

# LA MARTINIÈRE MODEL UNITED NATIONS, 2023



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THE DECENNIAL EDITION

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A.B.D.A HIGH COMMAND, 1942

BACKGROUND GUIDE

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# Letter from the Executive Board

Greetings!

We welcome you to this simulation of the ABDACOM – American-British-Dutch-Australian Command at La Martiniere Model United Nations 2023 and hope that this conference provides you with a great learning experience. We would also like to take this opportunity to highlight some key points pertaining to this committee and our expectations from those who will be participating in it.

The nature of this committee is sort of like a constant crisis committee, with the exception that, it mostly deals with strategic formulations and serves the role of the planners, with the purpose of formulating strategic recommendations for the fulfillment of the requirements of the agenda. So, the essential idea behind this committee is to understand the nuances attached with military strategy, strategic policymaking, and the pursuance of creative ideas to save the ABDACOM from the ruin it was in reality. This provides an opportunity to the participants to learn about the key concepts of strategy and geopolitics as well as to understand its different applications in a war-like scenario.

The ambit of research required for this committee is huge and therefore this background guide attempts to provide you with just a general direction and basic information so that a comprehensive understanding of the issues could be attained by the delegates. The background guide in no way is either a concept-note or a summary of research but rather provides you with a list of specific issues that you must be aware about.

The chapter relating to Strategic Context, provides the context for Dutch-Japanese strategic tussle, which shall form the premise of our first task, which is the redressal of Dutch apprehensions from Japanese aggression in South East Asia.





Mostly all the relevant topics have been mentioned in this guide and a general understanding on most of them could be a good way to initiate your research. Although, everyone has their own way of going about such things but just for those who might need it – after initiating your research with the guide and developing a general understanding on issues try to read more about things mentioned in this guide. The executive board also requests all the participants to please go through thoroughly the recommended readings attached with this guide. It is recommended that all participants must try to develop an understanding on the issues at hand and learn to identify interests and conflicts for the portfolio provided to you. It is also important for the participants to realize that their portfolios do not have any individual standing in the committee, as they are the representatives of their respective national-interests in the committee.

Lastly, the procedure for the committee and the nature of strategic recommendations and general directives that need to be presented for the purpose of this committee shall be explained during the conference itself. While, we feel that we have covered all the necessary points that were required to be mentioned in this guide, in case of any doubt or problem with regards to this committee or with the research, you may reach out to us through our email ids mentioned below.

Good Luck!

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# Agenda : The Pacific Theatre





# Historical Context: The War in the Pacific: South East Asia during World War II

## **Causes of the Conflict:**

The war in the Pacific, particularly in South East Asia, during World War II was characterized by Japan's aggressive expansionist policies, territorial ambitions, and a series of complex geopolitical factors.

- **Japanese Expansionism:** Japan's militaristic government, led by the imperialistic ideology, sought to establish a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. This expansionist ambition led to the invasion and occupation of several Asian nations, including China, Indochina, and the Philippines, in the years leading up to World War II.
- **Resource Scarcity:** Japan's rapid industrialization in the early 20th century led to a scarcity of essential resources, such as oil, rubber, and minerals. To secure these resources, Japan aimed to conquer territories in South East Asia where these resources were abundant.
- **Global Geopolitics:** Japan's aggression in South East Asia prompted concerns among the Western powers, particularly the United States, which imposed embargoes on essential resources and oil to deter further expansion. These embargoes heightened tensions between Japan and the United States.





## Key Events and Campaigns:

- **Invasion of Manchuria (1931):** Japan's expansionism began with the invasion of Manchuria, a region in northern China, marking the start of its aggressive territorial ambitions.
- **Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945):** The conflict between Japan and China escalated into a full-scale war, drawing Japan deeper into the quagmire of mainland Asia.
- **Attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941):** Japan's surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war. This event marked the official entry of the Pacific Theatre into World War II.
- **Invasion of South East Asia (1941-1942):** Japan launched a series of offensives in South East Asia, rapidly capturing territories including Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. These campaigns gave Japan control over vital resources.
- **The Philippines Campaign (1941-1942):** The Philippines, a U.S. colony, fell to Japanese forces, leading to the infamous Bataan Death March and a prolonged occupation.
- **Allied Response and Island-Hopping Strategy (1942-1945):** The Allies, led by the United States, adopted a strategy of "island-hopping" to bypass heavily fortified Japanese-held islands and focus on capturing strategically important ones. Key battles included Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.





## Consequences:

- **Horrors of War:** The war in South East Asia was marked by significant atrocities, including the Nanking Massacre in China and the mistreatment of prisoners of war.
- **Liberalization of Colonies:** The war led to the end of colonial rule in many South East Asian nations. The British, Dutch, and French empires were weakened, allowing for the rise of independence movements.
- **Japanese Surrender (1945):** Japan's unconditional surrender, following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led to the Allied occupation of Japan and radical political, social, and economic reforms.
- **Impact on the Cold War:** The post-war division of Korea and the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union in Asia contributed to the early Cold War dynamics in the region.
- **Economic and Political Transformation:** South East Asian nations, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, emerged from the war with newfound aspirations for independence and underwent significant political and social changes.

