

# Losing the First Battles

Enduring lessons for modern coalition warfare in the Indo-Pacific

by Maj William D. Long

The HMAS *Yarra* slipped beneath the waves. After taking multiple hits from Japanese eight-inch and five-inch guns, she finally succumbed and joined her Allied sisters at the bottom of the Java Sea.<sup>1</sup> The *Yarra* charged three Japanese heavy cruisers to protect the convoy she escorted. The sloop was heavily outgunned and outclassed but fired her guns at the Japanese ships until she sank. This final act off the coast of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) was indicative of the Pacific War's opening stages for the Allies. For 82 days, from December 1941 to March 1942, the Allies fought to hold back the Japanese onslaught in the Far East. The Allied countries committed dozens of warships, hundreds of aircraft, and hundreds of thousands of men to the region. British, Dutch, and American troops fought desperate and hopeless battles to stop the Japanese advance. Their fighting spirit could not overcome the lack of interoperability across multiple national militaries, and their inability to work cohesively prevented synchronized actions across military domains. They paid a high price: 30 warships were sunk, hundreds of aircraft destroyed, and tens of thousands of casualties.<sup>2</sup> The valiant but disjointed Allied campaign failed to slow Japanese operations and resulted in a crushing defeat in the first months of the war.

A study of the Allied effort to stop the Japanese in the Far East during the war's opening months reveals valuable lessons. This examination will discuss the disparate goals of the Allied forces, their lack of interoperability, and the impact those shortfalls had on operations. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization defines interoperability as "the ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to

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achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives."<sup>3</sup> Allied forces began the war with conflicting strategic objectives that led to operational blunders and culminated in tactical disasters. The Allies had significant shortfalls in two areas that form interoperability: people and processes. As they struggled to parry the Japanese thrust in the Far East, they suffered from human interpersonal conflicts in their ranks, technical incompatibility, and procedural inefficiency.

## Background

The Far East had four main Allied stakeholders: Britain, Australia, the Dutch government in exile, and the United States. By 1941, Britain, Australia, and the Dutch were embroiled in a war with Germany that had gone on for two years and had no signs of ending—the conflict in Europe complicated considerations in the Pacific for the Allies. Britain and the Dutch had to maintain their colonial possessions in the region (i.e., Malaya, Singapore, and the NEI) because they provided essential raw materials. The United States sought to deter Japanese aggression in the region and desperately wanted to avoid military involvement in Europe. United States political leaders were deeply opposed to fighting to preserve European colonial territories in the Pacific because it was politically unpopular in the United States.

Allied staffs in the Pacific had to consider these limitations when they held several conferences to formulate a plan to counter Japanese aggression in the region. The first conference was

an Anglo-Dutch-Australia Conference in late February 1941. Its members anticipated the Japanese would first invade Malaya and then seize Singapore. This assumption drove them to develop plans for mutual defense and coordination.<sup>4</sup> The Americans and British held the next Allied conference called ABC-1. They agreed to prioritize Germany in a war between the Allied and Axis powers. It also allowed American forces in the Far East to cooperate with the British and Dutch as much as possible, understanding that the United States would not help defend Singapore, nor would it abandon its primary mission: the defense of the Philippines. One month later, the American-Dutch-British (ADB) Conference convened. The participants agreed to coordinate local defense and establish a means to allow U.S. forces withdrawing from the Philippines to fall back to Singapore. Ultimately, leaders in Washington, DC, feeling pressured to keep the United States out of a conflict, rejected these agreements. Thus, there were no formal arrangements to coordinate Allied military operations in the Pacific before the war began. This lack of foresight would have deadly consequences for Allied forces in the region.

## The War Begins

On 7 December 1941, Japanese carrier-based aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor. They severely crippled the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet and limited American options to respond to the Japanese offensive in the Far East. Allied forces in the path of the Japanese operations in the Far East would fight with what they had in the region.

