When finally advised informally in May 1942 of the general strategy and priorities previously adopted by the major powers, the Curtin government attempted to reverse or at least modify these critical decisions. It thus came into direct conflict with the Roosevelt administration which had assumed overall responsibility for Australia and the Pacific, and had implicitly agreed, as early as August 1939, that the primary goal of Allied strategy in the event of a global war should be to attain victory first in Europe rather than the Pacific. Five months after the outbreak of war in Europe the joint planning committee of the US armed services advised Roosevelt’s military chiefs that if America became enmeshed in war with Germany, Italy and Japan, ‘the European Axis should be defeated first’. This priority was adopted at Anglo-American staff conversations at Washington in January-March 1941. Although the decisions made were not binding, they indicated the underlying aims of America’s global planning. It was agreed that the major strategic objectives of the US and Britain if both were involved in war in Europe and Asia would be:

1. The early defeat of Germany as the predominant member of the Axis, with the principal military effort of the US being exerted in the Atlantic and European area, the decisive theatre. Operations in other theatres to be conducted in such a manner as to facilitate the main effort.
2. The maintenance of British and Allied positions in the Mediterranean area.
3. A strategic defensive in the Far East.

Roosevelt did not formally approve these decisions. But he indicated that identical priorities would be adopted if war broke out on a global scale. Believing that Germany possessed a much greater military potential than Japan, Washington adhered to these priorities during 1941 and after Pearl Harbor. Planners in Washington accepted that an Axis victory in Europe would threaten, albeit indirectly, US survival. After Germany attacked the USSR in June 1941 America’s concern with events in Europe crystallised. A German victory in the USSR spelt potential disaster for the US. As early as November 1940 Admiral Stark had warned that if the British Commonwealth were defeated, America’s military position would be undermined in two critical ways: firstly, it would expose the Western hemisphere to attack by the successful Axis states; secondly, it would undermine America’s international trade, especially with Europe, and reduce America’s ability to develop heavy armaments on which subsequent national survival might depend. The long-term security and economic interests of the US were clearly threatened. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor precipitated America’s entry into global war, the Roosevelt administration reaffirmed that it would support only a limited defensive strategy against Japan until after the European Axis was defeated.

At the ARCADIA conference of December 1941 to January 1942 Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill agreed on the following priorities and objectives:

1. …that Germany was the predominant member of the Axis Powers, and consequently the Atlantic and European area was considered to be the decisive theatre.
2. Much has happened since February last, but notwithstanding the entry of Japan into the war, our view remains that Germany is still the prime enemy and her defeat is the key to victory. Once Germany is defeated the collapse of Italy and the defeat of Japan must follow.
3. …only the minimum of force necessary for the safeguarding of vital interests in other theatres should be diverted from operations against Germany.

Had Australia been aware of these decisions, its protests against American and British policy in the Pacific would doubtless have been voiced earlier and more emphatically. It was nonetheless agreed that ‘vital interests’ and ‘raw materials’ in the Far East must be protected. Hence the ARCADIA conference agreed that the security of Australia, New Zealand and India should be maintained, and the war effort of China be supported, provided this did not jeopardise operations in Europe.4

The rapid Japanese advance during the first three months of war underlined the urgent need to enlarge Australia’s defence capability. Responsibility for this task was gradually but ‘somewhat reluctantly’ assumed by the US.5 In March Roosevelt and Churchill agreed that overall operational responsibility for the Pacific theatre would rest exclusively with the US. At the same time MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific area command was established in Australia. Yet the broad strategic priorities established at ARCADIA remained virtually unchanged. The US remained wedded to a purely defensive Pacific strategy, but it now recognised that this might require greater resources than originally envisaged. During the war the US interpreted the ‘Europe first’ strategy more flexibly than Great Britain. But neither departed appreciably from this goal.

