

寄稿

Churchill's Pacific Strategy, 1943–45

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Introduction

During the latter stages of the Second World War, Churchill and his chiefs of staff engaged in a long-running argument about where best to apply British forces in the final defeat of Japan. There were several reasons for this dithering, not least among them being Churchill's deep antagonism towards Australia and Australians following the bitter wartime disputes between the governments of the two countries. To the intense frustration of the British chiefs of staff, this prejudice caused Churchill to oppose any strategy that required British forces to be based in Australia or to operate under Australian command. As a result, the impact of Britain's contribution to the Pacific war was much less than it otherwise might have been.

1. The "Germany First" Strategy and the Pacific War

The Japanese attack on Singapore in December 1941 saw Britain fighting wars on opposite sides of the world. Although Britain had a long-standing commitment to dispatch a fleet to the Far East to ensure the protection of Australia in the event of such hostilities with Japan, Churchill retreated from this promise and adhered instead to a secret commitment that he had made with the Americans to concentrate Anglo-American forces against Germany and Italy. This so-called "beat Germany first" strategy committed Britain and the United States to fighting the war in Europe with all their combined might while fighting only a "holding war" against Japan. To Churchill's great relief, this strategy was reconfirmed by the US Chiefs of Staff when he rushed to Washington in December 1941 to ensure that the Americans would remain committed to it in the face of the humiliation that they had suffered at Pearl Harbor.¹⁾

The "beat Germany first" strategy made considerable sense, although probably any strategy would have worked once the combined might of Britain, Russia and the United States were in the war together. In fact, the strategy should more properly have been called, "Italy first, Germany second and Japan a distant third," at least from Britain's point of view. It had the effect of focusing Allied power, along with the decisive power of the Soviet Union, against the Axis powers in Europe and thereby ensuring Germany's eventual defeat. However, in one important respect, Churchill failed to think through the implications of the Anglo-American strategy. Specifically, he did not seem to realise

¹⁾ For details of the British commitment to Australia, see David Day, *The Politics of War* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003).

the practical problems that would arise from having a two-stage ending to the war, whereby Britain would concentrate its forces in Europe until Germany was defeated and only then divert its forces against the very distant Japanese enemy while Europe was returning to peacetime pursuits.

When the strategy was drawn up in early 1941, few would have predicted the extent or the suddenness of Japan's territorial victories, which included the British colonies of Hong Kong, Burma and Malaya, the American colony of the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies and French Indo-China. It also included the Australian mandated territory of New Guinea and New Britain and a swathe of islands across the Pacific. Despite the daunting size of the expanded Japanese empire, which also included Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and large parts of China, there was no immediate change to the underlying Allied strategy.

Although there was some diversion of forces to the Pacific by the Americans, the underlying strategy remained fixed as far as Churchill was concerned. Even when it was clear that there could be no cross-channel invasion of Europe until 1944, Churchill still refused to modify the strategy and allow additional British forces to be deployed in the interim against Japan. He was particularly adamant about rebutting calls from the Australian prime minister, John Curtin, and the Supreme Commander in the South West Pacific Area, General Douglas MacArthur, to hit Japan hard when it was caught off-balance by its decisive defeat in the battle of Midway in June 1942. Indeed, it was not until early 1944, with the preparations for the cross-channel invasion completed and the forces accumulating and training in Britain, that Churchill finally was forced by his Chiefs of Staff to confront the question of how Britain was to participate in the defeat of Japan.

2. The Divisions in London Over Pacific Strategy

There was no easy answer to resolving the question of British strategy in the Pacific, particularly with the Singapore naval base still occupied by Japan. Unlike the British prior to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese actually based their main fleet there in 1944, albeit to keep their remaining warships out of the way of the Americans. The Japanese battleships posed a sufficiently powerful deterrent to keep British forces well clear of the place while also complicating the debate in London concerning future British strategy against Japan. Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff had to decide where to apply British forces for the final defeat of Japan. Essentially, there were two main choices. British forces could be sent to the Pacific to fight alongside the Americans and Australians in a northerly offensive through the Philippines towards the Japanese main islands. Or they could be used as part of a British offensive directed towards recovering Britain's territories in South-East Asia and restoring, to the extent that they could, the prestige that Britain had lost following the fall of Singapore.