The main Japanese attack in the Far East began shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After midnight on 8 December 1941, their forces

landed on the coasts of Thailand and Malaya. British fighter aircraft and ground defenses fought the Japanese to control the sky over Malaya. British Commonwealth soldiers contested Japanese landings in northern Malaya but were driven back. Japanese aircraft attacked British airbases across Malaya and established air superiority within a few days. The early success of Japanese air operations meant the British could not protect their ground forces and lines of communication or provide air cover for their ships in Malaya. By noon on 8 December, Japanese troops were firmly ashore and attacking down the Malayan peninsula. Their ultimate destination was Singapore—the Gibraltar of the East and the key to British influence in the region.

The same day the Japanese landed on Malaya, the British Navy sortied Force “Z” from Singapore to attack Japanese amphibious ships. It was a powerful flotilla with the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*, the battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*, and four destroyers. The task force searched for enemy ships for two days but failed to make contact. Japanese scout planes found the Allied ships on 10 December and quickly scrambled several landbased naval air squadrons to attack the British flotilla. Both capital ships dodged torpedoes and bombs for several hours but eventually were sent to the bottom of the South China Sea. It was a disastrous blow for the Allies; the two most capable Allied surface combatants in the Far East were sunk. British Prime Minister Churchill described the impact of this engagement: “In all the war, I never received a more direct shock. ... Over all this vast expanse of waters, Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked.”<sup>5</sup>

Japan scored another stunning success in the Philippines a few hours after the raid on Pearl Harbor. Japanese aviators destroyed most of America’s Far East air squadrons on the ground. The enemy attack caught U.S. forces unprepared despite prior notification of the Pearl Harbor strike. Half of the American Far East Air Force, the largest and most modern Allied air force in the region, was destroyed.<sup>6</sup> That same day, Japanese forces seized several islands in

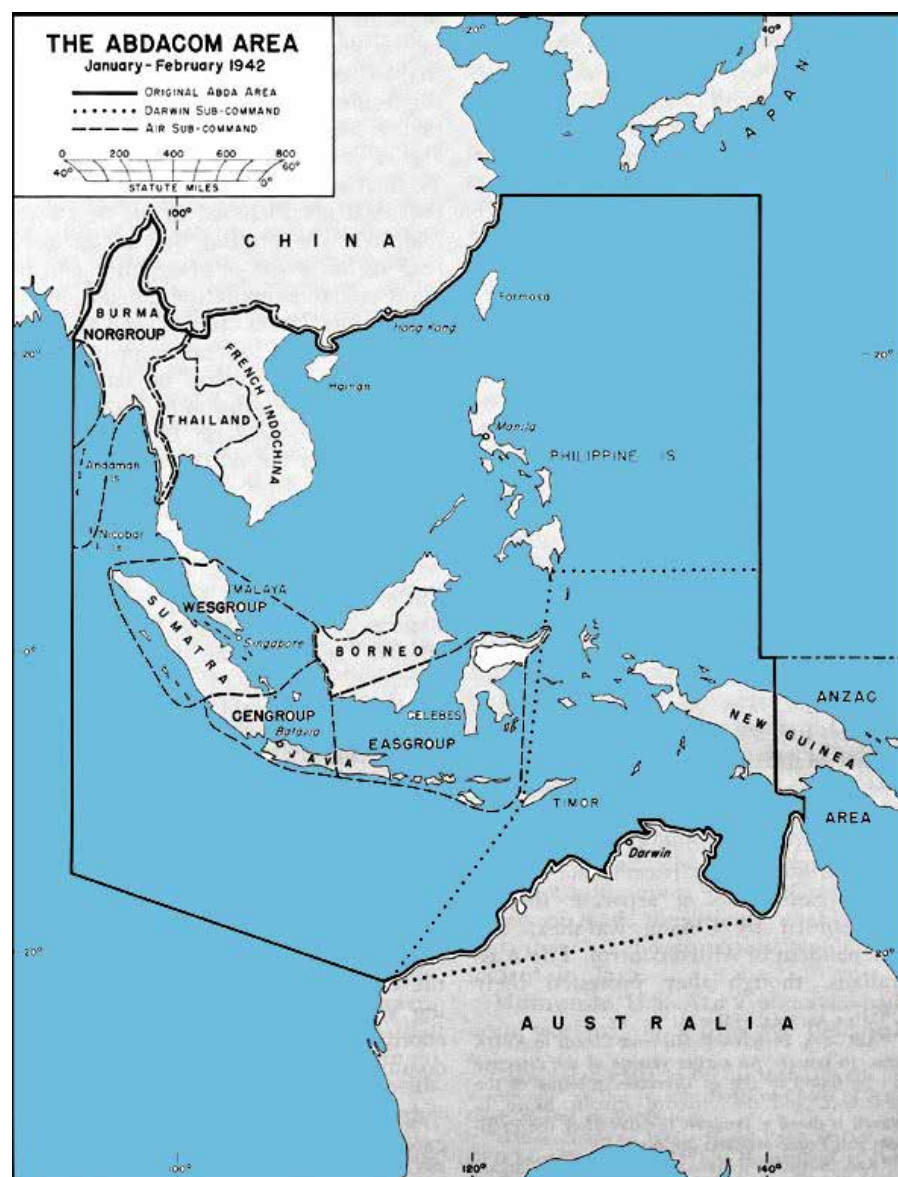
the northern Philippines. Two days later, they landed on the main island of Luzon and advanced south toward Manila, capturing the city without a fight on 24 December. The overwhelming effect of Japanese air, naval, and ground operations convinced leaders in Washington, DC, to abandon the Philippines.<sup>7</sup> U.S. aircraft and ships withdrew to Australia while U.S. ground forces remained and anchored their defenses around Bataan and Corregidor.