America’s willingness to provide military assistance to Australia corresponded with the impending retreat of MacArthur from the Philippines, the collapse of Singapore and the disintegration of Wavell’s united American-British-Dutch-Australian command in Southeast Asia. By mid-February 1942 these events had dramatically aggravated Australia’s concern with its immediate survival. Yet, at the same time, these events had made Australia the only viable southern base for Allied operations against Japan. Both American and Australian military authorities now recognised that various geographic and political factors made Australia the ‘most suitable’ Pacific base. Foremost were its uninterrupted sea communications with the US, and its vast size and relative isolation which militated against a possible Japanese occupation. It was also argued that Australia had ‘sufficient industrial development to form a good basis for rapid expansion with American aid’, and that

Its northern shores are sufficiently close to Japanese occupied territory to make a good ‘jumping off’ area for offensive operations, whilst its Southern areas are sufficiently far from Japanese bases to ensure a reasonable degree of immunity from continuous sea and air bombardment bearing in mind the growing strength of U.S.A. Naval and Air forces.6

In mid-December, 1941 General George C. Marshall and President Roosevelt agreed with General Eisenhower’s proposal that America establish a major base in Australia as well as in the Philippines. At the ARCADIA conference it was apparently recognised that ‘the Philippines could not be held’, and decided that Australia would become a major base in the war against Japan. Allied operations in North Africa were delayed to permit substantial American troops and reinforcements to be diverted to Australia during January-April 1942. The policy of the Roosevelt administration and joint chiefs of staff towards Australia resulted largely from strategic necessity and a realisation that Australia was the only viable Pacific base from which to conduct a holding war. Short of actually abandoning the Pacific area and its plan to maintain a defensive Pacific strategy until victory in Europe, the US had no real alternative but to develop Australia as the major base for initial Allied operations in the Pacific. America’s military planners did not anticipate that the Japanese would be permanently halted by MacArthur’s forces in the Philippines or by British reinforcements at Singapore.7 Hence, after late December, Washington planning was directed towards maintaining the Australian base. The consequences of this policy were fortuitous for
Australia’s government and people. But Australia’s freedom and security were only incidental to America’s long-term strategic objectives and interests. The level of American aid was always determined essentially by its global objectives and commitments. Nonetheless diplomatic and defence initiatives adopted by the Curtin government did focus Washington’s attention on the needs of the Southwest Pacific area, and encouraged Roosevelt’s military planners to ascribe greater urgency to reinforcement of the Pacific.

The Curtin government did not simply rely on diplomatic requests for additional assistance, or complacently accept that Australia’s unprecedented strategic value would ensure sufficient American aid. It also adopted a major independent military initiative which bolstered its immediate regional security, and simultaneously indicated that it was acutely dissatisfied with Anglo-American global strategy. Early in 1942 Australia ignored the protests of its Great Power allies and withdrew part of its forces from the Middle East to assist in the defence of Australia and its territories. The Curtin government possibly hoped to demonstrate that Australia was a significant military power which could not reasonably be denied the right to participate in high-level Allied policy-making machinery. Yet it was principally security considerations rather than political implications which motivated this initiative.

With the collapse of Singapore on 15 February 1942 John Curtin proclaimed that Australia’s territorial integrity, not the general contribution which his country could make to the Allied war effort, was now the fundamental objective of Australia’s defence policy. This aim was quickly translated into an appeal for the return of Australian troops from the Middle East, some of which were currently en route to the ABDACOM in Southeast Asia.

In the weeks preceding the collapse of Field Marshal Archibald Wavell’s command, Curtin sent Churchill thirteen personal cables requesting fresh reinforcements. He also sent numerous requests to Roosevelt. Anticipating the collapse of Singapore, Curtin advised Churchill through Earle Page of its critical importance. After emphasising ‘that the whole of the internal defence system of Australia was based on the integrity of Singapore and the presence of a capital fleet there’, Curtin stated that if this could not be ensured by Britain, Australia would act to reinforce its own security. Australia’s original willingness to participate militarily in the European and Middle East theatres, Curtin argued, had been premised on a belief that Britain would make Singapore impregnable. Clearly, Australia now believed that its obligation to Britain beyond the Pacific theatre had been removed by Britain’s failure to reinforce Singapore adequately. Irrespective of the validity of this argument, the Curtin cabinet and Australian military advisers were adamant that decisions concerning deployment of Australian forces would be made in Canberra, not London or Washington.

