SUPERPOWER BRITANNIA, 1923-35

I. STILL TOP KID ON THE BLOCK

Is power a matter of what you can quantify? In which case, there may be a case for seeing the 1920s as an age of steep decline.

Or is power also a matter of prestige?

If nobody dares to call your bluff, does it matter whether you are equipped to shoot?

Is a bully weak, if everyone gets out of his way?¹

In America’s eyes, Britain was still World Menace #1.

Not just to Big Bill Thompson, Chicago’s mayor

who promised that if King George V ever came to Chicago he’d bust him in the snoot

Not just to the Illinois legislature

that passed a law declaring that its official language was not English; it was American.

Not just to the smear artists

Who in the 1928 campaign “proved” that Republican presidential candidate Herbert Hoover was really an Englishman.

Military planners acted, with Britain’s prowess strictly in mind.

Canada’s course, if there was a war between America and Japan was so uncertain that our military made contingency plans in the 1930s.

“War Plan Red” mapped out an invasion and occupation of Canada.

It authorized immediate first use of poison gas against Canadian targets and to do strategic bombing of Halifax, if the port couldn’t be captured.

In 1935, Congress shelled out to build air bases near Canada’s border.

Their purpose: pre-emptive strikes against Canadian airfields.

This was pretty long-range planning –
  Canada didn’t have any airfields yet.

And none of its aircraft was worth a darn!

On the other hand, Canada planned for occupying Seattle and Spokane, Portland, Fargo, Detroit and Albany.

They couldn’t win. But this would buy time for the British Empire to send over forces to bail Canada out.

(What military planners weren’t counting on was that Britain wouldn’t have sent a single man to save Canada from a fate worse than annexation).
For power, the British army had never had such machinery at its command.

Radio –

Aircraft –

Tanks

Motorized cars -

All of which made patrolling the northwestern frontier of India much easier, and gave British forces special muscle like never before.

Yet it's worth looking at that frontier. The real story is the limits of SuperPower involvement.

The army could still go out, but increasingly, the old rules for what empires were allowed to do to their subjects had changed.

It wasn’t Sir Charles Napier day any more.

So the troops were to keep the peace; but they weren’t to make war doing it, if they could help it.

The home office wanted them to keep the number of casualties among the tribes down; even if it meant more casualties of their own.
Political Officers often identified not with the soldiers, but with the natives.

“Proscribed areas” were set up, too.

– this is the area where the trouble is going on.

In it, just about anything goes...

IF the men are armed

and IF they are off the path

or

IF there were more than 10 of ‘em.

– outside those limits, the army was hobbled.

It couldn’t shoot, until shot at, at all.

These sound like nice rules, but Pathan clothing made it so easy to hide weapons, and paths were so hard to see that this usually meant that officers didn’t know when they were within their rights and when not.

This didn’t mean more civilized warfare.

It sometimes meant the opposite.

Can’t afford to take prisoners, who’ll complain to the authorities.

You kill them, rather than taking them in.
The Pathans are asking for it anyway.

They’ve discovered technology, too –

mining the roads

stealing hand-grenades to turn into booby traps.

They dress like women.

They set up phony funeral processions.

All this lets British soldiers put down their guard, and then, bam!

a few rounds and then you melt into the hills. ²

**B. Status**

John Gunther in 1938: “The most pleasant locality in almost any Asiatic city is – and has been for twenty or forty years – the site of the British club; the best embassy, consulate, or local bank is he British one; in every capital in the East from Cairo to Peking ... there is a daily British newspaper, usually edited by Scotsmen. The British never become, as Americans become, expatriates.”³

And as he added, if you travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific, you would find the waterways were almost always controlled by the British.

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They had forts or bases staked out all along the route –

Gibraltar
Malta
Suez
Aden
Colombo
Penang
Singapore
Hong Kong.

II. THE END OF NAVAL SUPREMACY

A. SCUTTLING THE FLEET

The grand moment, for Britain, was when its Navy brought back the German fleet, as the spoils of war.

But the spoils spoiled soon enough.

On a signal, the German commanders scuttled their fleet, so that Britain would not get the use of them.
B. THE ONE-POWER RULE

For one thing, the Navy wasn’t its old self, and couldn’t be.

The rule of thumb in Pax Britannica was that the Royal Navy should be the equal of any two navies that could join to fight it

Less than that would be deadly.