The war in the Pacific, especially in South East Asia, had far-reaching consequences, both in terms of the post-war geopolitical landscape and the transformation of many nations in the region. It was a pivotal theater in World War II, with profound and enduring impacts on the history of the 20th century.





## Recommended Readings:

- <https://mappinghistory.uoregon.edu/english/US/US34-00.html>
- [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/npswapa/extcontent/wapa/brochure/brochure2.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/npswapa/extcontent/wapa/brochure/brochure2.htm)
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pacific-War>
- <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/pacific-strategy-1941-1944>





# Formation of ABDACOM: Addressing Strategic Concerns in the Asia-Pacific Theater

The formation of the American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDACOM) during World War II was a response to a set of pressing strategic concerns in the Asia-Pacific theater. ABDACOM was a joint command established in early 1942 to coordinate the defense of the Asia-Pacific region against the expanding Japanese forces. The key strategic concerns that led to the creation of ABDACOM were as follows:

- **Japanese Expansion:** In the early years of World War II, Japan rapidly expanded its territorial holdings in the Asia-Pacific region. The fall of Singapore, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies to Japanese forces highlighted the extent of this expansion and the need for a coordinated Allied response.
- **Isolation of Australia:** The Japanese advances in South East Asia threatened to isolate Australia, a crucial ally in the Pacific. Securing lines of communication and supply routes to Australia was vital to maintaining a strong Allied presence in the region.
- **Coordination of Forces:** Prior to the formation of ABDACOM, there was a lack of effective coordination among the Allies in the Asia-Pacific. Each nation, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia, had its own individual command structures. ABDACOM aimed to address this fragmentation and create a unified command structure to enhance coordination and cooperation.





- **Defense of Key Territories:** The Allies recognized the importance of key territories like the Dutch East Indies, which were rich in resources and strategically valuable. ABDACOM was tasked with defending these territories against Japanese incursions.
- **Resource Scarcity:** The Japanese had captured resource-rich territories, including oil fields in the Dutch East Indies. Access to these resources was vital for the Allied war effort, and ABDACOM was established to help secure these valuable assets.
- **Strategic Planning:** ABDACOM was formed to develop and execute a unified strategy for the Asia-Pacific theater. This included devising plans for counteroffensives and the eventual rollback of Japanese territorial gains.
- **Political and Diplomatic Significance:** The formation of ABDACOM also carried significant political and diplomatic weight, signaling the commitment of the Allied nations to defend the Asia-Pacific region against Japanese aggression. It served as a tangible expression of the alliance between the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia.

Despite the formation of ABDACOM, the challenges in the Asia-Pacific theater remained immense, and the command faced difficulties in coordinating the disparate Allied forces. ABDACOM was short-lived, as the Japanese advance continued, and the situation in the region evolved. However, it remains a notable example of the need for strategic cooperation and coordination in the face of complex and rapidly changing wartime challenges.





## Strategic Context

Dutch involvement in the Pacific dates from the first quarter of the sixteenth century when European countries entered upon an expansionist phase that was largely dictated by increasing demographic pressures and growing strain on resources. The Dutch destroyed Portuguese power in the Far East in 1667. This was followed by a period of annexation policy and colonization. In 1619, the Dutch seized Jakarta and renamed it Batavia and established the headquarters of the United East India Trading Company in Batavia. Over the next two hundred years the Dutch colonists charted the East Indies and subjugated them and exploited the rich island resources. During the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, when the Dutch were forced into an alliance with France, Britain, the powerful maritime nation, took most Dutch East Indies possessions and established British trading companies. In 1814, by terms of the Convention of London, the British returned control of the East Indies to the Dutch government. In the course of the nineteenth century the Dutch became uncomfortably aware that national prosperity stemmed from their exploitation and the wretchedness of the Indies. The Dutch committed themselves to the “ethical policy”—a program of investments in the Indies to improve the lot of the population and to create a new native elite, assimilated to western culture. This approach would eventually have to evolve into the new native elite bringing the Netherlands East Indies into a partnership with the Netherlands, along similar lines as the British dominions.





The colony was tapped for its wealth. The Netherlands East Indies possessed an impressive array of base ores, tin, rubber, tin, bauxite, quinine, and oil. The exploitative nature of Dutch rule gave impetus to a latent force of local sentiment and new forces of nationalism became challenges by the turn of the century. As a result the Dutch fought many wars following the rising of local resistance. The evolution of the Indonesian insurgence is beyond the scope of this monograph. During the period of colonial rule in the Netherlands East Indies, it was administered by a governor who was appointed by the Dutch Queen. For defense policies, the governor acted as the Commander-in-Chief for the Netherlands East Indies. The governor was accountable to the Dutch Minister of Colonies, and was assisted by a cabinet, selected by the Crown. During the period covered by this monograph—1941 till March 1942—the Dutch population in the East Indies numbered approximately 220,000, mostly working in government services or trading companies. The local population consisted of almost 70,000,000 Indonesians, 1,300,000 Chinese and 120,000 other Asians and Arabs. The Netherlands East Indies constituted a vast empire. The East Indies archipelago stretches from the west coast of the Malayan Peninsula and runs east above Australia to western New Guinea, a distance of 3,200 miles with a width of 1,200 miles. Put differently, the total amount of coast line of the archipelago equals the total circumference of the globe.

