



Fourth General KV Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture ‘Theaterisation in Light of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore in World War II’

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Gen KV Krishna Rao, PVSM

Gen KV Krishna Rao, PVSM, the 11th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), was a distinguished military leader and scholar warrior. Born on 16 Jul 1923, he played a crucial role in the growth of the Indian Army and contributed significantly to nation-building. Commissioned into 2 MAHAR on 09 Aug 1942, he later commanded 3 MAHAR, a Brigade in Ladakh, 8 Mountain Division, 16 Corps and the Western Army in various regions. He was the COAS from 1981 to 1983.

Notably, Gen Krishna Rao commanded 8 Mountain Division during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, contributing to the liberation of Bangladesh. His greatest legacy was the formulation of ‘Cold Start,’ a military doctrine involving multiple, shallow strikes at high speeds to capture enemy territory and end wars swiftly.

After retirement as the COAS, he served as the Governor of Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, and Jammu and Kashmir, playing a crucial role in restoring peace and democracy in insurgency-driven states. As the Colonel of the Mahar Regiment from 1968 to 1983, he significantly influenced its reputation and legacy.

General KV Krishna Rao’s multifaceted contributions, both in the military and as a statesman, have left an indelible mark.

The General KV Krishna Rao Memorial lecture, instituted in 2018, honours this legendary personality.

Introduction

Theaterisation or ‘Theatre Commands’ is a burning subject for study and discussion in India ever since the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was appointed in India in Dec 2019. A press release after the appointment of the CDS and the formation of the Department of Military Affairs, which he was to head, stated, “The mandate of the Department of Military Affairs inter-alia includes the facilitation of restructuring of Military Commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness

@ This is the edited version of the transcription of the lecture delivered by Gen MM Naravane PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd) on the occasion of the Fourth Gen KV Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture.



in operations, including through the establishment of joint/theatre commands”.¹ A theatre command requires all land, air and naval forces in a specified geographical area to be under one commander. This organisational structure facilitates the three services to work as a single entity looking after security challenges under one operational commander. Therefore, it is axiomatic that prior to the establishment of a theatre command there should be seamless jointness and integration between all services; structured and guided by a National Security Strategy (NSS). Jointness implies having commonality in operational doctrine and logistics. Integration implies understanding each other’s requirements, methods of functioning, strengths and weaknesses and being able to change to achieve a perfect fit.

The *raison d’etre* of a theatre command is joint planning and synergy. It would be incorrect to consider a theatre command as something that enables the saving of resources/money. However, regrettably, the common man understands theaterisation as being more economical. One of the many sites providing materials for the coaching of IAS aspirants lists out six reasons for the requirement of ‘Theaterisation’ of which four include economic benefits, the fifth states that it will improve jointness, and only the sixth point talks of the synergy it provides.² With such thinking, it is but natural that the youth, public and future administrators will view theaterisation only through the economic lens, which should be avoided.

The Malayan campaign during World War II (WW II) and the Fall of Singapore, which fell in just nine days after first being attacked, has many lessons for statesmen and strategists, ranging from the NSS, to the Higher Defence Organisation (HDO), lack of civil-military coordination in the theatre of operations, going down to divergent service strategies, inter service rivalries and trying to economise. Through a study of this campaign a number of relevant deductions can be drawn, and extrapolated in the quest for working out India’s NSS and models for theaterisation.

Why the Malayan Campaign?

There are a number of examples from past wars where a front crumbled because of inadequacies. However, the Malayan campaign is being studied to draw out the lessons in the context of the subject of theaterisation because it was a clear and separate theatre and its loss which included a strong and important fortress such as Singapore, was as unimaginable for the British as the attack on Pearl Harbour was for the US.

When one visits Singapore, especially Fort Siloso, it is often said that Singapore was lost because all the guns were facing seawards and that is where the Japanese attack was expected. An offensive through the Malayan Peninsula was not even envisaged and therefore the Japanese achieved total surprise. Nothing can be further from the truth than this myth. All possibilities had been envisaged and even war-gamed.

If, in spite of this Singapore capitulated so rapidly, it is because of the fact that Singapore was a disaster in the making right from the beginning because the war-games were done in silos. The loss was a result of lethargy and indecisiveness running into two decades plus, and if at all any blame has to be laid, it has to be laid on the indifference and apathy at the political, bureaucratic and at the senior military leadership.

With that as the backdrop it would do well to dwell into each of these aspects in turn, starting from security strategy in light of the situation at that time, the HDO and its impact on civil military relations and coordination, and thereafter each of the service strategies or philosophies, and how they played out and how they ultimately resulted in the loss of Malaya and the fall of Singapore.

Security Strategy

For the defence of their possessions in the east, the British had the General Headquarters (GHQ) India under General Sir Archibald Wavell the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) India, and the Far East Command under C-in-C Far East, Air Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham and from 23 Dec 1941 under Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Royds Pownall. Prior to the setting up of the Far East Command, at various times GHQ India had an area of responsibility from Iraq to Burma.³ When set up, the Far East Command had a staff of seven officers and an odd clerk, which was later increased to fifteen. This was inadequate to carry out any objective analysis for the planning and conduct of operations.