This is why in the 1890s, Britain spent twice what any other world power spent, on its Navy.

But after 1900, these plans smelled musty.

– what good was it, having a Navy that could beat France and Russia’s – or Germany and France’s – as long as there were countries on the other side of the world facing navies, like Japan’s and that of the United States?

– what good was a Navy the equal of two European powers put together, if you could never assemble that whole fleet in one place, because of your commitments halfway around the globe?

And after 1918, the plans were ones that the Empire just couldn’t afford.

It had a tremendous fleet of Dreadnoughts still.

But they were out of date.
A new, modern Navy just as big as the one Britain had, was going to cost a bundle.

And making it bigger still – ha! Don’t make us laugh!

The last thing a war-weary public wanted was to spend MORE on defense.

And where would the money come from, in a Britain that the war had put so deeply into hock?

It had to accept a greater element of risk.

One reason was that at least two world powers now had become major maritime forces ...

The United States
Japan

A whole new standard had to be set up, for the Navy:

– could it beat the biggest, strongest power afloat?

**B. Washington Disarmament Conference**
For the first time in a century and more, the Navy no longer was mistress of the seas.

In fact, it didn’t rank first among equals.

Under the ratio agreed on, Britain, United States, and Japan would limit the Navy to 5:5:3.

France and Italy would be 1.75: 1.75.

The signatories also agreed on the kind of ships each navy was allowed.

The power to design them anew, the Admiralty no longer had.

Nor could it say what size they would be.

And the bases around the world were limited.

Hong Kong was not to be developed as a base.

And in 1930 the British withdrew from their Chinese outpost across from Port Arthur, Wei-hai-wei, a coaling station.4

Britain scrapped 657 ships as a result.

1.5 million tons’ worth.
including 16 battleships and cruisers

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Much of the Grand Fleet was effectively scuttled.

Nor would new ones be built of that kind in British dockyards.

Let’s be cautious. It didn’t cover everything...
Not submarines.
Nor cruisers.
Nor destroyers.

This matters. It’s cruisers that keep the sea lanes open – or shut down the enemy’s sea-lanes.

The Great War had taught this: the only REAL use for a battleship is against another big battleship.

And the result? Those massive ships barely got used at all.

And when they did, they didn’t do a thing for the outcome of the war.

The real blows against England, subs made.

The real blows against Germany, cruisers made.\(^5\)

With lots of overseas bases, cruisers are exactly the weapon you want.

And Britain alone, of all the major nations, had those overseas bases all over the world.

And let’s not see it as a surrender on England’s part.

It could never have kept up with America and Japan, if they had gone on building – and they would have built, and built plenty in the 1920s.

If Britain was giving up naval supremacy, it gave it up the cheap way rather than the really expensive way...

and traded it for good will with the United States – whatever that was worth.6

That was the paradox of being a Superpower.

Of course Britain could have spent more.

But if you’re on top, and you spend more, it means deep trouble – and less security for YOU.

Because no Superpower spends more to defend itself.

Defend? Against whom?

It’s clearly arming to CONQUER.

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If Britain hikes its spending, other countries will get scared and hike theirs.

Before you know it, you’ve got an arms race.

And in comparative terms, you’re not as safe or superior as you were before.\(^7\)

**C. LONDON NAVAL CONFERENCE, 1930**

But the truth was, it HADN’T given up naval supremacy. Not in the sense of becoming a #2 navy, or equal to any other.

Nor did it.

In 1930, there was a new Naval Treaty in London. And this time America and Britain agreed on formal parity.

But what did that mean? It meant each side could have 50 cruisers.

How many did England give up? None.
How many did it have? 50.

How many did America have? 17.

How many did Japan have? 34.

34+17 may be one more than 50.
But 50 sure is more than 34 or than 17 – and nobody thought that

\(^7\) John Ferris, “Treasury Control, the Ten Year rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924,” *Historical Journal*, 30 (December 1987): 865.
America and Japan were ever going to join hands.\(^8\)

Each side agreed to build no new battleships for the next six years.

- How many did Britain have? 19
- How many did US have? 17
- How many did Japan have? 10.

England had six aircraft carriers.
- America had 2.
- Japan had 3.

