UNEQUAL ALLIES: AUSTRALIA-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND WAR IN THE PACIFIC 1941-1945:
TOWARDS PEARL HARBOR

The Australian-American alliance was not formalised until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. But its roots lay in the emerging international tensions in both Europe and East Asia during the 1930s. Australia’s relations with the US were transformed as a reaction to the expanding threat of the Axis states, especially in the Pacific.

Australian actively supported the British Commonwealth war effort against Germany and Italy after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. In contrast the US remained isolated from direct military involvement in Europe. Although it retained an undeclared, equivocal status, after mid-1940 the Roosevelt administration moved hesitantly away from isolationism and towards a position of tangible support for the Allied cause. Indeed, by August 1941, the UK war cabinet had been informed that Roosevelt was attempting to ‘force...an “incident” that would justify him in opening hostilities’ against the Axis states.1 Yet until December 1941, when war with Japan was unavoidable, it refused to comply with requests by the Allied powers that it declare war on Germany. It also refused to give Australia, Great Britain or the Netherlands an explicit commitment of military assistance if their possessions or territory in the Pacific were attacked by Japan.

Ironically, while war raged in Europe during 1939-41, diplomatic initiatives taken separately by Australia and the US focused increasingly on the Pacific area. The US was thrust into the European conflict as a full belligerent by events in the Pacific. While Australia’s military and economic resources were directed towards the Commonwealth war effort in Europe, it sought to guard against its increased strategic vulnerability by developing firm political and military ties with the major power in the Pacific, the US.

In October 1935 President Roosevelt advised the Australian Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, ‘that never again would the United States be drawn into a European war, regardless of circumstances’.2 This statement indicated the strength of American military isolationism during the 1930s, but it did not foreshadow American policy after Germany’s expansionist aspirations were revealed in Austria and Czechoslovakia during 1938-39. Roosevelt’s initial indications that his government might use ‘more effective’ methods than ‘mere words’ to deter Germany, and America’s increased diplomatic involvement in European affairs after early 1939, were welcomed in Australia as tangible evidence that America was moving away from isolationism and towards a more responsible position in world affairs.3

However, this movement was barely perceptible until after the fall of France in 1940. Despite its traditional moral support for China’s integrity and the ‘Open Door’, the US did not react forcefully to Japanese expansion in Manchuria during 1931 or in China proper during 1937. Not until late 1939 did the Roosevelt administration attempt to bolster its moral indignation and diplomatic protests by threatening to limit trade with Japan. Following the fall of France in June 1940 and formation of the Tripartite pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan shortly afterwards, the Roosevelt administration accepted that developments in Europe and the Far East were interdependent. During 1940-41 it moved towards military support for the British Commonwealth. In January 1941 Roosevelt acknowledged that America’s ‘vital national interests’ were threatened by the activities of Germany and Japan, and emphasised that America’s security was ‘interwoven’ with protection of the British Empire.4 Until the Pearl Harbor attack finally resolved the principal dilemmas confronting Roosevelt, American foreign policy vacillated considerably. But it was not wholly unpredictable or inconsistent. Despite the restraints of public opinion and belated rearmament, the US moved inexorably
towards firm economic sanctions and overt military intervention in support of the Allied powers, both in Europe and the Far East.\(^5\)

As a member of the British Commonwealth involved in war in Europe but located on the periphery of Asia, Australia was directly affected by gradual revision of American foreign policy during 1939-41. Like the US, however, it was slow to discard its inter-war policies in order to meet the changing international circumstances of the late 1930s. If events in Europe and the Pacific had initiated a change in America’s foreign policy by 1939-40, it was events in the Far East which largely precipitated a belated revision of Australia’s foreign policy.

