



EMBATTLED SUPERPOWERS

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26 January 2015

On the eve of the Second World War, the noted journalist John Gunther could still maintain that: “Great Britain, as everyone knows, is the greatest Asiatic power.”¹ The British Empire in Asia controlled a vast territory and large population, sweeping in a great arc from New Zealand and Australia in the South Pacific, to Southeast Asia and South China, and on to India and the Middle East. Britain stood as a superpower with economic interests and security commitments stretching around the globe, much as the United States stands today.

That position of leadership, however, was endangered. The emergence of major new industrial great powers was transforming the international landscape. These challengers, as they converted their growing economic strength into military power, confronted Britain’s leaders with uncomfortable strategic choices. In Asia, one of those rising challengers, imperial Japan, posed a dangerous threat to Britain’s standing as a world power after it embarked on a policy of expansion.

We know the outcome of Japan’s challenge: war and the catastrophic breakdown of Britain’s standing in Asia. The collapse of British power was in part brought about by dynamic changes in technology and the lethality of modern weaponry, particularly the advent of naval aviation, which shifted the naval balance in Japan’s favor. On the eve of war, Britain sought to deter Japan by forming a naval force in the Pacific, known to history as Force Z, consisting of the battleship Prince of Wales and battle cruiser Repulse. Even as Force Z steamed eastward, the Admiralty could spare none of its aircraft carriers, to protect it from air attack. Nor did the Royal Air Force have enough modern aircraft based in the Far East to offer adequate protection for Force Z. Britain’s inability to control the skies meant the Royal Navy could not command the seas, and this permitted the Japanese to land ground forces in Malaya and seize Singapore, the strategic pivot of British defenses in Asia. Not since Yorktown had Britain suffered such a crushing setback. The world’s leading naval power had been bested by a challenger that exploited innovations in technology and doctrine to gain a marked qualitative edge in fighting power.

As far back as the 1920s, British decision makers and naval planners had foreseen the dangers posed by an expansionist Japan to Britain’s strategic position in Asia. British analysts and commentators took note of Japan’s industrial development, with exports employing a growing number of workers. Since the home islands were poor in natural resources, Japan’s industrial growth generated an increasing demand for imports of raw materials. British naval planners feared that this increased demand would, in turn, lead Japan to seek direct control over sources of supply by expansion in Asia.² The British Admiralty maintained that “the need of outlets for the population and for increased commerce and markets, especially new sources of self-supply, will probably be among the most compelling reasons for Japan to push a policy of penetration, expansion and aggression.”³

One astute British naval officer observed a struggle between a “section of the [Japanese] ruling classes” who favored cooperation with the West and the “military party, who have hitherto dominated Japan’s policy, [and] do not take kindly to these new ideas which, as a very minimum, presuppose the subordination of armies and navies to civilian direction.” Britain feared that a group of militarists, intent on exploiting nationalist sentiments, could emerge the winners in Japan’s internal power struggle. To prepare for this conflict, the Admiralty sought to recapitalize the naval force, and develop the logistical infrastructure to forward

¹John Gunther, *Inside Asia* (New York: Harper, 1939).

²Notes by the Naval Staff, “Consequences of Suspending Work at Singapore,” April 28, 1924, in B. McL. Ranft, ed., *The Beatty Papers*, vol. 2: 1916-1927 (Aldershot: Scolar Press for the Navy Records Society, 1993), pp. 393-397.

³Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 5: *Prophet of Truth, 1922-1939* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 103.

deploy a powerful fleet to the Pacific.