The first strategy would require British forces to be based alongside the Americans and Australians in the South-West Pacific, from where they would be launched northward under the supreme command of America's General MacArthur. The second strategy would require British forces to be based in India alongside the existing British garrison under the overall supreme command of Britain's Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. From India, they would be launched eastward in a ground offensive to drive the Japanese back through Burma while amphibious landings along the Burmese coastline combined to encircle and recapture the Burmese capital, Rangoon. The second stage to this latter strategy, as envisaged by Churchill, involved capturing the northern tip of Sumatra to provide a launching pad for an attack against Malaya and Singapore. To the despair of the Chiefs of Staff, Churchill became obsessed with this plan and used all his political wiles to try to force it upon his military advisers, who wanted instead the British focus to be concentrated in the Pacific.

After Churchill joined with some of his more compliant cabinet colleagues in early March 1944 to pressure the chiefs to accept his cherished strategy, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, was so frustrated with the prime minister that he thought the chiefs might have to resign if Churchill ignored their advice and continued to insist on his strategy being adopted. Brooke confided in his diary after this political ambush that the naval chief, Admiral Cunningham, was "so wild with rage that he hardly dared let himself speak!" According to Brooke, the arguments of the ministers supporting Churchill were "so puerile that it made me ashamed to think that they were Cabinet Ministers."²⁾

In contrast to Churchill, Brooke favoured a strategy that used Australia as a base and which envisaged an offensive being launched from northern Australia to recapture Borneo and then push north towards Tokyo in tandem with the Americans. At this stage, it was expected that the defeat of Japan would not occur before 1946 or 1947, and perhaps even later. After the tense meeting between cabinet ministers and the Chiefs of Staff on March 8, 1944, Brooke thought he had made some headway in dissuading Churchill from his cherished Sumatran strategy. After two and a half hours of heated argument, Churchill conceded that the chiefs could at least begin a reconnaissance of Australia to check its suitability as a base for future action.³⁾ Despite appearances, he had not relinquished his attachment to an Indian Ocean strategy.

Churchill did not concede that easily. Instead of Britain trying to capture the northern tip of Sumatra, Churchill now argued on March 17 that British forces should capture a small island off the coast of Sumatra. It was left to the chiefs to point out that any British force trying to hold an island so close to Singapore would be courting

²⁾ Alanbrooke diary, March 8, 1944, in *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*, eds. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), 530.

³⁾ Ibid.

disaster from the nearby Japanese main fleet and air force. After having earlier thought he had convinced Churchill about the Australian strategy, Brooke was left wondering whether he was “Alice in Wonderland, or whether I was really fit for a lunatic asylum! I am honestly getting very doubtful about [Winston’s] balance of mind and it just gives me the cold shivers. I don’t know where we are or where we are going as regards our strategy, and I just cannot get him to face the true facts! It is a ghastly situation.”⁴⁾

Despite a series of exhausting meetings, Brooke and his colleagues were unable to make Churchill see sense over the issue. If blocked by the strategic logic of the chiefs, Churchill would appeal to his cabinet colleagues for support or go around the chiefs and seek the support of their planning staff for his alternative operations. After encountering opposition on March 17 for his plan to capture an island off Sumatra, Churchill returned on March 23 to his original plan to capture the northern tip of Sumatra. Brooke found himself having to start all over again. Exasperated beyond measure, Brooke complained in his diary that he felt “like a man chained to the chariot of a lunatic!! It is getting beyond my powers to control him.”⁵⁾