### Enter ABDACOM

The Allies were desperate to stop Japanese progress. The Dutch colonies were the next enemy objective.

British forces in the region lost their two most capable ships and struggled to hold Malaya and Singapore. American ground forces in the Philippines were isolated but holding their defensive line stubbornly. The U.S. Navy could not provide additional ships to stop the Japanese advance because they had to secure their lines of communication from the United States to Hawaii. The Australian mainland was under threat of attack and future invasion. These circumstances left the Allies off balance and fighting to gain the initiative in the Far East.

The newly formed Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff responded



ABDACOM area of responsibility. (Source: Wikipedia.)

by forming a theater command to coordinate regional military operations.<sup>8</sup> They named it after the nations it comprised: American-British-Dutch-Australian Command or ABDACOM. Its area of responsibility spanned from the Indian Ocean in the west to New Guinea in the east, from Darwin in the south to Formosa (modern-day Taiwan) in the north. The theater covered over eight million square miles. Sustaining operations over such an expanse would be difficult. For example, supplies from the United States landed in Eastern Australia and moved via rail to Darwin, the central logistics hub for the theater. Any movement from Darwin into the theater was via ship or plane and had to cover thousands of miles. Building up additional logistics nodes throughout the battlespace was a significant problem because ABDACOM's lines of communication were under attack by Japanese aircraft and submarines.

On 1 January 1942, the Allies named Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell to command the ABDACOM theater. Wavell was a veteran of the First World War and recently served as the Commander-in-Chief Middle East for all British forces. Despite sporadic success in North Africa, Wavell demonstrated competence as a theater commander.<sup>9</sup> The Combined Chiefs of Staff issued Wavell this guidance:

The basic strategic concept of the ABDA Governments for the conduct of the war in your area is not only in the immediate future to maintain as many key positions as possible, but to take the offensive at the earliest opportunity and ultimately to conduct an all-out offensive against Japan. The first essential is to gain general air superiority at the earliest possible moment by employing concentrated air power. The piecemeal employment of air forces should be minimized. Your operations should be so conducted as to further preparations for the offensive.<sup>10</sup>

The guidance was simple: stop the Japanese offensive and reclaim lost territory. However, competing Allied priorities complicated these goals. The British remained fixated on Singapore

and Burma, the Dutch needed to protect the NEI, the Americans wanted to support the remaining Philippine defenders, and the Australians were concerned about a Japanese invasion of their country.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Gen Wavell's new job had significant restrictions that impeded his ability to exercise coalition command. He had no authority to move forces among different national territories within the theater. He could not relieve commanders from other nationalities and could not interfere with the organization, supply, or disposition of forces from other countries.<sup>12</sup> These limitations tied Wavell's hands and placed substantial barriers between him and the forces he commanded.