When military disasters occur, the focus is normally on the situation just before the disaster. However, the cause of the disaster normally lies on decisions, taken over a period of time. This is true not only for military events but even in the case of natural calamities, wherein for example, floods in a certain place could be because of the wrong environmental and developmental policies taken over the years. And, therefore there is a necessity to go back in time and see what was the situation prevailing in the aftermath of World War I (WW I).

After the end of WW I, the entire global economy was in dire states, and this was particularly true for Great Britain which had borne the brunt of the war. In the decade after the war, governments kept changing, so it is not that a particular government is to be blamed, but in that period when the focus was more on restoring the economy and developmental activities, Britain came out with a resolution of 'No War for 10 years'. Based on this policy, more funds in the budget would be allocated for developmental activities and less for the defence services. After a few years, this became a roll on 'No War for 10 years', meaning it would be carried forward to the 11th, 12th, and 13th year and so on. This had an impact on the capability development of the armed forces of Great Britain.

As long as a nation has no disputes or threats on its borders and the sole purpose of the military is to deter predatory eyes, such reduction in defence expenditure can be done. When the situation started changing with a war in Manchuria and with the rise of Germany, this policy was scrapped in 1932, but within the scrapping of the policy, was the condition or the provision that the scrapping of the policy in no way meant that the defence forces or services could ask for more money.⁴ But the policy as such, was scrapped. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that the armed forces; navy, army and air force in Britain had to scramble for that limited portion of the pie and justify their own budgets.

The rise of Germany and Japan, in the late 20s, and early 30s, changed the threat perception totally, not only with these two countries rising rapidly but another threat albeit a lesser one, Italy, also lurking in the background. For the British these two threats were two widely geographically separated politico-military grand theatres, the European and the South East Asian. Within them were the military theatres; the European, North African, Middle East and the South East Asian. As far as the Japanese were concerned there too, there were theatres; the Japanese had divided their military into a Southern theatre which included Indo-China, Siam, Burma and Malaysia and the Eastern theatre which was basically towards Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. As far as the UK was concerned, the priority of necessity was Europe and the defence of Great Britain. On the other hand, for the Americans and two British dominions, Australia

and New Zealand, the priority was the Pacific. Hence, there were differences in the way of looking at the threat manifestation, and which should be the priority, even amongst the allies themselves.

In the decade leading to the war, there were many agreements between the UK, US, Italy, Germany and Japan on various issues, basically relating to trade and defence spending. In the case of armaments, for example, the total number of ships and tonnages were specified, for who could develop how much, and in which the US, and UK in terms of ratios got more and Germany and Japan got less. Obviously, that made them unhappy and they were smarting under that perceived insult. Nevertheless, various concessions were also given on the economic front and on trading rights, all in an attempt to keep the peace.

The security strategy was a policy of appeasement in some ways. There was a period, in which it was felt that by agreeing to certain terms and conditions set by Germany and Japan, the requirements of these countries could be met and war avoided. Appeasement can only work if the alternative is also available and believed by the opponent. The alternative being hard punishment. But in the decade before WW II, Britain's capability to deter its enemies had been reduced. With no deterrence, Germany and Japan grew from strength to strength and progressed their expansionist policies. When their demands started getting met, they started asking for more and more and this drew the world, inexorably closer to WW II.

South East Asia Theatre

The South East Asian theatre which saw the most intense battles for the British, comprised Burma, the Malayan Peninsula and the Island of Singapore. In this whole area there was a very complicated system of governance. There was of course the Crown Colony of Singapore and the Straits Settlements, which were the hub of all activity, but the rest of the peninsula, was divided into various zones (see Map 1). There was a federally administered zone and there was a non-federally administered zone. The federally administered zone was generally on the western side of the Peninsula, which had better road connectivity and also a few airfields primarily for commercial use. This was the resource rich area containing the tin mines and the rubber plantations. This was the area of focus, which produced 58 per cent of the world's tin and 38 per cent of the world's rubber.⁵ The rest of the Peninsula was generally left to their own devices. This is not unlike what the British had done in Nagaland, where there was a centrally administered area under the Governor of Assam and 'partially excluded' and 'excluded' areas depending upon their importance. The outcome of this was that each of these areas had their own different set of rules, regulations and laws as decided by the local bodies. This made it very difficult to implement cogent strategies especially as they related to military plans.



Map 1: The States of Malaya Peninsula

Not only that, but there was resistance from the locals and the civil administration to whatever changes were being proposed or sought by the armed forces. In fact, the presence of the armed forces was seen as an invitation to aggression and the Governor General (GG) on one occasion, even said so in an open forum. What this resulted in was that there were divergent aims as far as the economic aspects were concerned versus the requirement of military preparation or preparing for war. As mentioned earlier, post-WW I, with the economy in dire states, England had to turn to its colonies to source its economic recovery. And therefore, boosting production of rubber, tin, oil and so on, took priority over everything else.

