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As a result of the recent London Conference regarding Naval armaments, and the possibility of further reduction in capital ship tonnage, the question has arisen as to whether it is necessary to complete the work of creating a fortified base at Singapore, capable of maintaining the British main fleet.

Present Policy.

So far as is known, approval has been given for the establishment of a floating dock, graving dock, dockyard area, and an air base, to be completed by 1937.

As regards fortifications, the original proposal to mount three 15" guns, four 9.2" guns, and four 6" guns by 1932, has been modified in order that further enquiries may be made as to the most efficient form of coast defence, and approval has been given for the maintenance of flying boat squadrons for this purpose.

Estimated Cost.

According to newspaper report (Morning Post) the cost of completing the base, with fortifications, will be £4,867,000. This sum includes £1,290,000 which the Malay States and New Zealand have agreed to find.

Object of Singapore.

The object of having a first class fleet base at Singapore is to provide protection for Imperial interests in the Indian Ocean and Australia.

Importance of Singapore to Australia.

Australia's main interests are her trade and the integrity of her territory.

As regards trade, 23 per cent of the total trade of the British Empire and 60 per cent of Australia's trade passes through the Indian Ocean. The value of Australian import and export trade using the Indian Ocean in the course of a year is estimated to be about £200,000,000. Security for this, in war, is therefore not only of great importance

to the Empire as a whole, but vital to the existence of Australia.

It would not be possible for Japan to carry out continuous operations against our trade unless she could establish an advanced base at the Gateway to the Indian Ocean.
Function of Singapore in relation to Imperial Defence.

If Singapore were not adequately protected and held by us, there would be little to prevent Japan establishing such a base at Singapore itself. From here she would be able to concentrate the whole of her Naval forces with the object of attacking Australian and Imperial trade in the Indian Ocean, and the presence of her capital ships (if any) or, failing these, her main concentration, at Singapore, would provide support for her lighter forces operating on the trade routes.

The "Emden" alone was able seriously to dislocate British trade in the Indian Ocean at the commencement of the last war, although she had no base and no support of any sort. This single ship diverted 12 to 15 British cruisers from their normal duty before she was ultimately destroyed. How much greater, therefore, would be the effect of 20 "Emden's"?

The presence of a British naval base at Singapore, and the feasibility of quick military reinforcement for the garrison from India, would render the establishment of any other base within the vicinity by Japan extremely difficult - in fact a British base at Singapore would force back the Japanese main concentration 3,000 miles from our trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

As regards the protection of Australian territory, the lack of sufficient shipping to maintain an army of six divisions makes it certain that Japan would never attempt an invasion of Australia until she had absolute control of the sea communications. Sporadic raids on Australian territory or vital centres by swift-moving sea-borne mechanised forces, or even carrier-borne aircraft, is, however,

a possibility, and the damage created by such raids might be sufficiently serious to interfere with the internal activities of the country.

With a strong British Naval concentration at Singapore lying on the flank of the route between Japan and Australia, it is unlikely that any such raids would be attempted, unless provided with strong escort, and even so, our forces based at Singapore would be in a position to intercept the enemy en route which in itself would be a deterrent to any such attempt being made.

It may be stated that a strong British Naval force operating from a convenient base in Australian territory would itself be a deterrent to such attacks. This is undoubtedly correct, but it would not fulfill the all-important function of providing protection for the sea communications in the Indian Ocean.

Australia's policy for some years past has been to subscribe towards the Imperial Defence by providing a sea-going unit capable of co-operating with the British main forces in peace or war.

Previous to the establishment of this policy, a considerable amount of money was expended in carrying out preliminary work to establish naval bases, e.g., Cockburn Sound, West Australia, and at Port Stephens, New South Wales.

The Imperial policy to establish a base at Singapore was the principal reason, apart from lack of money, for discontinuing the policy of providing bases capable of holding a large fleet. It is considered that if the Singapore project is abandoned, the question of Australia providing a base to accommodate the British Main Forces ^{is sooner} or later bound to arise as it is upon the British main naval forces that the security of Australia finally depends.

Singapore, if proceeded with, can be regarded as an insurance against the necessity of Australia expending large sums of money in providing a suitable base in the

future, and possibly stronger naval forces.

It has been stated that if the trade in the Indian Ocean was seriously threatened, it could be diverted via the Cape of Good Hope. This would cause such delays and so much dislocation of trade, that it is doubtful whether the Empire could provide sufficient shipping to cope with it, and it must be remembered that all available cargo space would be required in war.

The establishment of tanks for reserve oil fuel at Singapore and the proximity of these to the oilfields of Persia, Burma, and Borneo, would cause considerable economy in tankers, which are also vital in war.

Whether or not the capital ship (as understood at present) is ultimately abolished, modern cruisers are over 630 feet in length and require docking accommodation almost equal to a battleship. --- in fact, there are no docks capable of docking cruisers of the "Australia" class on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean, and Australian Waters, except at Singapore and Sydney.

Should it be necessary to operate the fleet from Singapore (if no dock is established there) the nearest places where the present type of capital ship could dock would be Bombay, 2,435 miles, and Durban, 4,867 miles away.

It is not proposed here to enter into a discussion as to the advisability of abolishing capital ships, but the fact remains the battleship still remains the basis of sea power, and Germany has attracted considerable attention, and caused no little anxiety, by designing a capital ship of a smaller type. There is no guarantee that this type of ship will not grow in size - in fact the history of Naval development and construction throughout the ages tends to indicate that it will do so.

Docking accommodation for such ships and even large cruisers takes many years to complete, and much money has been wasted in the past by constructing docks which have

always been too small to compete with current Naval development.

Conclusion.

The function of Singapore is purely defensive, and Japan is fully aware that offensive operations against her own interests could not be undertaken from this base, as it is 3,000 miles away from the waters in which she is interested. On the other hand, being at the Eastern gateway of the Indian Ocean, it is essentially an Imperial responsibility that a fortified base should be established there, and that it should be adequately held.

It has been stated that a large number of troops would be necessary to hold it in the event of Japanese attack. This may be so, but the number required varies inversely with the strength of the fixed defences while the number required to attack it would vary directly, and the time taken by Japan to mobilise a large expeditionary force for attack on Singapore would be sufficiently long to enable us to concentrate an adequate garrison.

The only possible justification for abandoning our responsibility for the defence of the Indian Ocean by means of Singapore would be a world-wide assurance that war was definitely abolished. This knowledge would also justify the complete abolition of Navies.

Navies are, however, still recognised as being essential to national security, and particularly the security of the British Empire. It is also recognised that modern navies are useless unless they have bases to maintain them in the areas in which they are operating. From a defensive point of view it would be essential in war for the British Navy to maintain control over the communications in the Indian Ocean, and for this purpose, the Singapore Naval Base is vital to the Empire.