For Japan the interlude between World War I and the outbreak of the hostilities in December 1941 in the Pacific was one of confounding contradictions that, taken together, resulted in a drift into war. It was a period that began with a policy of moderation and attempted reconciliation with China.





But that was to finish with Japan totally committed to a war in China and a period during which Japan unaffectedly sought good relations with Western powers and was anxious to secure peace throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific in order to expand her industries. The need to secure resources and markets, on which her industry and expanding population depended, brought Japan under intense pressure to move against Western interest in the Southeast Asia. From 1940 onwards, there was a powerful inducement for Japan to go to war. In 1939 the United States had taken economic action against Japan by an unannounced withdrawal from the 1911 Trade Treaty, causing shortages for the Japanese who had urgent requirements for raw materials. The Japanese tried to escape the closing net by trading directly with the Dutch. This resulted in a Japanese request to the Dutch government for a trade conference in February 1940. The Japanese agenda was to neutralize existing trade barriers between the Netherlands East Indies and Japan. In essence the Japanese requested a disproportional volume of raw materials from the Dutch. The Japanese punctuated its demands by announcing that the Netherlands East Indies were part of Japanese designs of a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Dutch government, anxious not to antagonize the Japanese and in need for time to strengthen its defenses for the inevitable war, declined the request but offered constructive talks over feasible amounts of shipments. These trade talks started on 16 September 1940. These Japanese trade talks centered on oil supplies. The Japanese demanded vast volumes of oil from the Dutch. By contrast to existing trade agreements—the annual shipment of Netherlands East Indies oil products to Japan normally approximated 650,000 tons per year, the new Japanese demands totaled 3,150,000 tons per year.





The Japanese met Dutch refusal and signed contracts for significantly smaller volumes of oil products. This meant a diplomatic victory for the Dutch, and Dutch stubbornness signaled a changing posture towards Japan. Next to fears about supporting the Japanese war economy, the Dutch were apprehensive that the Japanese would ship materials to its Axis Allies in Europe. After the war these suspicions were proved accurate. Captured German documents showed evidence that the Japanese were using the Trans-Siberian railway to transport raw materials to Germany. The American oil embargo further exacerbated relations with the Japanese on 26 July 1941. The United States had frozen Japanese assets. The Japanese, lacking hard currency, could not obtain Netherlands East Indies oil. After the United States had established the oil embargo against the Japanese, they appealed to the British and the Dutch to take the same posture. To underscore the request, the United States seized the supply of armament to the Netherlands East Indies. The Dutch tried to leverage this American display of so called soft power in their desperate search for Allies by linking subscription to the embargo with United States security guarantees against the Japanese. Furthermore, the Dutch attempted to strengthen its position for negotiations for security guarantees from the British by declaring that formal British security guarantees might persuade the Dutch officials to join the British-United States oil embargo. This was *realpolitik* in optima forma and another indicator that the Netherlands had abandoned its strict neutrality policy. The Dutch had taken a more pragmatic approach to protect its own interests. Another indicator of this strategic shift was a Dutch government decision on 28 October 1941 to declare war on Japan in the event of Japanese aggression against the United States, Britain, or Russia.<sup>46</sup> This decision was shared with potential Allies.





It clearly signaled Dutch efforts to demonstrate its commitment towards the Allies in a desperate effort to secure support. The economic pressure brought against Japan by the Americans, the British, and the Dutch left

Japan with no option other than to go to war, unless they were prepared to see their empire reduced to an irrelevant Asiatic nation. The Japanese held that the terms for a resumption of trade—Japanese evacuation of China and Indo-China— were impossible to meet and therefore unacceptable. On 1 December 1941 the Japanese leadership formally accepted that there could be no peaceful method of resolving embroiled relations with the United States and the European powers and made the decision to go to war to secure its interests.

As indicated, the British War Cabinet articulated that it was only willing to consider security guarantees towards the Dutch if Britain in turn received American security guarantees. The resolution of this conundrum came on 1 December 1941, just short of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During a meeting with the British the United States President Roosevelt showed sudden resolve and stated that “we should obviously all be in [this] together,” after questions about an American response to potential Japanese aggressions against the British dominions in the Far East. The British perceived this as American guarantees of support. During a subsequent meeting President Roosevelt confirmed the American support. Based on these guarantees, Britain finally confirmed security guarantees to the Netherlands East Indies on 5 December 1941. In a letter to the Dutch government-in-exile in London, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, confirmed cooperation with the Dutch to the fullest extent.





After the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and against selected targets throughout Southeast Asia, the Dutch government-in-exile declared war on Japan seven hours later, even before the United States declared a state of war with Japan.





# ABDACOM: Formation and Operations

## **Formation:**

The endeavor to establish the ABDA Command commenced shortly after the outbreak of hostilities between the Allies and Japan on December 7, 1941. Recognizing the imperative need for a unified command structure in response to the prior Allied setbacks in the Battle of France, the Mediterranean and Middle East theaters, as well as the attack on Pearl Harbor, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson undertook this initiative.