There was also a totally different civil-military setup and a peculiar kind of military setup (see Table 1). There was a GG and C-in-C of the Straits Settlements (Singapore) and a High Commissioner of the Federated Malaya States (see Map 1), who had no military experience, not even having fought in WW I.

However, the GG with the background that he had, started relying more and more on the Secretary of Defence (SoD) and was openly hostile to the military. He even vetoed a proposal for the construction of defences on the grounds that this would be detrimental to morale. And in this scheme of things, the SoD had the power to initiate and more importantly, not to initiate, whatever policies or decisions had been arrived at. Any decision in which the views of the SoD and one or more of the service chiefs were aligned was more likely to go through. In many ways, therefore, the views of the SoD prevailed even in matters military, in which the Service Heads had more experience.

The military set up was not well integrated, (see Table 1). At the outset there was no C-in-C Far East. The land and air force commanders could never see eye to eye and had probably been selected to ensure that they toe the party line as being enunciated in London, by their respective service headquarters. If anything, the Land Force Commander was the more obdurate, and this obviously resulted in a lack of coordination and inaction on matters of importance. Under these circumstances, Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham who had retired in 1937, was brought out of retirement and appointed C-in-C in Oct 1940, but only of the land and air forces. The navy remained under its own commander headquartered in Hong Kong, in charge of a non-existent fleet. The British strategy of cutting down of costs known as ‘The Singapore Strategy’⁶, had not planned for a separate fleet for the east. In the event of war, the home fleet would sail to and reach Singapore in time to deter aggression by Japan by providing a base for a fleet of the Royal Navy in the Far East, to intercept and defeat a Japanese force heading south towards India or Australia.

MILITARY SETUP				
Time Line	C-in-C	Army	Air Force	Navy
1935-39	-	Maj Gen William Dobbie (1935-39)		-
1939-40	-			
1940-41	Air Chief Marshal Brooke Popham* (1940-41) Admiral Geoffrey Layton** (1940-41) Admiral Tom Phillips (Dec 41)	Lt Gen Lionel Bond (1939-41)	AVM JT Babington (1938-41)	Rear Admiral George Mullock (1939-41)
1941-42	Lt Gen Henry Pownall (23 Dec 1941)	Lt Gen A Percival (1941-42)	AVM Conway Pulford (1941-42)	Rear Admiral EJ Spooner (1941-42)
Under Air Chief Marshal Brooke Popham* Under Admiral Layton** Lt Gen Henry Pownall				
Governor General – Sir Shenton Thomas Secy of Def – Mr Vlieland				

Table 1: Military Setup in Far East 1941 - 42.

The Japanese Strategy

The Japanese had realised the importance of Singapore when they planned their campaign to capture the Dutch East Indies, (see Map 2). They knew that its capture was essential if they had to secure the resources of this region (present day, Indonesia). This was not only for its resources but also for the strategic necessity to keep both the British and US Naval Forces at bay, the British by capturing Singapore and the US Naval Forces, by attacking Hawaii.



Map 2 : Japanese Strategic Plan

The Southern Theatre, was under General Terauchi Hisaichi. He had two armies, the first was the 25th, which was earmarked for Malaysia and Singapore under General Tamayuki Yamashita. But while going southwards the Japanese also realised that they had to secure the northern flank that is Burma, where there were British troops. Therefore, for securing the northern flank, they had the 15th Army which was earmarked to capture Burma, under General Shojiro Lida. As far as their organisation was concerned, they of course had the army and the navy but they did not have a separate air force as such. Instead, they had an army air force and a navy air force, each distinct from the other, and with their own roles. Since, there was no separate air force as such, the air divisions formed an integral part and were on the order of battle of each army.

The Japanese were able to very correctly appreciate the strength, dispositions and vulnerabilities of the British, and having done that, they planned a hundred days campaign for the capture of Malaysia and Singapore. For this, they had earmarked four divisions including one in reserve in Japan, which was never required. As it unfolded, they could execute this task in seventy days, almost thirty odd days ahead of schedule. In this they were aided by an incorrect presumption by the British that the jungles and swamps of Malaysia were impenetrable. This enabled the Japanese to maintain the momentum of the offensive, thereby denying the British any opportunity to re-group.

The Defence of Singapore

For the defence of Singapore, there were different strategies i.e., naval, air, and land. And each had its advantages and disadvantages. At different times and periods, one dimension or the other had more importance or carried greater weightage. However, these were not distinct from each other in their timelines, as these strategies were overlapping both in their formulation as well as in their implementation. These strategies are covered below in the context of Theaterisation.