And the arguments went on. When the Australian prime minister, John Curtin, visited London for the imperial conference in May 1944, a meeting was held with Churchill and the defence committee to discuss Pacific strategy, even though no compromise had yet been achieved between Churchill and the chiefs. When the question of basing British forces on Australia was raised with Curtin, he expressed reservations about the capacity of his hard-pressed country to support the British forces with manpower and supplies. At the time, it was struggling to cope with supplying the needs of the Australian and American armies in the South West Pacific Area. Curtin was also wary of the British command interfering with MacArthur’s position as supreme commander of the South-West Pacific Area. After all, with the British forces being led by Mountbatten, their presence in Australia had the potential to cause an unseemly jostling for the spotlight between the two prima donnas, MacArthur and Mountbatten, and thereby disturb the mostly harmonious relationship that Curtin had enjoyed with the American general.⁶⁾ Despite Curtin’s concerns and Churchill’s continuing opposition, the chiefs convinced both Curtin and Churchill to develop Fremantle and Darwin as bases for the British forces.

If Brooke thought a conclusive decision had finally been made about Pacific strategy, he was much mistaken. Two weeks later, a very drunk Churchill returned to

⁴⁾ Ibid., March 17, 1944, 532.

⁵⁾ Ibid., March 23, 1944, 534.

⁶⁾ For Curtin’s relationship with MacArthur, see David Day, *John Curtin: A Life* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999); David Horner, *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000).

the charge, arguing the case for his Sumatran strategy in a meeting with his chiefs of staff that went on until 2 o'clock in the morning. Brooke complained angrily in his diary of having to fend off "all the old arguments that we have had put up by him over and over again." Although Churchill's ministers were now siding with the chiefs of staff, it still brought no resolution to the dispute. Eight days later, another late night meeting was held to decide on Pacific strategy but, according to Brooke, settled "absolutely nothing." Churchill promised that he would make a decision in a week. When the week was up, he declared instead that he would have to wait for Mountbatten to return to London before he could make a decision.⁷⁾ And so the arguments went on, only finally being brought to an end when Churchill was voted out of power the following year.

3. The Reasons for Churchill's Objections

Although Churchill and his chiefs of staff had many other disputes over strategy, no other dispute had seen them at such loggerheads, or for so long, as the dispute over the future British strategy against Japan. There are several reasons why Churchill was so adamant about sticking to his Sumatran plan, and they were not all the thinking of a madman, as an exasperated Brooke was sometimes inclined to suggest in the furious scribbles of his diary. Firstly, the Sumatran plan would focus British forces on the recapture of Singapore, the loss of which in 1942 had made a deep impact on Churchill, as had the associated loss of the British warships, *Prince of Wales*, and *Repulse*, not least because of Churchill's close association with Admiral Tom Phillips, who had gone down with the *Prince of Wales*.⁸⁾ It was Churchill who had sent Phillips out there in charge of the squadron and in the face of Admiralty warnings against sending such a weak and unbalanced force to taunt the much more powerful Japanese navy.⁹⁾ The loss of the ships and the death of Phillips hit Churchill hard. He later claimed that, throughout all the war, he "never received a more direct shock."¹⁰⁾

Secondly, the loss of Singapore had nearly cost Churchill his prime ministership, and almost certainly would have had there been a viable alternative to him as prime minister. But there was not, and he survived. As a historian and biographer of great men, Churchill was more conscious than most how the loss of Singapore would appear

⁷⁾ Alanbrooke diary, July 6, 14 and 20, 1944, in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 566-67, 570 and 573.

⁸⁾ In his history of the war, Churchill claimed that he "never received a more direct shock" than when he heard the news of the *Prince of Wales* sinking. W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 3 (London: Cassell and Co., 1950), 551.

⁹⁾ Defence Committee (Operations) Minutes, October 17, 1941, CAB 69/2, D.O.(41)65, and Defence Committee (Operations) Confidential Annex, October 20, 1941, CAB 69/8, D.O.(41)66, Public Record Office, London.

¹⁰⁾ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 3 (London: Cassell and Co., 1950), 551.

on his own historical resumé. Now that victory in Europe was in sight, he could redress the humiliation of 1942, and perhaps enhance his reputation, if he could mount a purely British operation, albeit with Indian and probably Australian troops, and recover Singapore from its Japanese occupiers.