Despite reservations from the British military establishment, the plan was solidified during the Arcadia Conference in Washington. On December 27, General Marshall and Admiral Ernest King presented the proposal for an ABDA Command, with leadership entrusted to Archibald Wavell, to British leaders, including Charles Portal, Dudley Pound, and John Dill. British authorities were initially skeptical, questioning the feasibility of entrusting control of the vast Pacific theater to a single commander.

Winston Churchill drew historical parallels, cautioning against the challenges faced by Ferdinand Foch as Supreme Allied Commander in coordinating operations across the Western Front during World War I. Nevertheless, General Marshall rebuffed these concerns, emphasizing the need for a united front against Japan. Ultimately, Churchill reluctantly endorsed the arrangement, telephoning his War Cabinet in London to advise acceptance despite reservations.





On December 29, Winston Churchill confirmed that General Wavell would assume the role of supreme commander to allay British doubts. At the time, Archibald Wavell held the position of British Commander-in-Chief in India. Churchill clarified the command structure, envisioning that Wavell would have a staff in the South Pacific, analogous to Foch's High Control Staff in World War I, receiving orders from a joint body accountable to Churchill as the Minister of Defence and the President of the United States, who also served as the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces.

After the declaration by the four nations on January 1, 1942, Wavell was officially appointed by the Allied governments. The formation of ABDACOM entailed granting Wavell control over a vast yet thinly spread force, extending from Burma in the west to Dutch New Guinea and the Commonwealth of the Philippines in the east. Other areas, including the British Raj and the Territory of Hawaii, remained under separate commands. In practice, General Douglas MacArthur exercised complete authority over Allied forces in the Philippines. Following Wavell's insistence, North West Australia was integrated into the ABDA area. The rest of Australia, including its territories Papua and New Guinea, fell under Australian jurisdiction.

ABDA's primary mission was to defend the Malay Barrier for as long as possible, aiming to maintain Allied control of the Indian Ocean and the western sea routes to Australia. This task was exceedingly challenging due to Japan's naval dominance in the western Pacific.





The command faced further complications, such as coordinating actions among forces of different nationalities with varying equipment and limited joint training. Additionally, national governments had differing priorities: British leaders focused on retaining control of Singapore, the Dutch administration concentrated on the defense of Java, the Australian government was heavily committed to the war in North Africa and Europe, and the United States was preoccupied with the Philippines.

General Wavell assumed his role in Singapore, the base for the British Far East Command, on January 7, 1942, fully incorporating this British command into ABDACOM. On January 18, he relocated his headquarters to Lembang near Bandoeng on Java. Recognizing the insufficient facilities at Lembang, the air force component of ABDA moved its headquarters to Bandoeng on February 1, though this transition created logistical challenges in coordinating air and naval forces.

ABDACOM's initial noteworthy success was the U.S. Navy's attack on Balikpapan, Borneo, on January 24. This operation resulted in the loss of six Japanese transport ships but had limited impact on their capture of Borneo's valuable oil wells.

The governments of Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand lobbied Winston Churchill for the establishment of an Allied inter-governmental war council, responsible for the entire Allied war effort in Asia and the Pacific, with its base in Washington, D.C. A Far Eastern Council, later known as the Pacific War Council, was instituted in London on February 9, accompanied by a staff council in Washington. Nonetheless, the smaller Allied powers continued to advocate for an organization based in the United States.





## Operations:

- **Battle of Makassar Strait (February 4, 1942):** ABDACOM's first significant operation was the Battle of Makassar Strait. This naval engagement occurred off the coast of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and aimed to disrupt Japanese landings on the island of Celebes. ABDACOM forces, including U.S. and Dutch warships, engaged Japanese forces, but the battle ended inconclusively with both sides suffering damage.
- **Battle of Bali Sea (February 19-20, 1942):** Following the Battle of Makassar Strait, the Japanese conducted a large-scale invasion of Bali. ABDACOM launched an air and naval operation to counter the Japanese landings. However, due to a lack of coordination and the superior Japanese naval and air power, the operation did not achieve the desired results, and Bali fell to the Japanese.
- **Battle of the Java Sea (February 27, 1942):** The Battle of the Java Sea was one of the most significant engagements involving ABDACOM. It was a naval battle in the Java Sea, pitting a multinational Allied fleet against a powerful Japanese force. The Japanese achieved a decisive victory, sinking several Allied warships, including the cruisers USS Houston and HMAS Perth. This defeat further weakened the ABDACOM's ability to defend the Dutch East Indies.
- **Battle of Sunda Strait (February 28, 1942):** The Battle of Sunda Strait followed the Battle of the Java Sea. The Allied cruiser HMAS Perth and the USS Houston, survivors of the earlier battle, encountered Japanese warships while trying to escape to the west. Both Allied cruisers were sunk, marking another defeat for ABDACOM.





- Battle of the Coral Sea (May 4-8, 1942): Although not a direct ABDACOM operation, the Battle of the Coral Sea involved a significant U.S. naval task force and Australian forces. This battle was instrumental in slowing down the Japanese advance in the South Pacific. It marked the first time in naval history that two opposing fleets engaged each other without seeing their respective enemy fleets directly.
- Defense of Midway (June 4-7, 1942): While ABDACOM was dissolved before the Battle of Midway, it's essential to mention it as a turning point in the Pacific. The United States, still reeling from the losses in the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, successfully defended the strategic Midway Atoll. This battle halted the Japanese advance in the Pacific and shifted the momentum in favor of the Allies.