The Naval Dimension

- Britain being a naval power, the defence of Great Britain lay in a strong navy and for this their NSS was premised on the philosophy that the British Navy should be strong enough to tackle the next two biggest navies. In this case, it was Germany and Japan; widely separated geographically. This philosophy is not unlike India's two-front war theory. This strategy evolved through a series of war games. These concluded that to deter the Japanese fleet there would be a requirement for a naval base in the Far East, from where the enemy fleet could be intercepted. The choice for a base lay between Ceylon (Trincomalee), Singapore, Hong Kong and Sidney. After much deliberation, Singapore was selected as the base.⁷ Along with this, another concept propounded was that of a 'Main Fleet to Singapore', meaning that while Britain developed its capabilities for tackling the next two biggest navies, an armada would be sent to Singapore only as and when the situation so warranted. This armada would comprise of one aircraft carrier, seven battleships, 11 cruisers and 24 destroyers. To this would get added whatever would already be existing in Singapore and Hong Kong. There were many permutations and combinations of sea power discussed including a 'flying squadron' composed of two fast battleships, two aircraft carriers, four large cruisers, and nine large destroyers.⁸ All these concepts remained on paper or were not followed up when war broke out with the priority being given to the home waters against the German threat.

- Based on this premise, the defence of Singapore, was based on three phases. It must be noted here, that it was only the defence of Singapore, and Malaya does not find any mention. For the defence of Singapore, in Phase 1, the garrison which at that time was merely a small garrison of two brigades plus would defend Singapore. In Phase 2, the fleet, namely the 'Main Fleet to Singapore' would move and on arrival, relieve pressure on the garrison. In Phase 3, the Fleet would blockade Japan and force its surrender. The time between Phase 1 and Phase 2, that is, until the fleet arrives came to be known as the 'Period Before Relief'. This was the period from when the garrison was first subject to attack until relief arrived, and it was initially set for 42 days or six weeks (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

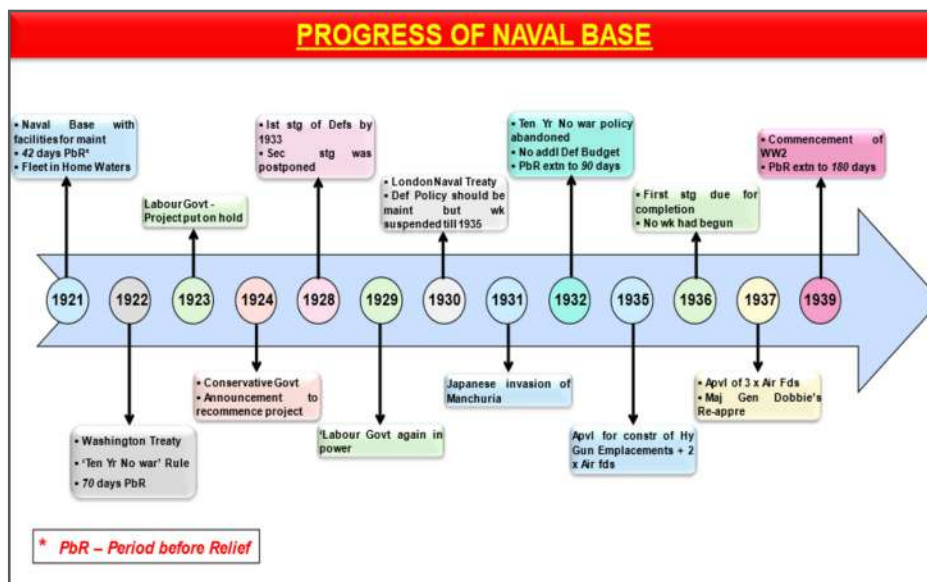


Figure 1 : Progress of Naval Base

- As the situation worsened in Europe the 'Period Before Relief', progressively increased from 42 to 70 days, then to 90 days in Jun 1939 to 180 days in Sep 1939 on the outbreak of war in Europe, and with the fall of France it was unofficially extended indefinitely. With that came a growing realisation that it was very unlikely that any fleet could ever be sent to Singapore. Yet this concept of 'Main Fleet to Singapore' and a threat to Singapore from the southern direction with amphibious landings on the southern coast remained deeply ingrained and affected decision making at all levels.

- This was evident from the fact that the site of the naval base was selected in the northern part of Singapore, having to pass through the narrow Johore Strait which was not an ideal site, even from the naval view point, and in the long run actually exposed the base to attacks from the north. This base was to be constructed with an outlay of about the 3.5 mn pounds, 2 mn from the Malaya states, 1 mn from New Zealand and half a mn from Hong Kong. 3.5 mn pounds translates to about 200 mn plus, today or about 20,000 Cr. The construction took place in fits and spurts, depending upon the priorities of which party was in power, their philosophy and the finances available in the UK. With the continuous increase in the 'Period Before Relief', a feeling of disquiet set in that a base was being built for a ghost fleet, a fleet that in fact, never actually arrived. Could there have been a mid-course strategic correction resulting in better utilisation of these funds if right from the beginning there had been a theatre command with a high-ranking commander who could have made the infirmities of the military appreciation evident to Whitehall? In hindsight the answer appears to be in the affirmative.
- With the threat of a Japanese invasion of Malaya imminent in Dec 1941, and in the absence of any fleet, all that could be spared was the His Majesty's Ship (HMS) Prince of Wales, one of the most modern ships in the British Navy armed with the most advanced fire control system to take on aerial targets, accompanied by the HMS Repulse a WW I vintage cruiser well past its prime, and four destroyers. There were to have also got the aircraft carrier HMS Indomitable, but it ran aground, necessitating base repairs and therefore could not join. The HMS Hermes, another aircraft carrier had accompanied the HMS Prince of Wales up to the Cape of Good Hope but because of its slower speed it remained behind.