Australia’s traditional obsession with Asiatic expansion received an indirect boost after 1937 as Japan occupied much of northern and central China and some key areas on the southern coast. This aggression culminated in an announcement by Prince Konoye in November 1938 that ‘Japan intended to create a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere which would involve the co-operation of China, Japan, and the puppet state, Manchukuo’.\(^6\) Australia was apparently unconcerned with the immediate consequences of the Japanese actions on China, but was apprehensive lest the Japanese actions foreshadowed further expansion southwards.\(^7\)

Although not uncritical of British policy, during the 1930s Australian governments accepted Britain’s ambiguous commitments to send naval reinforcements to Singapore as an adequate substitute for radical innovations in Australian defence or foreign policy. The Lyons, and later the Menzies, governments largely ignored the substantial evidence that in the event of war against both Germany and Japan, Britain would focus its naval resources in Europe and the Mediterranean, not in the Pacific. Moreover, the hope of a general British Commonwealth rapprochement with Japan was optimistically entertained by members of the Australian Government until late in 1941. While the Lyons and Menzies governments were prepared to appease Japan in the hope of averting or delaying war, they also adopted limited international initiatives which were designed to promote Australia’s regional security interests and reduce its traditional dependence on British foreign policy. During 1935 Lyons attempted to involve the US in a broad security pact embracing ‘all the nations bordering on the Pacific Ocean’. He also discussed Pacific defence problems with Roosevelt in Washington and was assured in 1937 that ‘If serious trouble arose in the Pacific, the US would be prepared to make common cause with the members of the Commonwealth concerned’. Without an independent diplomatic service, the Lyons government could not effectively promote extra-Imperial initiatives. Opposition from the United Kingdom was sufficient to negate Lyons’ proposal for a Pacific pact.\(^8\)

In his first address as Prime Minister, R.G. Menzies extended the objectives implicit in Lyons’ initiatives by declaring that in European affairs Australia would continue to be guided by Britain. But he also emphasized that in the Pacific Australia had separate, primary responsibilities and must take the primary risks. ‘The problems of the Pacific are different’, he stated:

\begin{quote}
What Great Britain calls the Far East is to us the near North. Little given as I am to encouraging the exaggerated ideas of Dominion independence and separatism which exist in some minds, I have become convinced that in the Pacific Australia must regard herself as a principal providing herself with her own information and maintaining her own diplomatic contacts with foreign powers. I do not mean by this that we are to act in the Pacific as if we were a completely separate power; we must, of course, act as an integral part of the British Empire. We must have full consultation and co-operation with Great Britain, South Africa, New Zealand and Canada. But all those consultations must be on the basis that the primary risk in the Pacific is borne by New Zealand and ourselves. With this in mind I look forward to the day when we will have a concert of Pacific powers, pacific in both senses of the word. This means increased diplomatic contact between ourselves and the United States, China and Japan, to say nothing of the Netherlands East Indies and the other countries which fringe the Pacific.\(^9\)
\end{quote}
Although an important step towards greater Dominion autonomy in formulating and prosecuting foreign policy, this statement did not foreshadow a radical departure from British policy by the Menzies government. It announced Australia’s determination to depend, in part at least, on its own diplomatic service rather than a common British Commonwealth foreign service. Most significantly, however, Menzies’ statement clearly differentiated Australia’s immediate regional security interests from the broader interests of Britain, and implied that Australia would subsequently act as a ‘principal’ Pacific power to promote its separate interests. Ironically, it was the Labor government, not the Menzies government, which ultimately gave unequivocal expression to the objectives outlined by Menzies. Although capable of suggesting new directions for Australia’s foreign policy, the Anglophile Menzies did little to effect these changes. Until late 1941, consecutive governments accepted that Australia’s regional security interests could best be promoted by intimate, but not necessarily uncritical, co-operation with the mother country. Yet if Australia was reluctant to diverge sharply from British policy before late 1941, it does not necessarily follow that Australia was unwilling to promote its peculiar national interests in international affairs. Indeed it did not defer automatically to British leadership in world affairs. Australia deliberately chose to co-operate closely with Britain and the Commonwealth. Despite support for this general policy, after 1939 successive Australian governments actively promoted closer Dominion and British Commonwealth co-operation with Washington and sought unequivocal assurances of American military intervention in the event of war in the Pacific.