The ABDACOM formed three functional components to synchronize operations: ABDAFLOAT, the naval component, commanded by American ADM Thomas C. Hart; ABDAAIR, the air component, under British Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard E.C. Peirse; and ABDARM, the ground component, under Dutch LtGen Hein ter Poorten.<sup>13</sup> Allied forces in the theater totaled approximately 1,000 aircraft, 359,000 troops, and 58 warships. They faced a Japanese force of 1,540 aircraft, 400,000 troops, and 74 warships. While the Allies were outnumbered, the Japanese did not enjoy an overwhelming numerical advantage. Their forces did possess numerous modern warships and aircraft with highly trained crews. The Allies faced a Japanese joint force with superior numbers, equipment, training, and interoperability.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of interoperability among the Allied forces hampered their ability to fight their superior foe effectively. The components manned headquarters with staff officers from each country comprising the command. This was a step toward interoperability within ABDACOM, but significant interpersonal conflicts occurred. Perhaps the most striking situation was a feud between VADM Helfrich and ADM Hart. Helfrich commanded all Dutch naval forces in the theater and believed he should have been appointed ABDAFLOAT commander.<sup>15</sup> When Hart asked Helfrich to assign his chief of staff to the ABDAFLOAT staff, Hel-

frich refused. As the campaign in the Far East unfolded, Helfrich consistently refused to inform Hart of his naval activities and ultimately led a successful effort to fire Hart and replace him with himself.<sup>16</sup>

The Allied command also lacked interoperable processes. The patchwork of forces created a communication gridlock across the Allied components.<sup>17</sup> Author Tom Womack described the scene at ABDACOM headquarters:

ABDA headquarters was a chaotic beehive from the start. Communications amongst the myriad of Allied commands were laborious and creaky. It was not uncommon to send a single dispatch to 10-20 different addresses.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike current multi-national warfare, where units from various countries fight cohesively as parts of a coalition, ABDACOM took every asset available and put them "into one pot."<sup>19</sup> It was not uncommon for American and Dutch pilots to fly together under the command of a British officer.<sup>20</sup> Naval ships were paired together in units regardless of nationality.

The ABDACOM components could not exercise command of the various national militaries. The component commanders had to request forces from the coalition members to conduct any theater operation. This process undermined the component commander's ability to coordinate their forces effectively. The differing priorities of the various Allied nations exacerbated this situation. An example of this shortfall was ADM Hart's initial inability to mass warships to attack the Japanese landings because the British and Dutch navies prioritized convoy escort, which tied up their ships and prevented Hart from forming a naval task force.<sup>21</sup>

### ABDACOM Fights

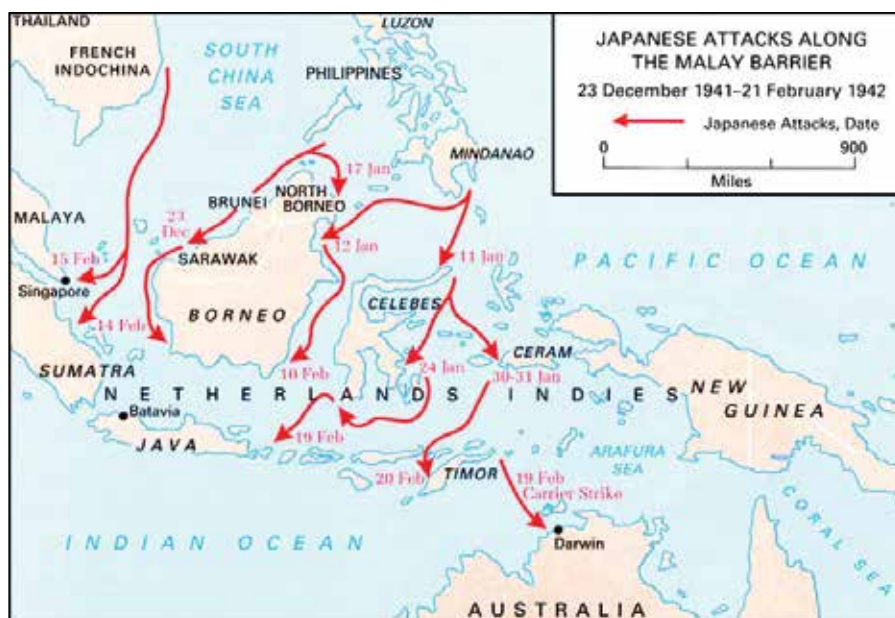
By 10 January 1942, when Gen Wavell arrived at his headquarters on Java, the situation in the theater was dire. The Japanese were closing in on Singapore, and the fall of the Philippines was inevitable. These two advances secured Japanese lines of communication and allowed them to land forces on Borneo and Celebes. The Dutch troops