Thirdly, it was not only Churchill's own prestige that was at stake. There was also the question of reasserting British power in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and re-establishing the prestige of the British Empire in the minds of its formerly subject peoples. For this, Britain would have to expunge from their minds, as far as it was possible to do so, the memory of the ignominious surrender in February 1942 of the British, Indian and Australian troops to the underwhelming might of the Japanese forces at Singapore.

There was a final consideration in Churchill's calculation. If British prestige was to be recovered, it was no good fighting in a subservient position alongside the Americans and the Australians in the Pacific, particularly when both Canberra and Washington were opposed to the re-establishment of European empires and wanted to replace them with some sort of international trusteeship.¹¹⁾ Moreover, Churchill was aware that the Americans were determined to restrict the British role in the Pacific to a minor one and he was equally determined that Britain "should not be tied to the apron strings of the Americans."¹²⁾

The Americans were justified in being somewhat resentful towards the British. After all, the Americans had been doing the bulk of the fighting against Japan for the past two years. They could hardly but be resentful towards the British parvenus muscling in at the last minute to be in at the kill and thereby able to demand an equal place at any future Pacific peace table. The Australians were also less than welcoming to the proposal for a sizeable British effort based on the dominion. It would undercut their relationship with MacArthur and it would also add to the almost unbearable burden on Australian manpower, since the British forces would have to be largely fed and supplied from Australia.

These were all good reasons why Churchill should want an alternative direction for Britain's effort against Japan. The major decision for Churchill was from where to base that eventual offensive thrust towards Singapore—from India heading east or from Australia heading north-west. The considerations set out above could not decide the issue as between India or Australia. After all, the chiefs had suggested a compromise by mounting an offensive based on northern Australia and aimed towards recapturing the British colonies in Borneo and thence allowing a move towards Malaya/Singapore. But there was also another reason that loomed large in Churchill's mind and made him

¹¹⁾ For details of the differences over colonial trusteeship, see W.R. Louis, *Imperialism at Bay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

¹²⁾ Alanbrooke diary, May 18, 1944, in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 547–48.

particularly averse to the plan by the Chiefs of Staff. This was Churchill's deep and now abiding feeling of resentment towards Australia and its political leaders. No matter how much sense the chiefs' strategy made, no matter how logical or deeply thought out in its military aspects, Churchill would simply not agree to it. As Brooke revealed after one heated discussion about Pacific strategy in February 1944, Churchill's "dislike for Curtin and the Australians at once affected any discussion for co-operation with Australian forces through New Guinea towards the Philippines." So prejudiced was Churchill towards the Australians that Brooke complained that there was "no opportunity of discussing strategy on its merits."¹³⁾

4. The Roots of Churchill's Antipathy Towards Australia

Why should Churchill harbour feelings of resentment towards Australia that were so deep that they prevented him coming to a decision on Pacific strategy and nearly precipitated the resignation of his chiefs of staff? The dispute with Curtin in early 1942 over Churchill's attempt to send an Australian division to reinforce Burma obviously springs to mind.¹⁴⁾ But that was merely the worst of a long series of disputes between Churchill and a succession of Australian prime ministers, as well as with the Australian high commissioner in London, S.M. Bruce.

It began in October 1939 when Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty and was forced to give assurances about sending a fleet to Singapore in order to secure the dispatch of the Second AIF from Australia.¹⁵⁾ A few months later, he found himself confronting both the Australian prime minister, Robert Menzies, and the high commissioner, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, when the Australians opposed Churchill's plan in early 1940 to lay mines in Norwegian coastal waters in order to prevent the flow of Swedish iron ore to Germany. The Australians feared that it would widen the war and hamper their search to find a solution short of Churchill's plan to fight Germany to the finish. They regarded Churchill, who Menzies referred to as a "menace," as the greatest threat blocking their push for a compromise peace.¹⁶⁾

When Churchill became prime minister, the British attack on the Vichy French port of Dakar in September 1940 became another source of dispute when Menzies took umbrage at discovering from the newspapers that an Australian cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, had been used in the bungled operation, without any attempt being made before or after it to inform Canberra. What particularly irked Churchill was Menzies' criticism about the attack being mounted without "overwhelming chances of success" and his suggestion that Churchill had underestimated the difficulties in the Middle East.