Menzies’ decision to establish a foreign diplomatic service and to formulate policy based on information supplied by Australian representatives abroad was a novel, if long overdue, response to growing instability in the Pacific. But it was not an unprecedented departure from combined British policy in the Pacific. Nor did it constitute the first attempt to promote closer Australian contacts with the US. As Meaney and a number of other historians have recently emphasised, from the time of Federation in 1901, Australian governments had adopted separate international and imperial initiatives which were designed to protect Australia’s distinctive interests in the Pacific. Foremost amongst these initiatives were the Prime Minister Alfred Deakin’s proposal for a Pacific pact in 1909; the aggressively independent and largely successful activities of the Prime Minister W.M. Hughes at the peace conference in 1919 which in effect secured firm Australian control over the former German colony in New Guinea and preserved the White Australia policy from possible international sanction by the League of Nations; and Lyons’ abortive Pacific pact proposal of 1935-37. If Australia had traditionally been preoccupied with the ‘search for security in the Pacific’, it was nevertheless slow to promote its regional interests by establishing diplomatic missions in the major capitals of the Pacific. Indeed, it was not until 1936 that a truly professional foreign service was created. However, from 1918 an Australian commissioner, under the control of the Prime Minister’s department, operated from New York. The two major Australian states, New South Wales and Victoria, also had trade and immigration officers in San Francisco continually after World War I. But, as Megaw has emphasized, until the late 1930s the duties of Australian representatives in the US were commercial rather than diplomatic. During these years Australian governments contemplated establishing full diplomatic links with Washington, but failed to do so, mainly because they did not wish to disrupt the of the British Commonwealth or diminish Australian influence on British policy.

In 1935 President Franklin Roosevelt and his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, both recommended the ‘establishment of regular diplomatic representations by Australia in Washington’. Lyons initially rejected this suggestion. In 1937, however, an Australian counsellor, Keith Officer, was appointed to the British embassy in Washington. The decision to establish a legation in the US was made by the Australian cabinet prior to the
death of Lyons in April 1939. This action was taken to promote the general interests of the
British Empire as well as Australia’s separate regional objectives in the Pacific. Richard
Casey (later Lord Casey) was appointed Minister to Washington. Clarence E. Gauss was
nominated as first American Minister to Australia. Both men took up their new posts early in
1940, shortly after the outbreak of war in Europe. During 1940 Australia also established
legations in Tokyo and Chungking.

Australia’s diplomacy in Washington during 1940-41 had two interrelated objectives. It
sought to strengthen general Anglo-American cooperation and to promote concrete assurances
of American assistance to Australia in the Pacific. Casey’s appointment was classified as an
important ‘strategic move in the Empire war effort, and an urgent immediate defence move
for our own security’. Because of the current uncertainty surrounding Imperial naval strategy
in the Pacific, an Australian official commented in 1940, America’s support had become ‘the
vital element’ in Australian defence planning. However, despite Casey’s exhaustive efforts,
Australia received no firm assurances of military assistance from the US.

Yet the exchange of diplomatic representatives did effect substantial favourable changes in
relations between Australia and the US, and established a firm basis for the intimate political
and military cooperation between the two powers following the declaration of war against
Japan in December 1941. During the decade preceding the Pearl Harbor attack Australian-
American relations underwent marked changes, but they did not, as Esthus has argued, travel
‘the road from enmity to alliance’. Despite persistent friction over economic matters, until the
late 1930s relations between the Australian and American governments and public were
notable for mutual indifference and isolation, not for deep-rooted hostility nor enmity. Although broad bilateral agreement on economic matters was not achieved, political and
military relations between the two states progressed towards co-operation and mutual
sympathy, culminating in a de facto alliance against the Axis states in December 1941. As
American public support for Roosevelt’s escalating assistance to the British Commonwealth
increased, and the activities of the new Australian and American legations in Washington and
Canberra expanded, the growing bilateral accord was translated into improved, more
sympathetic and informed public attitudes in both countries. Australia’s determination to seek
America’s support in the absence of certain guarantees of British protection was essentially a
pragmatic political response to an immediate security dilemma, which did not substantially
diminish Australia’s traditional allegiance to Britain. While Australian public opinion was
increasingly friendly to the US after 1939, available evidence suggests that public sentiment
did not have an important direct bearing on government policy towards the US.