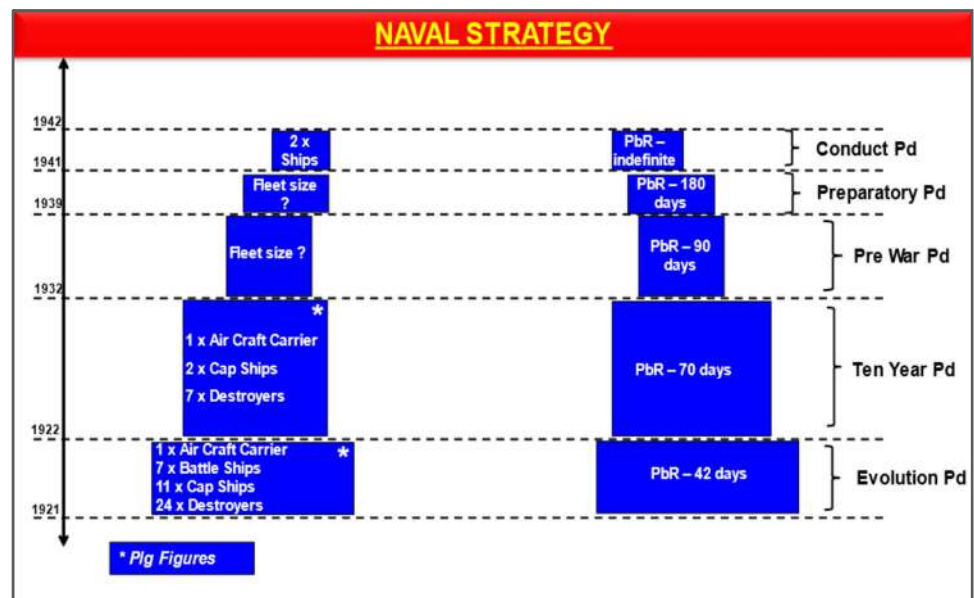


Table 2 : Naval Strategy

- So, these six ships, the HMS Prince of Wales, HMS Repulse and the four destroyers became Force Z, under the command of the newly promoted Admiral Phillips, and were tasked to intercept the Japanese invasion fleet. This fleet sailed from Singapore on 08 Dec 1941 to the East Coast of Malaya, but was unable to detect the Japanese main fleet, and turned back. Unknown to them, they were being tracked by submarines and had been spotted by Japanese aircraft. After a failed abortive attack on 09 Dec night, on the morning of the 10 Dec 1941 the fleet was once again spotted by the Japanese aircraft, attacked by torpedoes and the HMS Prince of Wales and Repulse both sank within an hour of each other. The Japanese aircraft had to turn back as they too had been searching for this fleet in different parts of the ocean and when the attack happened, they were themselves low on fuel. Had that not been the case, probably the other four destroyers may themselves been attacked or sunk and would not have been in a position to rescue the survivors of these two ships. With this loss, Singapore became a land base, rather than a base for power projection.

The remainder of the naval vessels were withdrawn to Ceylon and Indonesia and along with the HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, the strategy of the 'Main Fleet to Singapore' to keep the Japanese at bay, came to rest at the bottom of the sea. Singapore became a sentry box without a sentry.

- Part of the blame for the navy remaining out of the command of the theatre commander was because of the historic pre-eminence of the Royal Navy within the British military and the Admiralty system. This was on account of Britain being an island as well as an empire with overseas possessions around the globe; the possessions having been gained by its naval supremacy. The Admiralty differed from other British service departments in that it functioned as an operational authority, sometimes actually issuing direct orders to ships at sea. In the 20th century there were usually 10 members of the Board of Admiralty; three were members of Parliament, six were naval officers, and one was permanent secretary.⁹ Being a political military organisation its operations were affected to a greater extent by political considerations than the other services.

The Air Campaign.