¹³⁾ Ibid., February 25, 1944, 525.

¹⁴⁾ Day, *John Curtin*, 446-47, 451-57.

¹⁵⁾ Day, *The Politics of War*, 23-31.

¹⁶⁾ David Day, *Menzies and Churchill at War* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 16-17.

Moreover, this criticism came at a time when Churchill was engaged in winning the most crucial battle of all—the battle of Britain. Churchill refused to accept that an operation must have an overwhelming chance of success and he rejected Menzies' description of the Dakar operation as a "half-hearted attack." If Menzies was humiliated by reading of Dakar in the newspapers, he was even more humiliated, this time privately, by having to back down in the face of Churchill's angry cable. Menzies conceded that his own cable had been "crudely expressed" and denied "even the faintest suggestion that you or the British Government are half-hearted in policy, spirit or achievement."¹⁷⁾

Despite this assurance of support, Menzies' prolonged visit to London four months later would see the two leaders play out a contest for supremacy as Menzies sought to make himself the spokesman for the Dominions in the British war cabinet. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁸⁾ his long-term aim was to establish himself in a position where he could, in time, succeed Churchill as prime minister. It was not just political ambition that was being played out. As Menzies had revealed in early 1940, both men had fundamentally opposing approaches to the war, with Churchill wanting nothing less than total victory against Hitler whereas Menzies regarded Russia as the greater threat and, as a consequence, was keen to ensure that Germany be kept intact for the war to come against Moscow. Churchill was aware of Menzies' ambition and ensured that it could not be achieved. But the long-running campaign by Menzies to get to London, which lasted for nearly two years, did further damage to Churchill's opinion of Australia and its leaders.

This was compounded by the failure of the British expedition to Greece in early 1941, which had been intended to stop a German takeover of that country but which could only be mounted by diminishing the British forces that were on the verge of victory against the Italians in North Africa. Under pressure from Churchill, Menzies had approved with some misgivings the participation of Australian forces in the Greek expedition, only to become sharply critical of Churchill when the risky expedition quickly failed and many Australian casualties were incurred during the subsequent evacuation. Menzies had visited the Australian troops in the Middle East and had toured the sites of their recent victories in Libya. Now those victories had come to naught as the Axis forces pushed the British and Australians back into Egypt, catching in the process Australia's 9th Division in Tobruk and subjecting it to a long and grueling siege. Although Menzies insisted that the Australians evacuated from Greece be taken back to the Middle East, they were landed on Crete instead, where they faced

¹⁷⁾ Cables, Menzies to Churchill, September 29 and October 4, 1940, and Churchill to Menzies, October 2, 1940; W. J. Hudson and H. J. W. Stokes, eds., *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, vol. 4 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980), 186, 196-97, 204-5.

¹⁸⁾ See Day, *Menzies and Churchill at War*.

another battle and another forced evacuation, causing further losses of troops and ships.

In both Greece and Crete, the fate of the expeditionary force had been sealed by the almost complete absence of protective air power. Thereafter, Australian leaders repeatedly reminding Churchill of the Greek debacle whenever he wanted Australian troops to be committed to another risky operation. Menzies reminded him of Greece when Churchill wanted to use Australians on Cyprus. And Curtin used the Greek experience on several occasions, raising it with Churchill in relation to the Australians in Singapore, Burma and Ceylon. It usually provoked Churchill into making an angry reply, with Churchill never conceding any personal responsibility for the Greek disaster. After being brought low in the First World War by the Dardenelles disaster, in which Australia also suffered thousands of casualties, Churchill was anxious to avoid paying the political cost for another such disaster.