Despite Casey’s tireless activities, Australia remained of peripheral significance in
American government policy, and an unimportant focus of American public opinion. State
Department officials continued to view the Australian legation as an instrument of British
Commonwealth policy, and questioned the sincerity of Australian diplomacy towards
America. During 1941 American officials criticized Australia for refusing to grant substantive
economic or political concessions while constantly appealing for assurances of American
military assistance. Australia was reluctant to act independently of Great Britain in
international affairs. Furthermore, until after the outbreak of war against Japan, the Dominion
refused to lower the high tariff rates it imposed in American imports or to make any
significant concessions to the Roosevelt administration. Hence, the State Department
informed Hull and Roosevelt that Australia’s attempts ‘to establish its independent
position vis-à-vis the United States’ after 1939 had largely failed. Not until early 1942,
after Japan had exposed Britain’s weakness in the Far East, did Australia pursue strongly
independent initiatives towards the US, irrespective of the position adopted by Britain.

From early 1939 Australia’s relations with the US centred explicitly on the question of
reactions and attitudes of the Roosevelt administration and the American public ‘towards
any aggressive move by Japan in the Pacific Ocean, particularly in the event of Britain at
the time being involved with Germany and Italy and unable to send the necessary naval
forces to the Pacific to contain Japan’. 19

Developments in western Europe and the East led this question to assume even greater
prominence. Australia and Britain now desperately sought to avert war with Japan. Casey
commented in June 1940 that ‘the British Empire cannot fight successfully Japan plus [the
European] Axis powers’. 20 In the face of mounting Japanese pressure against Britain’s Far
Eastern possessions, and in the absence of an assurance of military aid from the US,
Australia and Britain were prepared to appease Japan.

Both Casey and the British ambassador in Washington, Lord Lothian, advised their
governments to negotiate a compromise settlement with Japan. This would establish stable
relations with Japan and permit Australian and British forces to be used exclusively
against the European enemy. 21 Casey was convinced that the ‘time has now come when
circumstances in the war in Europe necessitate major change in British and if possible
American policy in the Far East’. Should America continue to refuse to give armed
support if Japan attempted further aggression, Casey argued, then Britain should reach an
agreement with Japan even if this involved ‘large territorial concessions by China to
Japan’. In return for this concession and other economic assistance from Britain, Casey
proposed that Japan should formally ‘undertake to remain neutral in [the] European war
and to respect the territorial integrity, not only of the Netherlands East Indies, but also of
British, French and American possessions in the Pacific’. 22 Menzies endorsed these
appeasement proposals, although he possibly viewed them more as a tactic of delay than a
permanent solution to Japanese expansionism. 23 ‘My instinct tells me that Japan is not
really anxious for another major war on top of her Chinese campaign if she can, by
peaceful means, establish her commercial position in East Asia and get some assistance in
what must be her real economic difficulties’, Menzies wrote: ‘Our approach should
therefore be generous and understanding, without being abject’. 24

However, the US refused to bargain China’s territorial rights – in return for settlement
with Japan. 25 Nor did New Zealand support the proposal. 26 The Roosevelt administration
was convinced that Japanese aggression could not be diverted by a policy of
cconciliation. 27 Privately, Menzies criticized America’s decision. ‘The United States cannot
very well complain if we decide not to fight her battles in the Far East’, he informed
Stanley M. Bruce, Australian High Commissioner in London, because Roosevelt had
refused ‘to give any specific guarantee of the status-quo, even in relation to Australia, or
New Zealand, or the Netherlands East Indies’. 28 Despite this dissatisfaction, neither
Britain nor Australia was anxious to risk destroying US confidence in British policy by
adopting the original appeasement proposal concerning China.

After July 1940 Australia increasingly attempted to demonstrate its support for
America’s hardening policy towards Japan. This changed emphasis was reflected in
Menzies’ statement of August 1940 in which he claimed that his government was now
‘completely hostile to the mere appeasement of Japan’. Nonetheless, he added the
important qualification that Australia’s policy must remain sufficiently flexible to avert
war in the Pacific so long as Britain was involved in war in Europe. 29 In the following
months Australia and Britain anxiously sought to keep China belligerent to Japan, so that
China would continue to divert Japan from moving southwards and thereby remain a
buffer zone protecting British territory in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. 30 Furthermore,
Menzies opposed appeasement of Japan, and argued that Australia adopt a Far Eastern
policy which complemented that being pursued by Roosevelt and Hull after June 1940. 31

Roosevelt’s decision to restrict the export of strategic materials to Japan after early
July 1940 increased Australian confidence in US policy. This act had a negligible impact
on Japan’s capacity to wage war. But as Langer and Gleason have pointed out, it indicated that Washington was ‘gradually assuming the leadership in opposition to Japan’s designs, which of necessity involved the acceptance of some responsibility for British as well as American interests’. This leadership did not yet extend to military intervention against Japan.