on the islands resisted the Japanese advance, but their hold was tenuous.

Wavell believed he could hold Burma and Singapore.<sup>22</sup> Helfrich argued that the naval and air components could cripple Japanese amphibious forces in the theater.<sup>23</sup> First, Wavell wanted to establish a line of airbases from Darwin, across the NEI, to Singapore.<sup>24</sup> These bases would halt the Japanese advance and allow Wavell to build combat power for a counter-offensive.

First, he had to foil the Japanese attacks on Borneo and Celebes. These islands were crucial because Japanese aircraft could use them to strike Java and disrupt the ABDACOM lines of communication. The Allies struck back at Balikpapan, Borneo, on 24 January with Task Force 5 from ABDAFLOAT. This task force comprised American ships because the British and Dutch insisted on using their ships for convoy escort.<sup>25</sup> Task Force 5 initially had three cruisers and eight destroyers assigned to it. However, most of these ships were steadily assigned to other duties or had mechanical issues requiring them to return to port.<sup>26</sup> The remaining division of four American destroyers surprised the Japanese transports off the coast of Balikpapan and sank four of the twelve enemy transport ships. This minor success was a missed opportunity because Task Force 5, as initially constructed, could have dealt a solid blow to Japanese operations in the NEI. Despite the diminished firepower of Task Force 5, the Allies won a “badly needed victory” but only delayed the Japanese advance by a day.<sup>27</sup>

Events in Singapore quickly overshadowed this limited success. On 26 January, the British began a three-phased counterattack against a dangerous new Japanese landing at Endau, Malaya, that could collapse their defensive line and put Japanese forces within 115 miles of Singapore. In the first phase of the counterattack, the British attacked the Japanese landing site with all their remaining aircraft in the area. They were met by enemy fighters and anti-aircraft fire, which easily repelled the Allied attack with terrible casualties. In the second phase, two British destroyers infiltrated the Japanese landing site but



*Japanese Malay offensive. (Source: Wikipedia.)*

scored no hits on enemy transports, and the Japanese escort ships sank one of the British ships. The final phase was a British submarine attack that failed to find enemy ships. Ultimately, the counterattack was a waste of resources that ABDACOM could have used in future operations.<sup>28</sup> This dismal outcome triggered the British commander of Singapore to evacuate the island.

The situation for the Allies continued to deteriorate. In the Celebes, Japanese troops captured the Kendari port and nearby airfields. They deployed several air squadrons to the newly won airfields and used these aircraft to support other landings in the NEI. Additionally, the squadrons on Celebes could reach Java, the main target of the Japanese offensive in the Far East. They attacked Soerabaja, Java, on 3 February with over 100 aircraft and relentlessly pounded Allied airfields. The attack further degraded Allied air capabilities and effectively ended Wavell's effort to establish a line of airbases in the theater.

The American-British-Dutch-Australian Command continued to fight back. On 1 February, Adm Hart assembled a potent strike force of four cruisers and seven destroyers under Dutch RADM Karel Doorman. It sortied from Java at midnight on 4 February to attack Japanese amphibious forces on Celebes. A Japanese observation plane

spotted Doorman's force by 0949 and routed aircraft based on Kendari and Balikpapan to attack the ships. By 1000, the ships were under attack. The strike force maneuvered and fired desperately for over two hours as wave after wave of enemy aircraft attacked. ADM Doorman frantically requested air cover from the remaining Allied fighters at Soerabaja, but they could not arrive in time to relieve the pressure. At 1225, ADM Doorman ordered the ships back to Soerabaja and relative safety. The ships managed to shoot down or damage a few enemy aircraft but suffered severe damage to the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* and the light cruiser USS *Marblehead*.