The operations of ABDACOM were characterized by several challenges, including a lack of effective coordination among the Allied nations, inferior equipment, and limited joint training. Despite these challenges, the command demonstrated the need for unified efforts against Japanese expansion in the Asia-Pacific theater. The lessons learned from ABDACOM's operations contributed to the development of more effective joint command structures in the later stages of the war.





# Failure of ABDACOM and lessons to be learnt

## **Excerpt taken from United States Naval Institute: Naval History Course Material**

In the aftermath of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy executed a meticulously choreographed, lightning-fast campaign that has been likened to a "sea-air-land Blitzkrieg," as elegantly orchestrated as a ballet. Renowned World War II historian Samuel Eliot Morison vividly described the Japanese military forces' progress as reminiscent of the insidious yet inexorable reach of multiple tentacles, akin to a colossal octopus. Rather than concentrating their might on a single vital point, the Japanese forces adopted a strategy of strangling multiple smaller objectives. This strategy did not entail a direct confrontation with the full strength of the American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Fleet.

In response to the multifront attacks across the Pacific in December 1941, the Western democracies forged the ABDA Command in an attempt to establish a united front against Japanese aggression. On January 1, 1942, the four nations announced the appointment of British General Sir Archibald Wavell as the Supreme Allied Commander of ABDA Command. However, the lifespan of ABDA Command was tragically short, collapsing within a mere eight weeks. Ultimately, the war effort against Japan was steered by General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz, who effectively commanded a diverse array of Allied forces.

ABDA Command's inability to staunch Imperial Japan's relentless advance through East Asia holds essential lessons for potential conflicts involving a Sino-American alliance and its allies.

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Today, much like eight decades ago, joint and international forces are strategically positioned throughout the Indo-Pacific to safeguard national interests through their presence. In contemporary times, as in the past, emerging aggressors threaten territorial encroachments in East Asia, executing operations characterized by both mass and rapidity within their adjacent waters. While ABDACOM may not have been capable of entirely halting Japanese offensives across the Western Pacific, it could have inflicted more substantial costs on the enemy and afforded additional time for allied forces to reinforce the region, aligning with their war plans.

In order to avert a *fait accompli* scenario in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, modern coalitions must heed the lessons of ABDACOM. While readiness and military training played roles in ABDACOM's shortcomings, the principal reason behind its collapse was the lack of unified and combined command. Despite the outward appearance of unity on organizational charts and frequent conferences, individual national interests eroded the incipient alliance's strength, permitting Imperial Japanese forces to systematically defeat ABDACOM in the early months of 1942. If Admiral Phil Davidson, the former Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Combatant Command, is correct in assessing that the "threat [to Taiwan] is manifest . . . in the next [four] years," then the United States and its allies must proactively establish a joint American-British-Japanese-Australian (ABJA) Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) today.

### **Arcadia: Forming a Coalition**

In the immediate aftermath of Germany's declaration of war on the United States on December 11, 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill embarked on a pivotal journey to the White House for the First Washington Conference, codenamed Arcadia.





This conference convened to outline the strategy for the "Europe-first" approach adopted by both nations. However, they were confronted with the alarming reports of Japanese conquests in Hong Kong and Wake Island. Alongside Australia, New Zealand, and the Dutch government-in-exile, the remaining Allied territories required a cohesive plan for garrisoning and responding to Japanese advances.

On Christmas morning in 1941, General George Marshall, the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, advocated for unified command over the entire theater encompassing air, ground, and naval forces. He asserted that cooperation alone would not suffice and emphasized the need for a unified command structure. Both sides concurred, but the prospect of achieving Anglo-American unity in command posed a significant challenge, entailing delicate negotiations within and between the nationalities and services. Marshall recognized that military command in a coalition was intrinsically intertwined with diplomacy and politics, necessitating the concurrence of civilian leaders to proceed.

During a meeting on December 26, other U.S. officers displayed lukewarm support for the concept of unified command, while British service chiefs actively opposed it and encouraged Churchill to voice their reservations. Prioritizing unity of command over national autonomy, Marshall, in collaboration with President Roosevelt and advisor Harry Hopkins, proposed British General Field Marshal Sir Archibald P. Wavell as the inaugural Supreme Allied Commander of ABDACOM. ABDACOM's sphere of responsibility encompassed present-day Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, northwestern Australia, the Philippines, and their surrounding waters. Although Churchill, an advocate of naval power, initially countered with the suggestion that Admiral Thomas Hart,





the Commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, assume command of British and American naval forces in the Pacific theater, Admiral Ernest King, then the Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet and later Chief of Naval Operations, rallied behind Marshall's proposal and firmly supported Wavell's appointment.

Amid the combined pressure from U.S. service chiefs, the President, and his advisors, Churchill eventually acceded to the proposal. Subsequently, Dutch and Australian leaders also endorsed Wavell's appointment. General Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) for the British Army, expressed his skepticism about the entire ABDACOM scheme, considering it vague and incomplete, concentrating on a specific area of action—the western Pacific—against a single adversary, Japan, without a central control. Wavell set foot on Batavia Island on January 10, 1942, yet within a mere 43 days, he would be advocating for the dissolution of his command in his communication with the U.S.-British Combined Service Chiefs.

