

*Anglo American Naval Staff  
Conversation*

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FOREIGN OFFICE. S.W.1.

No. 585

14th June, 1939.

SECRET

Sir,

As Your Excellency is aware, His Majesty's Government have recently had under consideration the question of their naval dispositions in the event of a war involving operations not only in Europe but also in the Far East. The principles upon which His Majesty's Government have for many years based their naval strategy is that the safety of the United Kingdom and the safety of Singapore are vital to the security of the Empire; and it has therefore always been their firm intention, in the event of hostilities or a threat of hostilities with Japan, and irrespective of the situation in home waters, to send a fleet to Far Eastern waters sufficient for the protection of Singapore. This policy was, however, determined at a time when it could be reasonably hoped that Italy would be neutral, and when it would therefore have been possible to despatch an adequate fleet to the Far East without losing the necessary margin of superiority in home waters.

2. It is now necessary for His Majesty's Government to take into account the fact that, in any war between this country and Germany, Italy would in all probability range herself with Germany. It is useless to disguise the fact that the present and potential naval strength of this country is not sufficient, and indeed is not designed, to engage three naval Powers simultaneously; and His Majesty's Government have therefore been obliged to reconsider the naval dispositions

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His Excellency

The Right Honourable

Sir Ronald Lindsay, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., C.V.O.,

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which they would make if they found themselves at war with Germany and Italy and if Japan entered the war, or appeared likely to do so, on the side of the Axis Powers. The conclusion they have reached is that they would, in such circumstances, be obliged to maintain in home waters and in the Mediterranean a sufficient force to give them a margin of superiority over the joint fleets of Germany and Italy and so enable them to give adequate protection to their allies and support to the victims of any possible aggression. At the same time the importance of protecting Singapore and the Pacific Dominions is such that they cannot contemplate a complete reversal of their earlier intention to despatch a fleet to Far Eastern waters; and they have accordingly decided that, in the circumstances envisaged, they would still endeavour to despatch such a fleet to the Far East, although its size, and the moment at which it could be despatched, are matters which would have to be decided in the light of the general strategical situation at the time.

3. In the circumstances described above, the attitude and naval dispositions of the United States would obviously be of cardinal importance. Although this factor is at present too uncertain to justify His Majesty's Government in basing their own plans upon any estimate of it, and although they would not feel entitled to ask the United States Government for information as to their probable attitude in hypothetical circumstances, they consider, nevertheless, that there would be some advantage in informing the United States confidentially of the difficult naval situation in which they would find themselves if faced by a hostile combination consisting of Germany, Italy and Japan.

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Such a communication might conceivably elicit a useful statement of the intentions of the United States Government; and it would, moreover, be consistent with the frank exchanges of views which have recently taken place on problems of common interest to the two Governments.

4. I accordingly request that, if you see no objection, Your Excellency will make a formal communication to the United States Government on the lines of the preceding paragraphs of this despatch. Its confidential character should, of course, be emphasised, and I am prepared to leave it to your discretion whether to make it verbally or in writing, and whether to address it personally to the President or to the competent authority at the State Department.

I am, with great truth and respect,

Sir,

Your Excellency's obedient Servant,

(For the Secretary of State)

*F. B. Johnson*