This action, known as the Battle of the Flores Sea, confirmed the same lessons from the destruction of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*—sailing when the enemy owned the skies risked annihilation.<sup>29</sup> The captured islands in the NEI consolidated the Japanese position in the theater and extended their range to new targets. The Allies would suffer many more attacks from groundbased aircraft operating from captured airfields on Borneo and Celebes. At the same time, Japanese operations in Malaya also threatened their precarious hold on the NEI.

At this point, the contest between ADM Hart and VADM Helfrich

came to a head. Helfrich sent Wavell and Prime Minister Churchill a steady stream of complaints against Hart throughout the first month of ABDACOM's existence, turning both leaders against Hart.<sup>30</sup> Helfrich, alongside Dutch Deputy Governor Dr van Mook, argued with leaders in Washington and London that Hart lacked aggression.<sup>31</sup> Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations, was aware of the situation and wrote Hart to request a relief of duties due to health reasons.<sup>32</sup> Helfrich was named Hart's successor and assumed operational responsibility of ABDACOM on 14 February.

On 15 February, eleven days after the Battle of the Flores Sea, the Japanese Army captured Singapore and 90,000 British, Australian, and Indian troops with it. It was devastating news for the Allies and the worst disaster in British military history. The loss of Singapore brought Allied disjointed priorities to the forefront. The British now believed the NEI was lost and advocated for withdrawing all ABDACOM forces from the NEI. This position upset the Dutch, who believed they would be left to defend their territory alone.<sup>33</sup>

The unanticipated rapid capitulation of the Gibraltar of the East allowed the Japanese to use troops earmarked for operations in Malaya to attack Sumatra, their next target in the NEI. The Japanese tightened their grip on the NEI with repeated attacks on Allied naval forces and air bases around Soerabaja. On 19 February, Allied aircraft took to the skies in a desperate attempt to beat back the Japanese over Soerabaja. The largest air battle in the Pacific to date lasted a mere ten minutes and was a one-sided victory for the Japanese.<sup>34</sup> Japanese aircraft shot down 40 Dutch and American fighters and only lost a single aircraft. This attack effectively eliminated ABDAAIR over Java and won the air superiority needed for the follow-on amphibious landings.<sup>35</sup> On the same day, Japanese carriers attacked Darwin, the main Allied supply base in the theater, sinking nine Allied ships, destroying two dozen aircraft, and crippling crucial logistic facilities. Author Jeffrey Cox reflected that the widespread destruction wrought by the

Japanese appeared as though "Japan ... could be everywhere at once, while the Allies were seemingly nowhere."<sup>36</sup>

The next blow fell on Timor and Bali, where the Japanese landed troops to seize critical airfields. Dutch forces on the islands fought valiantly but could not prevent the Japanese from capturing the airfields and threatening Allied air lines of communication from Java to Darwin. The Allied air component could not muster an attack, so ABDACOM assembled a strike force to disrupt the Japanese landings on Timor and Bali. Three Dutch cruisers supported by seven destroyers (a mixed force of two Dutch destroyers and five U.S. destroyers) and nine Dutch torpedo boats conducted a night attack on the Japanese amphibious forces in the Badoeng Strait along Bali on 19 February. The strike force attacked

simultaneously. An Allied reconnaissance aircraft spotted the eastern invasion fleet in the Java Sea on 25 February. Admiral Helfrich received this report and sent Admiral Doorman's surface strike force of five cruisers and nine destroyers on a *do-or-die* attack.<sup>38</sup> It was a powerful force, but the Japanese fleet was numerically superior in 8-inch guns and torpedoes. Additionally, ADM Doorman's battle plan failed to provide an effective means to command and control during the surface action.<sup>39</sup> This oversight would have disastrous consequences for the outgunned and outclassed Allied force.