### **Wanted: Unity of Effort**

At the operational level, Admiral Thomas Hart, the Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, recounted in his declassified "Narrative of Events" that U.S. preparations for war effectively began around mid-January 1941. Initial discussions were held with British, Dutch, and Australian leaders throughout the year. However, even by October 1941, Hart struggled to reach an accord with his U.S. Army counterparts in the Philippines regarding a unified plan for the employment of air forces. Revisiting the issue during a subsequent meeting with General Douglas MacArthur, the Commander of U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE), in early October 1941,





Hart reiterated his request for aircraft cooperation and extended the same request to Dutch Army and British Royal Air Force representatives. MacArthur deferred the matter, awaiting a more detailed proposal and a concrete basis for further discussion in an official letter penned by Hart.

On October 27, 1941, Hart conveyed to the Navy Department that "no real progress had been made toward agreement on joint naval operations with the British and Dutch." In a coordinated effort with a representative from the Royal Australian Navy during a meeting on November 2-3, Hart presented his comprehensive war proposal, but it was met with a resounding rejection by USAFFE when it came to adequately arranging joint operations of army and navy aircraft over the seas. On December 1, 1941, MacArthur and Hart managed to agree on different sectors for joint airborne reconnaissance, thanks to prior consultations between their staffs. Regrettably, this agreement was short-lived.

Despite learning of the Pearl Harbor attack hours in advance, Japanese air forces managed to execute a successful ground assault on the Army Far East Air Force. Over half of the 181 airplanes stationed at Clark Air Field in the Philippines were destroyed, with many others sustaining damage. Japanese air supremacy significantly hampered Hart's 29 submarines, which were tasked with defending the Philippines. The submarines operated at greater depths than required due to the perceived threat posed by aircraft, reducing their effectiveness. Furthermore, the U.S. Mk 14 torpedoes used by the submarines ran deeper than their set depth and often failed to detonate upon impact, rendering them considerably less effective than they should have been. In land, the 4th Marine Regiment, having recently returned from China to the Philippines, engaged in constabulary duties for Philippine naval bases, reflecting a lack of consensus between Hart and MacArthur on the employment of Marines beyond this role.





On December 23, 1941, the 4th Marines were transferred to USAFFE control and eventually surrendered on Corregidor Island in May 1942.

On January 2, 1942, Hart received a communication indicating that the allied fleets would soon be placed under a joint command. While the strategic leaders of the Allied nations had aspired to resolve the issue of unity of command at their level, balancing national interests with the forces in the theater presented an ongoing challenge. Admiral Hart assumed command of naval forces, known as ABDAFLOAT, but his colleagues on the ABDA staff encountered difficulty aligning their interests within a multinational consensus. During meetings held on January 9-10, 1942, Admiral Hart received endorsement from his U.S. Army Air Forces counterparts, Lieutenant General George Brett and Major General Lewis Brereton, for joint ship and aircraft cooperation. However, these plans were immediately undermined by an operational focus.

Conflict persisted over the operational focus, with President Roosevelt endorsing the priority resupply of General MacArthur in the Philippines, including the use of Hart's submarines for delivering limited quantities of ammunition. At a subsequent ABDA Commander's conference, Hart argued that Allied naval forces could have achieved far more in terms of directly opposing the enemy's advance if cruisers and destroyers had not been assigned to escort duties. He contended that such a diversion of resources was unwarranted, although accurate. The U.S. Navy achieved a tactical victory in a nighttime raid on Japanese transport ships in Balikpapan, but its strategic impact proved fleeting.





Singapore, often referred to as the "Gibraltar of the East," fell to Japanese forces on February 15, undermining British hopes of maintaining the "Malay Barrier" against further Japanese intrusions. By that day, Admiral Hart had handed over operational command of ABDAFLOAT to Dutch Vice Admiral Conrad Helfrich. The Dutch government, having already succumbed to Nazi forces in Europe and having maintained a presence in the East Indies for three centuries, displayed a resolute commitment to fight.

Helfrich directed Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman to assemble a combined Striking Force composed of Dutch, British, and American elements. Regrettably, the Japanese conclusively defeated Doorman's Strike Force in the Battle of the Java Sea on February 27, 1942, and subsequent smaller engagements across the East Indies. While tales of tactical heroism in the face of overwhelming odds abounded, ABDACOM ultimately faltered. The coalition collapsed due to the absence of a shared joint and combined strategy and the failure to amass its forces until after Japan had seized the Netherlands East Indies. Future coalitions must learn from these mistakes.

### **Challenges Faced by ABDACOM:**

- **Lack of Effective Coordination:** One of the primary challenges faced by ABDACOM was the difficulty of coordinating forces from different nations with diverse military traditions, equipment, and strategies. Effective cooperation and communication were hampered by these differences, hindering the command's ability to respond cohesively to Japanese advances.