Curtin suggested that the Australian forces should not proceed to the Netherlands Indies, but return directly to Australia. Because of inadequate British military assistance in the Far East, Curtin argued that the ‘defence of Australia in the short term period must largely rest on Australian Forces and the degree to which they can be supplemented by forces, and to a large degree equipment from [the] United States’. However, he correctly pointed out that large-scale American aid could not reach Australia as quickly as the 6th and 7th divisions if they were immediately diverted. No longer was Curtin prepared to use Australia’s troops in the ‘outer screen’ of islands to the north of Australia if this threatened to weaken its continental defence capability. The rapid collapse of Singapore intensified Australia’s already acute anxiety, and clearly demonstrated that a British Empire military presence in the India-Burma area would not limit the Japanese advance south.

Two days later, Curtin instructed Churchill to authorise the diversion of the 6th and 7th divisions to Australia. Following Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee’s recommendation, Curtin also requested that Churchill assist in making ‘urgent arrangements’ for the ‘recall of
the 9th Division and remaining AIF in the Middle East at an early date’. The war cabinet approved this decision the following day.\textsuperscript{11}

This provoked an extremely critical reaction from Churchill and strong, if less explicit, criticism from Roosevelt and his military advisers. During 16-17 February Churchill and Wavell recommended that although reinforcement of the Netherlands Indies was no longer feasible, at least one of the Australian divisions should be diverted to Burma. The British war Cabinet and Pacific war council in London also opposed diversion of both divisions to Australia. Harry Hopkins, and apparently Roosevelt, shared this view.\textsuperscript{12} The combined chiefs of staff in Washington also opposed Australia’s decision.\textsuperscript{13} Yet despite this combined Anglo-American opposition, the Australian war cabinet refused to approve diversion of either division to Burma, and reiterated its instruction for their return.\textsuperscript{14}

Churchill reacted by warning that continued intransigence might adversely affect Australia’s relations with the US. ‘Your greatest support in this hour of peril must be drawn from the United States’, Churchill told Curtin:

They alone can bring into Australia the necessary troops and air forces, and they appear ready to do so. As you know the President attaches supreme importance to keeping open the connection with China, without which his bombing offensive cannot be started, and also most grievous results may follow in Asia if China is cut off from Allied help.

I am quite sure that if you refuse to allow your troops which are actually passing to stop this gap, and if, in consequence, the above evils affecting the whole course of the war follow, a very grave effect will be produced upon the President and the Washington circle, on whom you are so largely dependent.\textsuperscript{15}

Roosevelt personally opposed Labor’s decision, and Churchill successfully encouraged the President to relay this opposition in strong terms to Australian representatives. In discussions with Casey, Hopkins stressed that the President was determined to support China and India by reinforcing Burma. He intimated that if Australia diverted troops to Burma, the US would send additional forces to Australia.\textsuperscript{16} Roosevelt presented a similar argument in a personal message which exaggerated the priority accorded the war against Japan by Britain and the US. It also reflected a concern that Australian policy might jeopardise Allied operations in the Far East and thus disrupt Anglo-American global planning. Roosevelt advised Curtin:

I fully appreciate how grave are your responsibilities in reaching a decision in the present circumstances as to the disposition of the first Australian division returning from the Middle East. I assume you know of our determination to send in addition to all troops and forces now en route another force of over 27,000 men…We must fight to the limit for our two ranks – one based on Australia the other on Burma, India and China. Because of our geographical position we Americans can better handle the reinforcement of Australia and the Right Flank…On the other hand, the Left Flank simply must be held. If Burma goes it seems to me our whole position, including that of Australia will be in extreme peril. Your Australian Division is the only force that is available for immediate reinforcement [of Burma]. It could get into the fight at once and would, I believe, have the strength to save what now seems a very dangerous situation.\textsuperscript{17}

Roosevelt agreed with Churchill that diversion of Australian forces to Burma was of ‘utmost importance’ to Allied global plans.\textsuperscript{18}

Roosevelt’s appeal failed to alter Labor’s policy. On 22 February Roosevelt again asked Curtin to divert one division to India or Burma. However, in an effort to reduce tension which had developed between Australia and Britain, and to a lesser extent between Australia and the US, Roosevelt now assured Curtin: ‘Under any circumstances you can depend upon our fullest support.’ Despite this assurance. Roosevelt, like Churchill, remained firmly opposed to Australia’s decision.\textsuperscript{19}

The Australian government refused to respond to this combined pressure. In the following months Churchill and Roosevelt, with the support of the combined chiefs of
staff, continued to oppose Australia’s tentative proposal to recall its one remaining Middle East division at the earliest possible date. Indeed Roosevelt warned that an increased level of American aid to Australia was contingent upon its remaining in the Middle East.