Doorman's fleet intercepted the Japanese eastern force on 27 February. They were out-ranged by Japanese 8-inch naval guns and the Type 93 "Long Lance" torpedo.<sup>40</sup> The Allied forces fought for ten hours and charged into enemy fire

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in several waves, but the ships did not possess standardized night signaling, creating confusion in the ensuing battle. They struggled to identify friends from foes and missed opportunities to deal significant blows to the Japanese ships. Allied cruisers failed to damage enemy troop transports at anchor or draw the Japanese escort destroyers away from the landing sites. This failure led to a vicious night engagement between four Allied destroyers and four Japanese destroyers. The ensuing fight damaged two Japanese ships, sunk one Allied destroyer, and damaged several others. The raid failed to slow Japanese amphibious operations on Bali, and the island fell a few days later. The loss of Bali allowed Japanese aircraft to attack Allied shipping in the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup>

Java, the most resource-rich island in the NEI, was their next target. They massed two invasion fleets to strike the western and eastern ends of the island

several times to bring the Japanese within range of their guns. To make matters worse, ADM Doorman lost control of his strike force for several hours due to his planning shortfalls. The Japanese capitalized on the Allied confusion and sank two cruisers and three destroyers—ADM Doorman went down with one of the cruisers acting as his flagship. The remaining Allied ships withdrew in the early morning hours of 28 February. They attempted to evade the pursuing Japanese throughout the day of the 28th, but enemy air and surface forces tracked down the surviving ships and sank them. The Japanese success in the Battle of the Java Sea was decisive. Doorman's strike force ceased to exist, and the Japanese ships suffered no damage in any of the engagements.

The invasion of Java, the destruction of ABDAAIR, and the decimation of ABDACOM's warships effectively ended ABDACOM. Wavell resigned

on 25 February, two days before the Battle of the Java Sea. The ABDACOM existed in name only until the Allies dissolved the command a week later into two separate theaters: the Burma Theater under British command and the Southwest Pacific Theater under American command. It would take the Allies over three years to reclaim the territory the Japanese captured in three months.

### Lessons from Failure

Interpersonal conflicts impacted Allied actions. The officer corps of each country was suspicious of the motives of the other Allied nations.<sup>41</sup> The most impactful interpersonal conflict was between Dutch ADM Helfrich and American ADM Hart. Helfrich undermined Hart and led efforts to relieve the American commander. His actions were not malicious. He wanted to prevent the Japanese from conquering the NEI, and he rightly assumed the other Allies did not prioritize its defense. Ultimately, he was no more successful than ADM Hart, and his decisions led to the deaths of many sailors in ABDAFLOAT.<sup>42</sup>

The Allies suffered significant technological interoperability issues in many major engagements. Allied ship crews and aircraft pilots did not possess functional command and control across the various naval and air services. Ineffective communication led to chaos when the Allied forces closed on Japanese ships and aircraft. The Battle of the Java Sea was a striking example of failed technological interoperability. ADM Doorman lost control of his ships for several hours because he could not communicate with them. The confusion led to disjointed action and allowed the Japanese to maximize their superior naval guns, aircraft, and torpedoes.

The lack of interoperable processes limited the Allies' ability to operate across such a large area. Pre-war conferences failed to establish a coalition framework for Allied forces; therefore, the Combined Chiefs of Staff threw the Allied troops in the region under one command after the war began. Their ad-hoc formation exacerbated supply administration for the heterogeneous forces in the Far East because they did

not fall in on pre-war lines of communication.

Inadequate interoperability prevented the Allies from synchronizing actions across the air, maritime, and ground domains. Throughout the first three months of the war, the Allies could not marshal combat power across domains to deliver a significant blow to the Japanese. The air component did not support ABDAFLOAT's efforts against Japanese naval forces. Conversely, ABDAAIR attacked Japanese landings without timely follow-on strikes by ABDAFLOAT. The result was uncoordinated air and naval actions that had no real impact on the Japanese offensive. The Allies also failed to stop, or even slow, Japanese ground operations. They also never massed ground forces due to competing national priorities—each Allied stakeholder's ground troops defended terrain essential to their respective interests—so the Japanese defeated them in detail. The lack of Allied mass on the ground created a cascading effect where the loss of land led to the loss of maritime and air control, which led to the loss of more land.