**D. SPARE THE RATE AND SPOIL THE NAVY**

Over the years that followed, though, it wasn’t the Treaty that gutted the Navy.

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It was the budget. Britain couldn’t afford more, and didn’t pay for it.\footnote{This is true from 1926 on. But we have to be very careful here. Up to 1924, the Services were getting more every year. The Treasury hadn’t yet been able to rein them in. It talked about the Ten-Year Rule, though it didn’t call it that, but the Services went their own way. John Ferris, “Treasury Control, the Ten Year rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924,” \textit{Historical Journal}, 30 (December 1987): 859-83.}

So it lagged, in re-fitting older battleships with new weapons...

like anti-aircraft gunnery
or better armour plating.\textsuperscript{10}

Tons of destroyers ended up being scrapped.

Naval aviation felt the crunch worst.

In 1918, British naval aviation stood number one in the world.
It had FOUR of the FOUR aircraft carriers in the whole world.

By 1930, the Americans had overtaken Britain, and the Japanese were closing in.
Older, experimental carriers stayed in harness a lot longer than planned.

Dates to start making the new ones were postponed over and over.\footnote{J. R. Hill, ed., \textit{The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 320.}

In 1918 the Navy had 3000 first-line aircraft operating.

By the early 1920s they had scarcely a hundred.

And why should they, the Government argued.

The real place for airplanes wasn’t the Navy.

It was the Air Ministry.

Penny-pinching also cut down on battle readiness.

Exercises at sea are one way you train yourself...

Say, large scale Combined Fleet exercises for the Atlantic Home Fleet and the Mediterranean fleet.

But the fuel allowance was badly cut off.

So ships spent a lot more time in harbor instead.

There were steep budget cuts for spending on ammunition for the main and
secondary armament, too.

And NO anti-aircraft practice at all, hardly.¹²

Personnel: 380,000 in 1919
89,600 in 1932.

Early in the 1922, two thousand officers – including one third of all the captains on the active list – were removed.

As for the Naval Staff – pruned and pruned again by the Treasury.

By 1927 it had 60 officers – whereas in 1918 it had had 330.

But the Staff is where the thinking and policy-making happens.

If you haven’t got that, you can’t plan for war.

And the cuts were worst in naval Intelligence.

So how fast Japan or Germany was building, nobody really knew. They had no way of knowing.

As the three military services scrambled for less and less money, they got meaner to each other.

Each, to make money, had to argue why the others weren’t worth having.

Usually, the Admiralty could win out.

But by the late 1930s, it was the Air Staff that was making

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Always the fight was: if you are attacked in England – or Singapore – or Aden –
What’s the best way of fighting back?
Guns at sea? Yes, said the Navy.
No, said the army – guns ashore.

Neither one, said the Air Force. A mobile air force, moving along imperial
air routes can get from one crisis place to another faster.

It can patrol and defend more than one place.

What the Government did was persuade the public that everything was peachy.

Nobody did this with more fervor than Churchill.

Every year that he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the money for
defense dropped.

If he had had his way, it would have been an even sharper drop.

Always he had a hatchet out, to wreck the Admiralty’s program for
building more cruisers.

There was no danger at all from the Japanese, he insisted –
and no need for a fleet.

War was absolutely impossible before 1940. Why hurry?13

III. THE MIRAGE OF OMNIPOTENCE

A. WAS THE EMPIRE A PLUS?

What no one thought to ask was: did the Empire cost more to British national security than it returned?

Was England’s military power overstretched, protecting territories that it hadn’t the manpower to protect?

Certainly India became more of a liability every year.

The Crown Colonies ... well, nobody had depended on them for manpower.

And the Colonial Office did nothing to make them sources of vital war materials.

But it’s not just a matter of assets. It’s a matter of liabilities.

What did the Mother Country have to shell out, to protect the Empire?

And even then, protect it badly?

B. SINGAPORE: THE SHADOW OF STRENGTH

Why Singapore as a major naval base?
Until the Great War, it played a small, useful role in imperial defense.

It was fortified. It was a coaling station.

The Singapore Harbor Board let the Navy dock five warships at a time in a special part of the harbor...

(t’wasn’t room for more).

What Britain needed was a major installation...