The dispute both reflected and aggravated Australian-American differences over military strategy. Australia’s intransigent refusal to reinforce Burma was made in the absence of detailed information concerning Anglo-American global priorities or strategy against Japan. Curtin refused to accept assurances of additional American aid as the *quid pro quo* for deployment of some Australian forces in Burma in part because the proposed aid might have been inadequate or unavoidably delayed. He also rejected the proposal because he was anxious to demonstrate the magnitude and urgency of Australia’s immediate defence problems after the collapse of Singapore. Clearly, Curtin was prepared to act independently in both the military and political arenas to protect Australia’s particular interests. Australian troops would only be used to ‘help the common cause’, if this could be accomplished ‘without imperilling’ Australia’s security.

Although opposed to the return of Australia’s troops, the Roosevelt administration did not reduce the level of military assistance proposed for Australia. Indeed, the fact that the dispute coincided with the collapse of Singapore and the Philippines ensured that aid would be expanded. Curtin perhaps anticipated this.

In Washington early in 1942, Morison has claimed, there was ‘serious talk of abandoning Australia and New Zealand to the enemy’. Although this policy was never adopted, the US military viewed retention of Australia as a ‘highly desirable’ but not an imperative or ‘mandatory’ objective. Roosevelt and the joint chiefs accepted Eisenhower’s suggestion that Australia was of minor importance compared with the need to retain the US, England, Russia and the Middle East. The US war plans division classified the Southwest Pacific ‘as a very important but not a vital area’. In mid-1942 Roosevelt acknowledged privately that he would ‘rather lose’ Australia or New Zealand than contribute to Russia’s collapse. This view was an extension of the ‘Europe first’ concept. It was also influenced by the joint chiefs’ optimistic assumption that Japan would not attempt to occupy continental Australia. The Great Powers adhered to the ARCADIA decision to allocate resources to the Pacific theatre which were sufficient only to support a purely defensive strategy. In contrast, Canberra favoured ‘an immediate change on the part of the Allies to a positive offensive strategy’ in the South Pacific after February-March 1942. But without the allocation of American troops and materials at a level well above that envisaged in Anglo-American plans, anything other than a purely holding operation in the Southwest Pacific area could not be contemplated.

MacArthur collaborated closely with Curtin in requesting additional American reinforcement during 1942 and early 1943. Both leaders argued during April 1942, for example, that reinforcements allotted or promised were ‘quite inadequate to carry out the objectives laid down’ in MacArthur’s directive, ‘and far from enabling him to prepare for the offensive they are not sufficient to ensure the security of Australia as a base for offensive operations.’ By late April, Curtin, H.V. Evatt and MacArthur were making virtually identical submissions to different authorities in Washington.

Requests for additional aid and an early offensive implied criticism of Anglo-American global priorities. Other major submissions made by Curtin directly contradicted these priorities. While Evatt was gaining informal but extensive information from British officials concerning the ARCADIA decision to ‘beat Hitler first’, Curtin advised Roosevelt that Allied global policy should be directed towards defeating Japan first. ‘The advantages of this course are several’, Curtin argued:

> It would ensure the security of the Southwest Pacific area. It would be the best means of protecting India. It would provide a second front for assistance to the Russians by relieving pressure on Siberia and releasing
forces for use on the European front or by enabling a cruiser squadron to join with the United Nations in an early defeat of Japan, when the entire effort could be concentrated against Germany. Finally, a large scale offensive can be staged more easily and quickly in the Southwest Pacific area than in any other area.30

Although informed of Anglo-American global objectives and priorities in May, as late as August Curtin continued to preface his requests with the suggestion that he was ignorant of global strategy. On 31 August, for example, he cabled Roosevelt:

In the absence of knowledge of what is contemplated in the Southwest Pacific area in the general scheme for global strategy, we feel apprehensive regarding the capacity of the forces assigned to the Southwest Pacific area to ensure the security of Australia as a base.31

Curtin had received some indication of the ARCADIA decisions from Evatt in London during May, but his government remained largely ignorant of precise Anglo-American plans. MacArthur was designated ‘the source of all information to be given to the Australian government on operational matters’.32 Yet MacArthur was not advised by his superiors of the global priorities adopted at ARCADIA or of the broad objectives and priorities of Anglo-American strategy.33 Evatt’s discovery of the ARCADIA decisions intensified Australia’s determination to insist on ‘prior consultation to a greater degree’.34 However, the joint chiefs refused to disseminate important strategic information to the Curtin government. In discussions with Dixon in August 1942, for example, General George C. Marshall, US Chief of Staff, ‘emphasised as he had done before the impossibility of making disclosures of plans and intentions’ and repeated that military risks would be involved if vital strategic information was given to the small Allied powers.35

After gaining knowledge of the ARCADIA decisions, the Curtin cabinet modified its proposal that the principal Allied objective be Japan’s defeat. A report by the war cabinet dated in June conceded that operations in all theatres of war were interdependent. Rather than argue that Japan should be defeated first, Curtin now emphasised that the US should provide sufficient aid to ensure that MacArthur could take the offensive and ‘inflict a decisive defeat on the enemy’. Although no longer adamant that Japan should be defeated before victory in Europe, the Middle East or Russia, Curtin nonetheless emphasised that ‘from the aspect of grand strategy’ it was imperative that effective offensive operations against Japan be made ‘an agreed objective of first priority’. MacArthur and Admiral Ernest J. King made identical requests.36

However, the US made only slight adjustments in the level of aid given Australia during 1942 and early 1943. It thus refused to accord the Pacific a higher defence priority than that agreed to at ARCADIA.

Until early 1943 the combined chiefs of staff adhered to a policy of providing only ‘minimum forces required’ for a holding operation in the Pacific, and allocated maximum resources to the other theatres.37 Nonetheless, the Pacific areas did receive American air, naval and ground reinforcements in 1942 above the levels initially contemplated by Anglo-American planners. Despite limited resources and a ‘defensive’ strategy, the US navy struck at Japan whenever possible, and was rewarded with major victories in the Coral Sea and at Midway. By mid-1942 approximately 250,000 American ground and air forces were stationed in the Pacific; over 80,000 had reached Australia.

Australian cabinet ministers continued to maintain publicly that they ‘could never consent to the doctrine that Hitler must be defeated first’, and argued that it was ‘more important to the Australian people that Japan should be defeated in the Pacific theatre than that we should participate in the European theatre’.38 However, by September 1942 Evatt conceded that the US was justified in balancing the reinforcement of Australia against the valid claims of other theatres and the other areas of the Pacific.39 Yet the Curtin government remained critical of US policy towards Australia. A secret American report
issued from Canberra in December 1942 described Curtin as ‘being very bitter at President Roosevelt and Churchill’ for failing to support Australia, and convinced that “no appeals” to the Allied leaders “would do any good”’. Curtin’s public criticisms were deliberately muted. He acknowledged in Parliament that ‘Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt were unable fully to accept the views of the Australian government on Pacific strategy and the provision of the forces and supplies sought’. But such was the strength of Curtin’s private dissatisfaction that Johnson advised the State Department to initiate steps ‘to establish better understanding and greater confidence’ between Curtin and Roosevelt.

Australia remained dissatisfied with the level of US aid, and attempted to use its Middle East troops as a lever for gaining additional assistance. As indicated previously, Roosevelt agreed to send an additional division to Australia in March 1942, provided the 9th division and supporting troops remained in the Middle East. But in July Curtin told Churchill that withdrawal of the 9th division would only be delayed if Britain’s representatives in Washington undertook to support Australia’s appeals for reinforcement of the RAAF to 73 squadrons by mid-1943. The combined chiefs of staff ultimately agreed to provide equipment for 30 squadrons by this date. Roosevelt and Churchill argued that in conjunction with other projected reinforcements this would ensure the defence of Australia.