Although seeking ‘firm and exact’ assurances of military and political co-operation from Roosevelt, the Menzies government remained privately critical of America’s ‘indefinite and variable’ policy. After the Tripartite pact between Japan, Germany and Italy was formed in September 1940, however, Australia experienced greater confidence in America’s hardening policy towards Japan. Casey observed that the Roosevelt administration ‘is now well aware that the security of the United States is bound up with the security of Britain.’ It was also reported that Hull ‘clearly feels that [the] German-Japanese alignment inevitably means that the United States itself will inevitably be drawn into war’. Washington consented to follow parallel policies with the British Commonwealth in the Pacific, but refused to commit itself to ‘joint’ military action should these policies fail. Nonetheless, Casey was confident that America would not abandon Commonwealth powers.

Britain and Australia reacted decisively to the Tripartite pact. The Burma Road was reopened, thereby curbing Britain’s temporary appeasement of Japan. In October, both Britain and Australia gave an assurance that if Japan and the US became involved in war, they would immediately declare war on Japan. As the prospects of a Japanese attack on American territory were slight, this assurance did not involve them in an immediate risk. It was undoubtedly designed to stimulate greater American sympathy with British policy in the Far East. Menzies also gave an assurance that should Britain become involved in war with Japan, Australia would immediately declare war on Japan ‘even if America does not...We make no reservations about our associations with Great Britain and our willingness to collaborate with her to the full’.  

Australia’s determination to gain an explicit American commitment intensified after late 1940 as British and American defence planning and priorities were revealed during strategic conferences at Singapore, involving Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands. These powers requested that the US base at least part of its Pacific fleet at Singapore, rather than Hawaii, in order to deter Japan. However, the Roosevelt administration rejected this idea. Menzies was ‘gravely concerned’ with the decisions made at Singapore, and anxious that Britain should give an unequivocal commitment to send adequate naval support to the Far East.

This concern was aggravated during the Anglo-American discussions in Washington in 1941 where it was agreed that in the event of global war America’s principal military effort would be directed against Germany, not Japan. It was also agreed that Anglo-American policy in the Pacific would initially be purely defensive. The US refused to accept responsibility for retaining Singapore or defending the Netherlands East Indies, Australia or New Zealand. Although these decisions were not binding, they were accepted in principle by both governments. Kirby has emphasized correctly that the US ‘had neither accepted an obligation to enter the war nor specified the circumstances in which they might do so’. This broad outline of projected American global strategy was only slightly modified before December 1941.

While Australia continued to seek a formal American military commitment, it was reassured by Britain that the Roosevelt administration would not desert the British powers. Churchill advised the new Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden:

You should, however, be aware that the general impression derived by our representative at the Atlantic meeting was that, although the United States would not make any satisfactory declaration on the point,
there was no doubt that in practice we could count on the United States’ support if, as a result of Japanese aggression, we became involved in war with Japan.\(^43\)

Although less confident than Britain, during August-September 1941 Australia exhibited ‘renewed optimism’ that war could be averted and, if not, that American involvement was virtually assured.\(^44\)

The coalition governments of Menzies and Fadden publicly accepted that Australia had primary diplomatic responsibilities in the Pacific and took initial steps towards providing its own information and separate diplomatic contacts with other Pacific powers. However, despite Casey’s resourceful activities in Washington and operation of the Tokyo and Chungking legations, Australia relied on Britain for most information concerning developments in high-level relations between the US, Japan, and Britain. Hence the Dominion government generally accepted British assessments of international affairs because these were based on direct access to a wider range of information. Moreover, Australia’s submissions concerning projected co-operation with other Pacific states, and reciprocal commitments of military assistance, were made largely through London. These submissions were consistently rejected or modified in London. On such central issues as appeasement of Japan, support for China, and formal assurances of support to Thailand or the Netherlands East Indies, Australia continued to defer to Britain. Under Menzies and Fadden, Australia lacked both the inclination and military resources to adopt a radically different Pacific policy. Australia was more urgently concerned than Britain with the immediate threat of Japan, but both were preoccupied with promoting maximum American support in the event of global war. While not uncritical of British policy in the Pacific, Australia acquiesced in a united Commonwealth policy under British leadership and control principally because Britain shared its determination to ensure American belligerency against Japan.