- **Logistical Difficulties:** ABDACOM's area of responsibility covered vast distances and diverse terrains, from the Dutch East Indies to the Philippines. The logistical challenges were immense, and the command struggled to establish a seamless supply and communication network.
- **Superior Japanese Naval and Air Power:** The Japanese Imperial Navy and Air Force were formidable adversaries in the Pacific, boasting superior numbers and technology. ABDACOM's forces were often outgunned, making it challenging to counter Japanese naval and aerial offensives effectively.
- **Diverse National Interests:** The participating Allied nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia, had differing priorities and strategies. British leaders were primarily concerned with retaining control of Singapore, while the Dutch focused on the defense of Java, and the United States was preoccupied with the Philippines.

#### **Lessons Derived from ABDACOM's Failure:**

- **Importance of Unified Command:** ABDACOM's failure underscored the importance of unified command structures in multinational operations. The lack of a single commander with the authority to make rapid decisions hindered the coordination of operations. Subsequent military alliances, such as NATO and coalitions in various conflicts, have emphasized the need for a clear chain of command.





- **Effective Communication and Cooperation:** The need for effective communication and cooperation among multinational forces became evident during ABDACOM's operations. Modern military coalitions prioritize the development of common doctrines, standard operating procedures, and communication systems to ensure interoperability and effective coordination.
- **Adaptive Strategy:** ABDACOM's inability to counter the Japanese advance highlighted the necessity of adapting strategies to meet changing circumstances. The military must be agile and able to adjust its tactics and plans in response to evolving threats and challenges.
- **Logistics and Infrastructure:** The logistical difficulties faced by ABDACOM emphasize the critical importance of robust logistics and infrastructure in military operations. Ensuring a secure supply chain, adequate transportation, and well-established communication networks is crucial for sustaining military efforts.
- **Military Preparedness:** ABDACOM's encounters with superior Japanese forces underscore the importance of military preparedness and modernization. Investing in technology, training, and adequate equipment is vital to ensure military effectiveness.
- **National Interests and Alliances:** The differences in national interests among ABDACOM's member nations highlighted the need for clear alignment and understanding of objectives within a coalition. Ongoing dialogue and negotiation to harmonize national interests are critical in maintaining coalition unity.





- **Historical Context:** The lessons learned from ABDACOM's failure, including the need for a united front, influenced subsequent military strategies in the Pacific and elsewhere. The pivotal Battle of Midway, for instance, marked a turning point in the Pacific War by demonstrating the effectiveness of unified command, intelligence, and operational planning.

In conclusion, the failure of ABDACOM in the early stages of World War II was a result of multifaceted challenges, including a lack of coordination, logistical issues, and superior Japanese forces. The lessons derived from this failure have contributed to the development of more effective military strategies, unified command structures, and improved international cooperation in subsequent conflicts. ABDACOM serves as a historical reference point that has informed military planning and execution in the decades that followed.





## Specific Interests and Concerns

### **Dutch:**

**Defense of the Dutch East Indies:** The primary concern of the Dutch within ABDACOM was the defense of their colony, the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia). These resource-rich islands were of great economic importance to the Netherlands, and protecting them from Japanese invasion was a top priority.

**Resource Preservation:** The Dutch had a strong economic interest in preserving the resources of the Dutch East Indies, including rubber, oil, and other raw materials. They were keen to ensure that these resources did not fall into Japanese hands, as it would have severe economic consequences for the Netherlands.

**Naval and Maritime Interests:** As a seafaring nation, the Dutch had a keen interest in the control of sea lanes and maritime routes. They were concerned about the Japanese Navy's dominance in the region and sought to maintain a naval presence to safeguard their maritime interests.

**Territorial Sovereignty:** The Dutch having lost their mainland to Nazi-occupation were determined to defend their territorial sovereignty and prevent Japanese encroachment on their colonial possessions. They were committed to preserving their colonial holdings and avoiding occupation.

**Cooperation with Allies:** The Dutch sought to work closely with their Allied partners within ABDACOM to coordinate military efforts, share intelligence, and jointly plan defensive strategies to repel Japanese advances. Collaboration with the British, Americans, and Australians was crucial to the Dutch.





**Supply Lines:** The Dutch were concerned about the security of supply lines to their forces in the Dutch East Indies. These supply lines were vital for the sustainability of their military operations and the defense of the colony.

**National Pride and Identity:** Dutch leaders were determined to maintain their national pride and identity, even in the face of adversity. Their involvement in ABDACOM reflected their commitment to the Allied cause and the defense of their colonial interests.

**International Relations:** The Dutch were cognizant of their diplomatic and international relations, especially with the United States and the United Kingdom. They worked to ensure that their interests were taken into account in the broader context of the Allied war effort.

**Post-War Recovery:** Beyond the immediate concerns of the war, the Dutch were also looking ahead to the post-war period and the potential challenges of recovering and rebuilding their homeland in Europe which was under the occupation of Nazis, thereby requiring colonial resources.

### **Americans:**

**Pacific Security:** The United States had a vital interest in the security and stability of the Pacific region. American leaders were concerned about Japanese expansionism and the potential threat it posed to U.S. territories, such as the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii.





**Defense of the Philippines:** The defense of the Philippines was a top priority for the United States. American military forces were stationed in the Philippines, and U.S. leaders were committed to preventing Japanese aggression and protecting American citizens living in the islands.