Australia was not placated. In the following weeks, during September 1942, Curtin advised that Australia might have to recall the 9th division unless it received additional assurances of American equipment and forces. In mid-October Curtin stated that Australia could no longer maintain the 9th division unless it was stationed in Australia.

Roosevelt responded by offering to dispatch an American division from Hawaii to Australia, provided the Australian forces remained in the Middle East. However, the President also stipulated: ‘it must be appreciated that the situation may develop in such a manner as to require the diversion of this additional Division for Australia to another locality within the South or Southwest Pacific Areas where its employment will be of greater advantage to the defense of Australia’. In recommending that an American division be transferred from Hawaii, the joint chiefs of staff also requested that Roosevelt inform Curtin:

I assume that sending this division will obviate the necessity for the Australian War Council to call back the 9th AIF Division from the Middle East. I cannot too strongly stress that leaving the 9th AIF Division in the Middle East will best serve our common cause.

On 27 October the joint chiefs instructed the 25th US infantry division to transfer from Hawaii ‘to Australia, or to stations in the Southwest or South Pacific Areas, depending on the situation, between 15 November and 1 December. Both the joint chiefs and Roosevelt considered ‘it imperative that the Australian Division now in the Middle East remain there’. Speaking before a sympathetic combined chiefs of staff in November, Marshall outlined why America opposed Curtin’s proposal. ‘There were now sufficient troops in Australia to ensure the security of the continent’, Marshall argued. Furthermore, ‘an additional division was being shipped from Hawaii during November-December’. Finally, Marshall argued that Curtin’s proposal would necessitate ‘serious cuts’ in projected Anglo-American reinforcements throughout the world. This would jeopardise operations in the Middle East, Burma and possibly New Guinea and the Solomons.

Despite these developments, Australia recalled its remaining troops from the Middle East. In November Curtin told Roosevelt that Australia expected the Allied powers to provide adequate shipping to give ‘early effect’ to the return of these troops. Roosevelt immediately asked Churchill to cable Curtin that the US opposed any withdrawal of
Australia’s Middle East forces ‘until the whole African operation from Algiers to Egypt is
definitely settled in our favour, and every German and every Italian is driven out of
Africa’.\(^{51}\) Churchill endorsed Roosevelt’s views, and intimated that suitable shipping
might not be available.\(^{52}\)

Still the Australian government refused to accede to combined Anglo-American
pressure. Confronted with this intransigence, Churchill reluctantly recommended to
Roosevelt on 2 December that Australia be permitted to remove the 9th division ‘as soon
as shipping can be provided’.\(^{53}\) Roosevelt acquiesced but reiterated that the troops should
not be transferred until after a ‘final and decisive victory’ had been achieved over
Rommel’s forces.\(^{54}\) The combined chiefs were adamant that ‘there were no military
arguments that would justify’ the return of Australia’s forces.\(^{55}\) Nevertheless, the troops
were withdrawn. In early February the 9th division reached Australia.

New Zealand decided against withdrawing its remaining division from the Middle East.
This pleased both Churchill and Roosevelt, and permitted the early withdrawal of the
Australian troops.\(^{56}\) It also modified the negative impact of the Australian action on Allied
policy in North Africa. Yet it did not reduce America’s displeasure with Canberra’s
refusal to accept the recommendations of the joint or combined chiefs of staff.
Washington’s disenchantment was accentuated during December when Curtin announced
that acute manpower difficulties had forced Australia to reduce its military forces by two
divisions. This intensified criticism of Australia’s unwillingness to contribute to the global
war effort by concentrating on the defence of its own continent and immediate island
periphery. Immediately Curtin reaffirmed that the 9th division would be recalled, the joint
chiefs of staff diverted the US 25th division originally scheduled tentatively for Australia,
to assist at Guadalcanal in the Solomons. By late-1942 American military planners
believed that Australia was adequately protected, and that any reinforcement above
projected levels would be largely redundant.\(^{57}\)