- The formulation of the air strategy also had a lot to do with the developments in aircraft in the inter war years, as well as the new doctrines on air power being propounded by Douhet and Mitchell, which had in essence propounded the theory that air power by itself could win battles and wars. But once again this has to be seen in the backdrop of the restricted defence budgets prevailing at those times and of course the attempt by all services to project their requirements and their strategies as the best, without a central theatre commander being able to forecast or coordinate their integrated use.
- The Air Strategy was an alternate to the Naval Strategy and this was propounded based on having major advantages since aircraft would definitely have better and longer ranges than coastal batteries and slow-moving surface ships. Therefore, they would not only be able to spot an invading fleet much earlier but would also be able to target it much further away, thereby making an amphibious landing well-nigh impossible. The numbers required for such a strategy had been war gamed by the air force and were quite accurate as it turned out at the end. It also emerged in these war games that these aircraft needed to be deployed within the theatre for this strategy to be successful. During this period there were only about 88 vintage aircraft in this whole area. Singapore had merely one airfield, and as time progressed, work commenced on the construction of two more. So initially, at the outbreak of hostilities there were all together about three to four airfields and less than 100 aircraft in the theatre.
- Notwithstanding, the ranges of the aircraft were still quite restricted and therefore the air force was unlikely to be able to achieve the aims set out for itself. This was to target the Japanese Navy as far forward as possible. For this there was a requirement to build airfields in Malaya. Accordingly, this infrastructure was built up, but these airfields were sited without any coordination or consultation with the army. As a result, most of them were in tactically unviable locations, mostly on the western coast of Malaya, which was the probable route of the air reinforcement (see Map 3). A few airfields were sited on the eastern coast to further the reach of the aircraft, and these airfields, were totally unviable from a defensive point of view and would be the first to fall in case of an amphibious landing.



Map 3 : Airfields in the Malaya - Singapore Area

- In this strategy, therefore, the air force was to play a primary role and the army was to play a supporting role to safeguard the airfields rather than defending Malaya as a whole. This, of course, resulted in the dissipation of whatever resources existed in an airfield guarding role rather than holding a defensive line. As the infrastructure was built up, the squadrons started arriving and the aircraft strength increased, but never ever reached the strength that had been contemplated and planned for the successful conduct of the air campaign. So, at the start of the war there were just about 130 to 140 odd aircraft (including the obsolete ones) as against the 336 that were sanctioned, whereas the Japanese had 439 modern aircraft. During a similar time frame 400 odd aircraft had been sent to Russia and 200 or so to the Middle East. So effectively, Singapore received merely 100 odd aircraft and the bulk of these had been deployed mostly in Malaya to enable them to strike at the airbases in Indo-China and the invasion fleet.
- From the Japanese side the air battle commenced on 07 Dec when the Japanese took control of the airfield of Singora (Thailand), and launched air strikes on British airfields. By the evening of 08 Dec, 60 out of 110 aircraft deployed in Malaya had been lost out of the total of 138 in the whole theatre. Under these circumstances, the balances of the aircraft were evacuated to Singapore. And it was also under such circumstances that Force Z ventured into the waters off the Malayan Coast. Some air effort had been allotted to Force Z, but the ships had changed course a number of times, which was not communicated to anyone, since they were operating under their own C-in-C (Admiral Layton) and by the time the aircraft located the fleet, they arrived just as the ships were going down. Here again the lack of air and naval coordination can be attributed to the fact that the navy is not under the theatre commander General Wavell.
- In mid Jan, after the invasion of Malaya was well underway, Singapore did receive 50 Hurricane fighters, but this was a case of too little-too late and the strength of the aircraft even with these reinforcements, was once again less than 100 aircraft as compared to 450 on the Japanese side. General Wavell visited Singapore sometime in the second week of Feb 1942, made a round of the front line and sensed that the situation in Singapore was hopeless. One of the last orders he gave before leaving Singapore, was that the balance aircraft should move back to the Dutch East Indies. This more or less sealed the fate of Singapore. Once again, the strategy was sound, but in the absence of dedicated resources this plan remained a 'Castle in the Air'.

Land Strategy.

- At the start of the period when the Japanese threat became evident, the army was little more than a local garrison, mostly for local protection with the strength of about two odd brigades.

Along with the naval and air force discussions, deliberations on the army strategy were also underway. In these deliberations, spread over a period of time, the army was quite muddled. The navy and the air force had a very simple task or mandate, and that was to keep the Japanese forces as far away as possible and prevent a landing. But for the army, the task was more complex.