The Japanese Army and Navy, in contrast to the Allies, used their joint interoperability to execute a pattern of multi-domain actions that enabled them to defeat Allied forces. Their aircraft established air superiority from their airfields to create maritime freedom of maneuver, enabling naval forces to land ground troops that rapidly secured enemy airfields further forward. This enabled Japanese aircraft to base squadrons on those fields to extend their reach into Allied territory and attack Allied ground forces. This pattern allowed them to sequentially mass on the dispersed Allied positions and march through the Far East.<sup>43</sup>

### Current Circumstances

Interoperability in a future conflict in the Far East will be more complicated than in World War II. In December 1941, the countries in the region fell under three Allied nations. Any future conflict may require a coalition of nine or more independent countries, each with unique foreign policy interests and defense priorities. The large number

of partners and allies potentially creates several complications for interoperability. Every member of a coalition must agree on the means to accomplish strategic objectives. Any lack of consensus impacts what operations can be undertaken, how they can be executed, and how allies and partners prepare for them.<sup>44</sup> Countries in a coalition must align capabilities and means within mutually understood constraints to fight effectively, and even if they do, there is no guarantee that they will agree to participate in a conflict, which could create serious capability gaps for the coalition as a whole. Finally, many more countries may implement strategic and operational constraints on the employment of their forces, like the restrictions Wavell had to navigate. These limitations can hamper military operations if they are not understood before a conflict occurs.<sup>45</sup>

### Solutions

Despite these challenges, forming a coalition is essential. The current situation in the Far East incentivizes the United States and its allies and partners to conduct theater security cooperation to maximize the strengths of all regional stakeholders and counter the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s military influence.<sup>46</sup> The need for interoperability to deter the PRC is more evident than was the need for interoperability to deter Japan before the outbreak of hostilities in 1941.

Today, China is the pacing challenge for the United States. "The 2022 NDS [*National Defense Strategy*] advances a strategy focused on the PRC."<sup>47</sup> The Indo-Pacific Command is the unified combatant command postured to counter Chinese aggression in the region. The Indo-Pacific Command has existed in some form since 1947. It has changed over the last 76 years, but its longevity signals the U.S. commitment to the Pacific. The command has built many enduring ties with U.S. allies and regional partners. These efforts place a U.S.-led coalition in a significantly better position than the Allies before the Japanese attack in the Far East.

U.S. allies and partners are committed to building regional interoperability

and security cooperation. Theater security exercises across the Pacific focus on building proficiency and military interoperability among the United States, its partners, and allies. Many Pacific nations (e.g., Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines) send officers to U.S. military schools to build mutual understanding and long-lasting relationships. Additionally, the United States signed security agreements with several countries in the region. A significant output of this diplomacy was the creation of a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States called AUKUS. Unlike the failed alphabet conferences before the war, this agreement contains a mutual commitment from the participating countries.

### Conclusion

The United States and like-minded partners can learn from the opening months of the Pacific War. The Allies did not build interoperability before the commencement of conflict, leading to uncoordinated efforts across multiple domains. The United States must foster interoperability with countries in the Far East to avoid the same early war disasters. To counter PRC aggression in the region, the United States, with partners and allies, must maintain shared priorities and means to achieve them, or we are in danger of repeating the same mistakes as our predecessors. A coalition formed to defeat the PRC should be able to fight together across multiple domains. It must set conditions in space, cyberspace, and the air to maneuver on the sea and seize key terrain. Planning and integration with allies and partners will build these capabilities. This output requires time and focus before competition becomes a crisis that eventually sparks conflict. U.S. efforts in the region should heed the words of H.P. Willmot when he described the lack of foresight before the war in the Pacific, “[ABDACOM] made mistakes, but the greater mistake was in being organized in days to rectify the errors and omissions of years.”<sup>48</sup>

### Notes

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