Australia refused to defer or alter its decision to withdraw its forces from the Middle
East. While this undermined America’s confidence in Australia’s willingness or capacity
to contribute unselfishly to the Allied cause, it also stimulated additional US military
assistance to the South Pacific. Similarly, Curtin’s previous refusal to divert Australian
troops to Burma or India disturbed the Roosevelt administration and intensified
Australian-American differences over global strategy and priorities. Nonetheless, the first
dispute over the return of Australia’s forces indirectly influenced Roosevelt’s decision to
send an extra American division and additional reinforcements to Australia. The
unexpected Japanese military advance, rather than Australian pressure, was principally
responsible for expanding the level of American aid to the South Pacific during 1942. The
US was anxious to allocate MacArthur and Nimitz sufficient resources to prevent Japan
from consolidating its newly won positions. Delays in the proposed Allied cross-channel
assault on Germany, coupled with the fact that America’s wartime production had
outstripped expectations, permitted the joint chiefs to divert expanded resources to the war
against Japan.

The Anglo-American strategic conference in Casablanca during 14-24 January 1943
reaffirmed that basic Allied policy was to delay a full-scale offensive against Japan until
after Germany was defeated. Yet despite this, the US chiefs of staff and the President gave
qualified support to offensive operations in the Pacific. They also stressed that action
against Japan be given a higher priority in future Allied planning. Indeed, Marshall and
King argued that the percentage of resources diverted to the war against Japan should be
increased from 15 per cent to 30 per cent. Although the conference made no final decision
to give the Pacific a higher strategic priority, this altered emphasis in American planning
was expressed in limited offensive operations against Japan in the South, Southwest and Central Pacific areas early in 1943.58

However, Great Britain did not share America’s new enthusiasm for offensive operations. When advising Canberra of the decisions taken at Casablanca, the Dominion’s secretary merely emphasised that operations in the Pacific would be ‘limited by the necessity for concentrating the maximum US and British forces against Germany, the primary enemy, but these will be sufficient to ensure that we retain the initiative against Japan.’ The US did not advise Canberra of the Casablanca discussions. Hence Australia remained unaware that America was now prepared to diverge from the ARCADIA strategy and ascribe greater importance to offensive operations in the Pacific, Australia interpreted the Casablanca discussions and decisions as a simple restatement of existing ‘Europe first’ strategy. 59

The strategic decisions made at TRIDENT, combined with recent Allied successes in the Guadalcanal and Papuan campaigns, conditioned a new optimism in the Curtin government after May 1943. Although the TRIDENT decisions did not reject the primacy of the European theatre, they did elevate the Pacific to a position of unprecedented importance. Plans were proposed to eject the Japanese from the Pacific islands, details of a Central Pacific drive against the Marshalls and Carolines were decided and joint Anglo-American long-range planning to defeat Japan was initiated.

These decisions did not fully validate Curtin’s assertion of June that the Allied powers would now prosecute the war in the Pacific ‘with the same vigor as the war in Europe’.60 But they did constitute an unprecedented modification of the ARCADIA strategy, and foreshadowed broad Allied offensive operations in all areas of the Pacific. After early 1943 the momentum of operations against Japan increased rapidly, although victory in Europe was still the first priority.61 The TRIDENT decisions did not, as Curtin claimed in June 1943, ‘absolutely and completely support the contentions of the Australian government’ on global priorities or strategy.62 But after TRIDENT, Anglo-American objectives did correspond more closely to Australia’s views. Nonetheless, no conclusive evidence exists to suggest that Australia’s consistent and forceful opposition to Anglo-American global policies during the first eighteen months of the war had a decisive influence on the gradual modification of Pacific strategy early in 1943. Through Evatt’s two diplomatic missions to Washington, withdrawal of its forces from the Middle East and frequent appeals to Roosevelt and the joint chiefs of staff, Australia asserted its dissatisfaction with both the low priority accorded the Pacific theatre and the level of American reinforcement. The Roosevelt administration made some concessions to these initiatives. It increased the level of Pacific aid above that initially projected in Anglo-American plans. In addition, it gradually ascribed the commencement of offensive operations against Japan a higher priority in grand strategy.