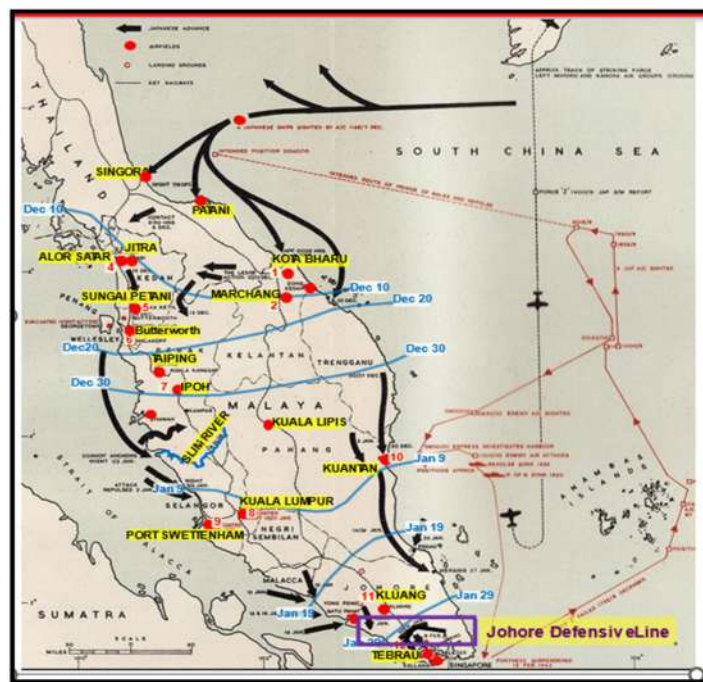
- The role of the army in the naval phase or scheme of things was to hold Singapore for the 'Period Before Relief' and for that of course, there had to be an orientation towards the South, as that is where the attack was expected during that stage. Once the air strategy came into being and was being implemented, then the requirement of defending the airfields in Malaya was laid down, and therefore there was an orientation toward the north. These were pulls in two different directions. Be that as it may, it was apparent right from the beginning that the force levels were clearly inadequate. As far as the army was concerned, therefore, there were three options, i.e., defend Singapore alone, Singapore plus Southern Johore and Singapore plus the whole of Malaya. Obviously, for each of these options, the force levels and strategies would be radically different.
- With the naval and air force plans either not fructifying or only being partially implemented, it became evident that the army would have to go into Malaya whatever be the case, and this was further reinforced in the air strategy when the army had to go into the Malaya to defend the airfields. But this requirement, dissipated the forces that were at hand over large distances incapable of mutual support, over difficult terrain, with poor road communications, so that there was no way one location could reinforce the other in a timely manner especially in the face of opposition. During various deliberations, the requirement for a defensive line in Southern Johore was proposed and worked on that even commenced but it was abandoned half way due to changing priorities and budgetary constraints.



Table 3 : Proposed Strengths of the Three Services in Various Periods

- Similar to the navy and air force, the army had also carried out its own appreciation for what would be needed for the defence of Malaya plus Singapore and this came to about five divisions with a full complement of supporting arms and services, namely artillery, armour, engineers, air defence and so on, (see Table 3). But ultimately, what they got was only about three plus divisions worth or so, that too without their full complement of supporting arms and services. The divisions had inadequate artillery which was only about 2/3rd of their authorisation. There was only one cavalry regiment, with armoured cars unsuited for jungles (having being diverted from the deserts of North Africa). The anti-tank and anti-aircraft resources were just not there. In terms of effectiveness therefore, this force was merely the equivalent of perhaps two divisions. On the Japanese side, they had earmarked three divisions for this offensive including one in reserve in Japan which was never used. They had adequate artillery, armour and air divisions which were an integral part of the 25th Army.

- In May 1941, Lt Gen Arthur Percival assumed the charge of GOC Malaya. He carried out a fresh assessment and against a requirement of 31 battalions, projected by his predecessor came to a figure of 48 battalions, which is closer to the original figure of five divisions. Interestingly, as a Colonel in 1937, under the directions of his then GOC, Major General William Dobbie, he carried out an appreciation¹⁰ in which, he had identified exactly the beaches and axis of advance that the Japanese might undertake should they carry out an offensive through Malaya. During the same period of the 1930s, year after year, in the war games conducted by the Imperial War College, the same result was thrown out, irrespective of the time of the year, that the Japanese would land on the east coast of Siam (Thailand) and northern Malaya and then advance down the western side. Yet, General Percival failed to implement even his own appreciation fully.
- In the context of grand strategy and Theaterisation, detailed operational or tactical issues are not being highlighted, but it would be interesting to review 'Operation Matador', which were the plans for a pre-emptive strike into Siam to deny the Japanese likely beachheads, which as mentioned earlier had been correctly identified. For this the 11 Division was mobilised and they were in trains, along with all their defence stores, but this plan was aborted at the last minute on the directions for the War Committee, in the belief that it would invite Japanese retaliation and give them a *casus belli* to invade Siam and/or Malaya.¹¹ As it transpired because of this, 11 Division neither carried out the offensive, nor was re-deployed at Jitra from where barely a week earlier it had uprooted its field fortifications and line communications. Thus, the defences were under-prepared and subsequently when the Japanese attacked Jitra, it was over run in the very first week of the campaign.



Map 2: Progress of Japanese Land Operations

- From that moment on, the British remained unbalanced throughout as they withdrew down the peninsula (See Map 2 above), and even then, the withdrawal rather than making a clean break and leap-frogging from one line to the other, the same troops occupied successive defensive lines and kept battling and battling, as a result of which they were thoroughly exhausted by the time they reached Singapore. Even at that point of time when Jitra had fallen, had a permanent defensive line been occupied at Johore it would have kept Singapore out of artillery range and stalled the Japanese long enough to perhaps affect the overall outcome.