Graving-docks, where you could scrape hulls clean regularly

Wharves next to workshops
Cranes big enough to lift the heaviest equipment out..
Gun turrets, for instance
or engines

Temperature controlled magazines to put your ammunition into

Homes for permanent staff
Barracks for the men
Recreation facilities
Hospitals

In other words, all the things an operational fleet can’t do without.

Yes, but why there? And why then?

It seems like a queer place to build, to defend India from.

And who’s ever been remotely interested in the Aussies and the Zealanders?
The answer: by 1918, Germany wasn’t the Threat of the Month.

If Britain was going to have any rival from now on, it was going to be one of its two allies:

    The United States
    Japan

Japan could feed and fit out its fleet from home.

The United States could operate out of Pearl Harbor, and this was something new: Pearl only got completed in 1919.

The farthest east that Britain had anything like? *Malta*!

Why couldn’t you keep up your alliances?

1. Japan was expanding, and was casting longing looks at China.

   Japan might not WANT to renew the alliance, when it came up for renewal in 1921.

2. Japan and America didn’t like each other.

   Alliance with one would mean having to prepare for a chilly time with the other.

   Either way, Britain would have to prepare for possible war with one of them.

But let’s say the Anglo-Japanese treaty lapses.

Then Britain is in a sticky situation.
Japan has eight battleships and battle-cruisers that it can use, in peacetime in the Pacific.

Britain has very few to spare.

Where was the likeliest flash-point? Hong Kong.

Could Hong Kong be protected without a fleet? Not likely.

So there would have to be a base for a fleet to operate out of.\(^\text{14}\)

But NOT Hong Kong.

Formosa, the island, is just across the straits.

Japan controls it.

A Hong Kong base would be an “unfriendly” act.

It would also be vulnerable to a strike before anyone knew it was coming.

The next war, the British knew, would be like all the others.

Your prime target isn’t battleships. It’s merchant ships – starving out the enemy’s trade.

If it should be America, well, Singapore is ideally suited for hitting the Philippines.

To defend British interests in the East, there would need to be a beefed up fleet, specially made for Asia:

Ideally – 8 battleships
   8 battle cruisers
   4 aircraft carriers
   10 cruisers
   40 destroyers
   36 submarines
   and plenty of auxiliaries.

Cost: about 20 million pounds a year.

It’s a cinch that any such fleet would need a major base to be stationed in, to operate out of.

All in all, that means somewhere like Singapore.\(^{15}\)

In the end – and this says much about the wearying arm of empire – the Admiralty decided to build the base, but not the fleet.

One fleet would have to make do.

In wartime, they could send the Mediterranean fleet to Singapore, if there was a crisis.

\(^{15}\) McIntyre, The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942, 22-23. The proposed wish-list of ships was made by Admiral Jellicoe, First Lord of the Fleet in October 1919.
But one reason why this was so was because the Commonwealth wasn’t picking up its share.

From the start, the Singapore base was slow to be built.

Britain hadn’t the money to do it right away.

They assumed some of the chips would be provided by their Dominions.

The Dominions were slow to do so.

- Australia promised to give, only once it saw what everyone else was willing to give
- New Zealand needed to spend the money on building a battle cruiser.
- India supplied nothing at all.\(^{16}\)

In the end, the source for much of the money for Singapore came from a very unsettling source: opium!

- British merchants would buy it raw in Iran or India.
- Then they would process it, and sell it at twelve times the price.
- The trade was legal, but controlled....

\[^{16}\text{McIntyre, } \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942}, \text{ 56-59.}\]
Addicts had to register to buy it, and it took a doctor’s excuse to prove you an addict.

(And 99% of the addicts were Chinese).

That’s no small sum. For years, one penny in three of revenue in the Straits Settlements came from opium.

By the late 1930s, it was a bit less than one penny in four.\footnote{John Gunther, \textit{Inside Asia}, 313-14. In 1936 it made up 23.23\% of total revenue, and in 1937 it made up 24.48\%.}

American importers paid another big share.

They wanted to buy tin and rubber.

But they had to pay a special export duty on it.

\textbf{C. THE ARMS RACE – DOWNWARD}

Twenty years of disarming had left Britain unfit to cope with the dictators.

In 1926-27, after deep budget cuts, the total defense spending had been
116 million pounds; six years after, it was just 100 million.

The Royal Air Force – second to none in 1918 – was now #6 in the world.

The Royal Navy had fewer men than at any time in forty years.