Plans to complete a strategic pivot to Asia as a hedge against an aggressive Japan confronted harsh economic realities in Britain, however. Britain suffered from sluggish economic performance throughout the interwar period: unemployment remained stubbornly high with older, staple industries no longer as competitive on world markets. In Asian markets, Japan posed a formidable trading competitor to Britain. With an overvalued currency, a heavy debt burden, and growing entitlement costs, Britain's international competitive position weakened. The press baron Lord Rothermere complained: "It really looks [as if] every economic thing in England is going wrong. We are ... quite unsuited to the era of intensive competition which is now setting in."⁴

Confronted by straitened economic circumstances, Britain's political leaders opted to run risks in the strategic arena rather than rearm and jeopardize the economy's prospects. Successive British governments during the 1920s and early 1930s curtailed the spending requests put forward by the Royal Navy for warship construction, operational readiness, and base development to protect Britain's interests in Asia. In naval aviation, a key element in determining command at sea, Britain was also falling behind its rivals Japan and the United States. As a consequence, by the 1920s Britain had become a "frugal superpower" and could ill afford an arms race against a rising great power competitor.⁵

Could a reversal of fortune of this magnitude—the world's leading naval power being soundly defeated by a rising challenger—happen again? The sad answer, of course, is that it most certainly could. Britain's strategic predicament—as "the embattled superpower"—offers insight into the strategic challenges that currently face the United States. The end of Britain's standing as a superpower conjures up a frightening scenario of how a post-American world might come about: not through a gradual, managed, "elegant decline," but through sudden defeat at sea.⁶

What might Americans of today learn from studying the collapse of an earlier superpower? Let me put forward just two sobering thoughts.

First, the United States must reverse its policy course and increase its defense budget. Current trends provide cause for worry, and unless the U.S. Navy can find a way to produce more force for less money, its capability to meet new threats in the Pacific will decline. The Obama administration's budget proposals would see defense spending drop to three percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2016. That measure of defense effort would continue to decline and is projected to drop to 2.3 percent of GDP by 2023.⁷ Britain's melancholy example underscores for American decision-makers that large defense cuts may undermine the stability of the regional order if a challenger is ready to take advantage.

Of particular concern, China's rising military effort calls into question the strategic wisdom of further cuts to spending. Defense reductions by the United States—when coupled with China's growing capabilities—portend a rapid and unwelcome shift in the international strategic landscape. To guide renewed defense efforts, Americans must first forge a consensus on an overall grand strategy. The United States needs to recapitalize its forces by undertaking programs for nuclear modernization, and to stay ahead of challengers in the aerospace,

⁴Lord Rothermere to Churchill, February 12, 1925, Martin Gilbert, ed., Winston S. Churchill, vol. 5, Companion Part 1: The Exchequer Years, 1922-1929 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 389.

⁵Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010).

⁶Robert D. Kaplan, "America's Elegant Decline," *The Atlantic*, vol. 300, no. 4 (November 2007), pp. 104-116. Online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200711/america-decline>.

⁷Online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2015/assets/tables.pdf>.

cyber, and maritime commons.

Second, a policy of seeking to accommodate the ambitions of rising challengers is fraught with difficulties and dangers. Britain faced four serious great power challengers in the early twentieth century: Germany, Japan, Russia (Czarist and Soviet), and the United States. Britain's attempts to appease these rising powers proved unsuccessful. The result was war, and the British world order being supplanted by one put in place by the strongest challenger, the United States. Despite the economic benefits these challengers enjoyed under the existing international order, their leaders were dissatisfied with Britain's leadership of that system. And, with increasing wealth at their disposal, the authoritarian rulers of Germany, Japan, and Russia armed their nations and adopted offensive strategies to pursue dreams of conquest.

American decision makers need to take seriously the demands of challengers that seek to change the existing global order through arms buildups and assertive behavior. Henry Kissinger, for one, hopes that the leaders of China and the United States can forestall a contest for mastery in Asia by sustained diplomatic engagement. Still, he fears how events might unfold if the "triumphalists"—ardent nationalists within China who seek to reassert their country's former position as the dominant power in Asia—gain the upper hand in Beijing. As Kissinger warns, resurgent nationalism in China would likely prompt a containment strategy from the United States in response, but "[s]ooner or later, one side or the other would miscalculate."⁸ Whether the United States can decisively influence the deliberations among China's rulers, policy advisors, and defense planners to encourage restraint in their foreign policy objectives, remains to be seen. For American leaders and academics to think they can "manage" China's aspirations and actions might well be the great illusion of the twenty-first century.

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone.

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⁸Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 521.