The Fall of Singapore

Because of the naval perception and outlook that had been prevalent for so much time, in spite of the clear threat from the north, troops were still spread out all along the island including guarding the approaches in the south where there was no threat, earlier indications of a Japanese fleet coming southward had been negated. Even when Wavell had visited, he had suggested to Gen Percival to realign his forces and prepare defences in the north, but to no avail as the naval view remained supreme. Furthermore, as an attack from the north became imminent, there was a feeling that the attack would be in the northeast (where the Naval Base was located), which was the shortest approach, and this feeling was further reinforced by the preliminary operations carried out by the Japanese, when they captured the island of Pulau Ubin in the Johore Straits on the night of 07 Feb. With attention diverted to the northeast the Japanese actually attacked in the northwest in the area of Tengah, in the area of responsibility of the over stretched 22nd Brigade, which was quickly overrun. After that, the Japanese kept advancing rapidly, whereas on the British side there was loss of cohesion and a breakdown of command and control. Wavell did his final visit on 11 Feb, in which as mentioned earlier, one of his final orders before leaving was the transfer of all the aircraft to Indonesia. But even then, he says in his memoirs, that there was no thought of surrender. Perhaps even he did not appreciate this situation thoroughly. Later, the Japanese gave an ultimatum to surrender and even threatened to raze the city. Faced with such a difficult choice the commanders conferred and agreed to surrender, primarily to spare civilian casualties and the surrender came into effect on 15 Feb 1942, which is barely nine days after the first attack on the island of Singapore.



Map 3: The Fall of Singapore

Thus ended the campaign, which was the greatest military defeat Britain had ever suffered since the loss of the American colonies.¹² The Japanese had catered for a 100 days campaign but achieved it within just 70 days. However, because of the speed of the advance their own lines of communication and logistics chain had been over stretched and in fact broken down. Had the British held on a little longer they could have gained time to re-group and re-organise their defences.

A parallel can be drawn to the Battle of Kohima where a similar situation prevailed but there it was the Japanese who blinked first and ultimately had to withdraw. But there is one difference that, in the battle of Kohima, the relieving column had reached 20 odd miles away and the embattled troops had hope of relief. At Singapore, the navy, and air force had left the island and taken their assets to safety and it was the army that had to face the ignominy of the surrender. The images that went around the world were of dishevelled and dispirited soldiers, always giving the feeling that it is the army that had lost. In reality, it was a loss for which all three services were responsible.

Conclusion

The study of a campaign that resulted in a major defeat is more noteworthy, because as former President APJ Abdul Kalam said, “Don’t read success stories, you will only get a message; read failure stories, you will get some ideas to get success”.¹³ The take-aways and lessons learned from this campaign in the context of the issue of Theaterisation are given below:

- The foremost is that one operational commander with full control over his resources is required to conduct a successful theatre campaign.
- Wars are unpredictable and are thrust upon us by force of circumstance. Planning for the campaign has to be objective, with foresight, continuity of commanders and with adequate staff to work out the details for the theatre commander. The span of a theatre commander is so vast that small staffs cannot be equal to the work.
- All three services have to be under one theatre commander if all three are required for the successful conduct of that campaign. In the case of the campaign in Malaya/Singapore the navy was not under the command of the theatre commander.
- Theaterisation should not be understood as something done for saving financial resources. The British procrastination to assign resources to the South East Asian Command during the interwar years in order to economise, sealed the fate of Singapore. On the other hand, a militaristic Japan had built up its forces substantially in the interwar years in spite of restrictions imposed by treaties with western powers.
- ‘Intention and Capability’ are two sides of the same coin. Whereas intentions can change overnight, capabilities take decades to develop. Defence preparedness therefore has to be an ongoing, break-free process without self-imposed moratoriums. The enemy will obviously exploit weaknesses. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is a case in point. One may say while planning as the British did a ‘No War for 10 years’, that the enemy may have other ideas.
- Theaterisation is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. And it is that end which has to be specified first, through a National Defence Strategy, which itself will flow out from a NSS. Without these two in place, calling for theaterisation in isolation is not workable. The British never had a clear strategy as to how they were to defend Singapore. If they had made one, then even with the navy not under the control of the theatre commander, it would at least have worked in unison with him.
- Within the theatre itself, there will be various ways and means to achieve the aims. Whichever method is adopted, it must be implemented wholeheartedly, in an integrated manner. Force structuring cannot be contingency based; there are too many imponderables of war and the more complicated the plan, the more chances of it failing. Any of the strategies for the defence of Singapore, if implemented in toto, would have succeeded. Sometimes in trying to satisfy everyone, one ends up satisfying no one. And that is a sure recipe for defeat.
- The theatre commander must have the last word on all matters related to the prosecution of operations. Here, we must also distinguish between the theatre command and the theatre commander. Theatre commanders will be appointed by the government and that is a fact of life that has to be accepted, as well as the fact that there cannot be two swords in one scabbard, i.e., duality in command and control. Therefore, within the theatre command, an integrated theatre strategy as decided by the theatre commander, has to take precedence over service specific philosophies as happened at Singapore.

A broad strategy is essential in order to create effective theatre commands. When such a strategy is in place, the charter is laid out and the roles are specified, can one think of various formulations for theatre commands. Once this is in place there will of course, in the end-ways-means continuum, various means to accomplish whatever are the aims of the theatre. And the role will dictate the composition of the theatre, the force levels, and based on the aim as to which will be the lead service. The theatre command is not just an organogram. The buck should stop with the theatre commander.

End Notes

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