The Army was weak and under miserable leadership.

This is numbers. In quality of weaponry, the figures get worse yet.

Most of the equipment for the RAF was obsolescent.

In the army, budget cuts had stopped mechanization.

What equipment the soldiers had was outdated and the supply was poor.

Nor could the services recover fast.

The ordnance factories were out of business. They would need to work quite a while, before British rearmament would have the supplies it needed.

Many military suppliers had switched over to civilian goods.

They would need years to re-tool.

But, then, there wasn’t as much need for a military big enough to serve an empire, was there?
That was the whole idea of the Dominions getting more power to run themselves.

They would also have more responsibility to defend themselves.
   And hadn’t they every reason?

   They *knew* that England couldn’t be counted on.

   Their leaders had said so, again and again.

Yet here they were, neck and neck with England in making that race to the bottom.

They didn’t build up their armies. They cut them.

   (After all, they weren’t planning on going to war for England again).

As of 1935 New Zealand had just two cruisers.

If Singapore was under attack, how many soldiers could New Zealand muster in 1939?

   Just 200.

Australia, now. That’s more than a mess of islands hanging over the edge of nowhere. It’s a continent.

Total army in 1935: 29,000 men.
Navy? Three cruisers, three destroyers, two sloops, and a survey ship.

How many men could they spare away from home, of their whole force? None.

South Africa had almost no aircraft, and very few ships.

Its army, then? 7,300 men.

What can you say about a force so small that a customs officer could arrest them?

That it was twice as big as the Canadian army!

That had only 3,600 men.

In a pinch, it could bring out its minutemen
136,000 of them – but they were all needed for defending the homeland.

As for Canada’s navy, we’re talking 4 destroyers.

It will have its hands full just patrolling its own shores.

Its air force was exactly ONE plane.

And that wasn’t even theirs!

They’d borrowed it from the RAF on a one-year loan.
Sum it all up in 1939.

The white Dominions had over 20 million white people in them.

Britain had a little under 50 million.

But Britain was floating 7 aircraft carriers – and the Dominions none; it had 12 capital ships – and the Dominions none; it had 50 cruisers – and the Dominions 11. It had 94 fleet destroyers and 87 escorts – and the Dominions 20.

As of August 1940, the British could count on just 39 divisions of soldiery.

All but five came from the mother country.

They couldn’t arm England.

They needed England to arm them.

Churchill even wanted the planned naval base at Singapore abandoned.

Cheapskate government on defense cast a long shadow.

By 1932, the arms industry was virtually wiped out.

When rearmament had to start, the industry needed to be rebuilt from the ground up.
All of this couldn’t help but weaken the force by which empire was going to be protected.

So did the end of the Anglo-Japanese treaty.

Till now, they had worked together.

Now, there would be one more big rival for Britain to cope with in the East – and no big Navy to help it do the coping.

A twentieth-century Empire needs to be tied together more tightly.

And it can be – with a grid of airline routes.

When the Great War ended, Britain seemed poised to do just that. It had the biggest air force in the world.

Over the next two decades, the British aircraft industry lost its edge.

German and American aviation industries were booming.

But as late as the mid-1930s, your typical British fighter-plane was still made of wood with cloth tent-canvas wings.

There wasn’t a college of aeronautical engineering in England till 1931. And when it opened, it had all of 35 students.
So where’s the technology to bind the empire together?

An airship route to India?

It was tried. The R101 got no farther than France, where it went down in flames.

An air route across the Pacific?

Britain never developed one.

Air service from Australia to Tasmania?

None.

Air service to South Africa?

In the works. Never accomplished.

Air service to South America?

If you wanted to go, it would be on a German company.

By 1930, put all the air routes spanning the whole British empire together and it comes to 23,000 miles.

Germany has no overseas empire at all. But it operates 17,000 route miles.

France operates 19,000.

The Empire carries only 58,000 passengers on its planes a year.

Germany carries 93,000.

America carries 385,000.
As of 1937, if a British airline wants to put a modern plane in the air... it buys one from Germany or from the US.

Where’s the planning and the coordination that the Empire needs?

It simply doesn’t exist.

And at risk isn’t just Britain’s rank as tops in making aircraft. It’s its ability to meet a threat from the air to its empire... or even to Strand and Piccadilly.