**Island-Hopping Strategy:** The United States was developing an island-hopping strategy in the Pacific, which aimed to capture key islands and bypass others in order to move closer to Japan. ABDACOM was expected to support and align with this broader strategy.

**Naval Dominance:** The U.S. Navy sought to establish and maintain naval dominance in the Pacific. This was essential for protecting sea lanes, supporting amphibious operations, and countering the Japanese Imperial Navy.

**Allied Coordination:** The United States was concerned about the need for effective coordination and cooperation with its British, Dutch, and Australian allies. The success of ABDACOM hinged on unified military efforts and shared strategies.

**Air Bases and Supply Lines:** The Americans were interested in securing air bases and supply lines to support their military operations in the Pacific. These air bases and logistical infrastructure were critical for launching offensives against Japanese-held territories.

**Resource Access:** The United States sought access to the resources of Southeast Asia and the Dutch East Indies, including rubber, oil, and other raw materials. These resources were essential for the U.S. war effort and industrial production.





**Reinforcement of Allies:** The United States was concerned about reinforcing and supporting its Dutch and British allies in the region. This included providing military aid and resources to bolster the defense of the Dutch East Indies and other Allied territories.

**Economic Interests:** The economic well-being of the United States was linked to the stability and prosperity of the Pacific region. The U.S. was concerned about safeguarding its economic interests and trade routes.

**Long-Term Strategic Goals:** American leaders were also thinking about long-term strategic goals, including the post-war order and the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

### **British:**

**Defense of British Territories:** The British were primarily concerned with the defense of their colonial possessions and territories in the Far East, including Singapore, Malaya, and Hong Kong. Protecting these key outposts was essential for maintaining British influence and presence in the region.

**Protection of Sea Lanes:** The British had a vested interest in safeguarding crucial sea lanes and trade routes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Controlling these maritime highways was vital for sustaining the British Empire and facilitating the flow of resources.

**Allied Cooperation:** The British were committed to close cooperation and coordination with their American, Dutch, and Australian allies. Effective collaboration was seen as essential for countering Japanese advances in the region.





**Singapore as a Strategic Base:** Singapore, often referred to as the "Gibraltar of the East," held significant importance for the British. They aimed to maintain control of this strategic naval base and were concerned about Japanese attempts to capture it.

**Resource Protection:** Protecting the British Empire's access to key resources in Southeast Asia, such as rubber and tin, was a priority. These resources were essential for the British war effort and their post-war reconstruction plans.

**Naval Dominance:** The British Royal Navy had a substantial presence in the Pacific, and the British sought to establish and maintain naval dominance to counter the Japanese Imperial Navy and protect their interests.

**Support for Allied Territories:** The British were committed to supporting Dutch and American territories in the region, including the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. Cooperation with these allies was critical for a unified defense.

**Long-Term Strategic Goals:** The British considered the long-term strategic implications of their actions in the Asia-Pacific. They aimed to ensure the preservation of British influence and interests in the post-war order.

**Coordination with British Commonwealth:** The British were part of the wider British Commonwealth, and they coordinated their efforts in the Pacific with other Commonwealth nations, such as Australia and New Zealand.





**Diplomatic and Economic Interests:** The British government was concerned about the diplomatic and economic consequences of their actions in the region, as well as the impact on their relations with other major powers, including the United States.

### **Australians:**

**Defense of Australia:** The paramount concern of the Australians was the defense of their homeland. They wanted to ensure that Australia remained secure and protected from any potential Japanese invasion.

**Support for British Interests:** Australia had strong historical and political ties to the British Empire. They were interested in supporting British interests and maintaining the integrity of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific.

**Security of Southeast Asia:** Australia had an interest in the stability and security of Southeast Asia, as it was geographically close and considered its neighborhood. This included countries like Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies.

**Resource Protection:** Australia, like other Allied nations, sought to protect access to key resources in the region, such as rubber, oil, and other raw materials necessary for the war effort and the Australian economy.

**Cooperation with Allies:** The Australians were committed to cooperating closely with their American, British, and Dutch allies within ABDACOM. Effective collaboration was seen as essential for countering Japanese advances.





**Naval and Maritime Interests:** Australia had a strong naval presence in the region and was interested in maintaining naval dominance to safeguard sea lanes and protect its maritime interests.

**Amphibious Operations:** The Australians recognized the importance of amphibious operations and were interested in developing the capability to conduct them effectively in the region.

**Economic and Trade Interests:** The Australians were concerned about the impact of the war on their economy and trade relationships. They aimed to protect their economic interests in the Asia-Pacific.

**Territorial Sovereignty:** Australia was concerned about maintaining its territorial sovereignty and avoiding any occupation or encroachment by the Japanese in the Pacific.

**Long-Term Security:** Beyond immediate concerns, Australia was thinking about its long-term security and the post-war order in the Asia-Pacific.





## Recommended Readings:

- <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA612211.pdf>
- <https://krex.k-state.edu/bitstream/handle/2097/13618/JeffreyNelson2012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2627125/view>
- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oNxLNlbd43ySUoV6-YBYJZhTSqR3Y0Hj/view>
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2145165>
- <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/45/4/701/2681023?redirectedFrom=PDF>







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# THE DECENNIAL EDITION

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