The Australian demand in late 1941 for the relief of their besieged troops in Tobruk was particularly galling for Churchill. Initially it was Menzies, on the recommendation of Australia's commander in the Middle East, General Blamey, who demanded that the Australians be relieved. Churchill needed the Tobruk garrison to be maintained as a thorn in Rommel's side until the British in Egypt could ready themselves for a renewed offensive. In his view, the Australian troops in Tobruk were running the normal risks of war and, with the backing of British commanders in the Middle East, he opposed the Australian demand. But Menzies insisted. When Menzies was replaced as prime minister in late August 1941 by the Country Party leader, Arthur Fadden, the Australian demands for the relief of their troops were repeated. And they continued when Curtin became prime minister six weeks later. The urgent demands for the relief of the Australians in Tobruk angered Churchill beyond measure. His anger was widely shared by British political and military leaders, with the issue being repeatedly referred to in their letters and diaries for months and even years afterwards.¹⁹⁾ Churchill later told Curtin of the "distress" that the repeated Australian demands had caused in London.²⁰⁾

With the Japanese entry into the war, there was a dramatic increase in the angry rhetoric between London and Canberra. Much of it was centred upon Australian attempts to have Churchill make good his repeated assurances about reinforcing Singapore. When little more than token assistance was forthcoming, and reports reached Australia of plans to evacuate Singapore, Australia's External Affairs Minister, Dr H.V. Evatt, told Churchill that such an evacuation would be regarded by Australia as "an inexcusable betrayal." In fact, no evacuation was being planned. The garrison at Singapore was simply not going to be reinforced. Churchill had given the island up as

¹⁹⁾ For the British resentment, see David Day, "Anzacs on the Run: The View from Whitehall 1941-42," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (May 1986).

²⁰⁾ Cable, Churchill to Curtin, November 27, 1941, VI/I, Ismay Papers, Kings College London.

lost and wanted any reinforcements to go to Burma instead. Despite this, and against his better judgement, he responded to Evatt's cable by sending another British division to Singapore. It arrived just in time to be captured when Singapore fell. Although Rangoon's defence was similarly hopeless, Churchill could not help blaming the Australians for the wasteful loss of the British division at Singapore and the subsequent loss of Rangoon.²¹⁾

The fighting reputation of the Australian troops was not helped by these demands from their political and military leaders, who always seemed to want to have them away from battles unless they had an overwhelming chance of success. And their reputation was dealt further blows by the failure of the Australian troops to live up to the high expectations that Churchill had of them. At the beginning of the war, Churchill and his colleagues tended to view Australian troops as the successors to the partly mythical warriors of the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. When Australian behaviour in the Second World War, either by the military commanders or the political leaders or the troops themselves, differed from that earlier image of selfless valour, the British were merciless in their condemnation. This reaction was evident following Churchill's dispatch of the Australian troops to stem the German tide into Greece, with Churchill believing that the Australian troops could hold the mountain passes armed with rifles and little else against the terror of the Stuka dive-bombers and the power of the Panzer tanks. When the inevitable rout occurred, the blame was sheeted home to the Australian soldiers and their commander, General Blamey, rather than to any defect in Churchill's strategy. In Churchill's mind, the Australians not only let him down in Greece but also later in Singapore, where the Australian troops failed to prevent the Japanese obtaining a lodgement on the island from where they were able to roll back the British defences. Other Australian troops were later involved in discreditable episodes in Singapore as they fought their way aboard the last evacuation ships that were meant for women and children. Reports of the Australian behaviour gradually filtered back to London over the succeeding months.²²⁾

It is not surprising in the light of Churchill sending the British division into Singapore at Australia's insistence, that he should be so insistent in turn that the Australian convoy of troops from the Middle East in early 1942 should be diverted to the defence of Rangoon rather than proceed on to Australia. Nor is it perhaps surprising that Churchill should unilaterally divert the convoy towards Burma when he failed to get an immediate reply from Curtin to his request for the Australians to step into the breach and defend Rangoon. Churchill's anger is also understandable when Curtin rightly insisted that they be sent home. As if these disputes were not enough, there were several other issues involving Australians that intensely irritated and

²¹⁾ See Day, *The Politics of War*, Chaps. 18–23; Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 4.