Yet in the final analysis, the pragmatic changes in America’s policies and objectives in the Pacific resulted from altered military circumstances in all theatres of the war, not from political pressure exerted by any power. The initial American decisions to reinforce Australia and to establish the Southwest Pacific command resulted fundamentally from geographic and military factors, not from political persuasion. By March 1942 Australia was the only viable major Allied base available to the US in the South Pacific. The ad hoc adjustments made by the US in relation to the defence of Australia during 1942 and early 1943 were designed to sustain Australia as a base for defensive operations against Japan, not to placate the Curtin government. The nature and extent of military assistance provided to Australia were always determined within the context of America’s broader global objectives and commitments. At no time was Australia allocated additional reinforcements if this threatened to jeopardise or seriously delay an Allied victory over Germany.
NOTES

12. Page to Curtin, 18/2/42, Bruce to Curtin, 18/2/42, cited Hasluck, op. cit., pp. 78-9; AWCM 770, 18/2/42.
13. CCS TO Roosevelt, 18/2/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 2, *January-February 1942*.
14. WCM 1916, 19/2/42; Curtin to Page 19/2/42, cited Hasluck, op. cit., pp. 79-80. Neither Bruce nor Page supported the Curtin cabinet’s position.
17. Roosevelt to Curtin, 20/2/42, Roosevelt papers, PSF Australia, Box 23.
19. ibid.
27. JCS, 23/3/42, CCS 381 (1-31-42), USNA RG 218. The JCS believed Japan would seek to ‘isolate Australia and New Zealand without embarking on a major operation southwards’.
30. Curtin to Roosevelt, 14/5/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12(1A).
31. Curtin to Roosevelt, 31/8/42, in Welles to Roosevelt, 1/9/42, Roosevelt papers, PSF Australia, Box 23.
32. Minutes, JCS, 6/4/42, CCS 381 (1-4-42), Section 2, USNA RG 218.
34. Evatt to Australian Government, 28/5/42, in Hasluck, op. cit., p. 165.
35. Dixon to Curtin, 31/8/42, CAO A981, Defence 61B, pt. 3.
40. OSS, 28/1/43, Report Item 281115, USNA RG 218.
42. Johnson to Stewart, 9/3/43, Johnson papers, Box 42, folder 1943, S-T.
44. AWCM 2287, 29/7/42; Curtin to Churchill, 30/7/42, cited Hasluck, op. cit., pp. 177, 180.
45. Curtin to Roosevelt, 11/9/42, CCS report, 13/9/42, CCS 660.2 (3-14-42), section 2, USNA RG 218. This cable should be viewed in conjunction with Curtin to Roosevelt, 31/8/42, Roosevelt papers, PSF Australia, Box 23.
46. Curtin to Roosevelt, 18/10/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12 (1A).
47. Roosevelt to Curtin, 29/10/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12 (1B).
48. JCS, Strength of Armed Forces in Australia, JCS records, CCS records, Australia 1942-1945, USNA RG 218.
49. JCS, memo, 27/10/42, JCS records, Australia 1942-1945, USNA RG 218.
50. CCS, 49th Meeting, 20/11/42, JCS records, CCS records, Australia 1942-1945, USNA RG 218.
53. Churchill to Roosevelt, 2/12/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 3, November-December 1942.
54. Curtin to Roosevelt, 8/12/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12 (1A).
55. CCS, 51st meeting, 4/12/42, JCS records, CCS records, Australia 1942-1945.
56. Fraser to Roosevelt, 6/12/42, 12/12/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12 (1B); Curtin to Roosevelt, 28/12/42, USNA 740.0011 PW/3054.
57. Curtin to Roosevelt, 8/12/42, Roosevelt papers, Map Room Box 12 (1A); CCS, 51st meeting, 4/12/42, JCS records, CCS records, Australia 1942-1945, USNA RG 218; History of the AIF..., Evatt papers.
59. SSDA to Curtin, 29/1/43, SSDA to Curtin, 26/1/43, CAO A989, 43/970/20, AWCM 2/2/43.
60. Curtin, 10/6/43, quoted Hasluck, op. cit., p. 218; Evatt, for Curtin, to Roosevelt, 3/6/43, Roosevelt papers, PDE 8459.