²²⁾ Day, "Anzacs on the Run."

angered Churchill.

There was the hostile Australian reaction to his proposal to appoint Richard Casey, the Australian minister in Washington, as British minister in the Middle East. Churchill thought Curtin had given him the go-ahead for this and was taken aback when Curtin appeared to change his mind and make strenuous objections that spilled over into the pages of the press.²³⁾ Then there were the attempts by Curtin during 1942 to retrieve the last remaining Australian division from the Middle East, with Churchill tenaciously trying to retain it there. Curtin did not improve his reputation by demanding the division's return just as it stood ready to take a leading part in the front line of Montgomery's massive offensive at El Alamein in August 1942. Churchill used all available means to try to keep the Australians there even after the battle was finished, enlisting President Roosevelt in his attempts to pressure Curtin into backing down. But it was all to no avail. "Australia has failed us," an exasperated Churchill later wrote. Although the New Zealand division remained in the Middle East, he expected it to be withdrawn once the fighting in North Africa had ceased. Their withdrawal, wrote Churchill, would place them "on the same level as Australia." Hence his relief when the New Zealand prime minister, Peter Fraser, allowed his troops to be used in the subsequent invasion of Italy.²⁴⁾

There was also Bruce's meddling in British politics, with the high commissioner attempting to promote the political stocks of Stafford Cripps as a replacement for Churchill, or at least for Cripps to take over as defence minister from Churchill.²⁵⁾ And there were many other minor disputes that helped to tear Australia's reputation to tatters. The wartime disputes were far from petty. Most of them involved fundamental challenges by Menzies and Curtin to Churchill's grand strategy, to his political position or to his place in history. Through his efforts to get a compromise peace, Menzies was directly challenging Churchill's aim of achieving the total defeat of Germany. Through his efforts to become the dominions' representative in the British war cabinet, Menzies was mounting a challenge to Churchill's largely untrammelled running of the war and, if he could manage it, to Churchill's prime ministership. With Curtin, the issues were just as fundamental, with Curtin challenging the agreed Anglo-American strategy to "beat Germany first," and seeking through his alliance with MacArthur to squeeze additional resources for the Pacific war from Washington. Curtin also made several calls for Russia to join the war against Japan. All these things were a direct challenge to Churchill's strategy for conducting the war. Yet by the end of the war the Anglo-Australian relationship was largely resuscitated, almost as if nothing had happened.

²³⁾ Day, *The Politics of War*, 293–97.

²⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, 477; Cable, Churchill to Fraser, December 6, 1942, PREM 3/63/10, Public Record Office.

²⁵⁾ David Day, "An Undiplomatic Incident: S.M. Bruce and the moves to curb Churchill, February 1942," *Journal of Australian Studies* (November 1986).

Conclusion

In the end, each side needed the other, much as they had before the war, in terms of defence cooperation, trade and investment, and immigration. Moreover, Australia remained a predominantly British country with strong public support for the British monarchy and the preservation of the empire. That should not let us forget, however, that Churchill's dithering over defence strategy in the Pacific was partly based on feelings of deep resentment towards Australia, some of it justified. The delays caused by that resentment helped to rob Churchill of his chance to avenge the humiliating loss of Singapore by recapturing it prior to Japan's surrender. It also played a part in effectively excluding Britain from any Pacific peace table. Instead of playing a full and equal part in the Pacific war, Britain's Pacific strategy was reduced to dropping paratroopers into Singapore after Japan had surrendered and sending part of its fleet to fight in the Pacific alongside the Americans. Other plans for an air and land contingent, using mainly Indian, Australian and Canadian troops and airmen, never eventuated due to the unexpectedly quick ending to the war. Japan had driven Britain from the Pacific in 1942, but it was largely Churchill who ensured that it would have a weakened presence in the Pacific thereafter.