The US interpreted events in Europe, rather than Asia, as the primary threat to its long-term security and economic interests, especially after the fall of the Netherlands and France. After July-August 1941, Roosevelt favoured American military involvement in a global war rather than witness the collapse of Britain or occupation by Japan of territories adjacent to British possessions in Asia. Realising this, Britain adopted responses to Japanese military and political ventures which paralleled or complemented those of the US. Ultimately, Roosevelt made an explicit commitment to intervene in the war against Japan, and by implication against the Axis states generally, before Japan actually attacked either British territory in Southeast Asia or American territory in the Pacific.\(^45\)

This commitment was similar to that favoured by Australia governments after 1939. But it resulted primarily from British rather than Australian initiatives. Had it not incorporated the Roosevelt administration’s independent assessment of the steps necessary to protect American security interests, it could not have been extracted from the US. Moreover, Roosevelt could not have moved as quickly or deliberately towards unqualified support for the Commonwealth and the occupied western European states had not American congressional and public opinion changed after 1939. Although, as Langer and Gleason have emphasised, American public opinion remained highly mobile and difficult to assess, by late 1941 support for appeasement of Japan was a minority view, and a majority of Americans were prepared to risk war in order to ‘sustain Britain at all costs’.\(^46\)

A new Australian government presided over the final phase of the Australian-American rapprochement and the commencement of bilateral military co-operation, which accompanied America’s inexorable movement towards confrontation with Japan. On 3 October, following defeat of the Fadden government in Parliament, the Australian Labor Party under John Curtin was commissioned to form a government. Curtin became Prime
Minister and Minister of Defence. The energetic and gifted Dr Herbert Vere Evatt was appointed Minister for External Affairs.

Following the outbreak of war against Germany, the Labor Party pledged ‘to do all that is possible to defend Australia, and, at the same time, having regard to its platform, will do its utmost to retain the integrity of the British Commonwealth’. During 1940-41 Curtin’s opposition to deploying Australian infantry forces in the Middle East was modified in the face of German gains in western Europe and the German attack on Russia. Through membership of the advisory war council the ALP promised to co-operate with the government. It did not publicly oppose Menzies’ and Fadden’s major initiatives, but remained sceptical of Britain’s commitment to reinforce Singapore and criticised Britain’s failure to consult meaningfully with the Dominions. Yet by mid-1941 Curtin and a majority of the parliamentary Labor Party accepted that Britain’s survival and Anglo-American unity were essential if Australia’s continental security and economic viability were to be maintained. While prepared to support the European war effort and to concede the significance of the Middle East and Singapore as ‘outer bastions of Australia’, Labor continued to place greater emphasis on local defence needs than did the Menzies or Fadden governments.

However, when the Labor government was commissioned, it did not immediately reorder Australia’s defence priorities, diplomatic policies, or its external commitments. The theoretical assumptions of Labor’s foreign and defence policies when in opposition did not have a significant bearing on the policies it adopted in government until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Not until early 1942 did Labor act to give continental defence priority over support for the Commonwealth war effort in Europe. Moreover its actions in the international arena after October 1941 completely submerged the isolationist tendencies evident in party thinking during the 1930s. The external policies of Curtin’s infant government during October-December did not depart radically from those of its predecessors. Labor took steps to reinforce Australia’s troops in the Middle East, supported American leadership in negotiations with Japan, and pressed successfully for a renewed assurance of substantial British naval support for Singapore if Australia was gravely threatened.

However, the new government was less confident of British intentions and more prepared to endorse or question American Far Eastern policy without preliminary reference to London. It was also more willing to diverge from the policies of either major power to promote its immediate defence needs, and was less inhibited by its small-power Dominion status. In the uncertain period before Pearl Harbor, however, these tendencies were only vaguely evident.

In the absence of a formal commitment to intervene against Japan, however, the Curtin government, unlike Great Britain, was not prepared to defer automatically to America’s leadership. It pressed for unilateral British action to strengthen the air and naval defence capacity of Singapore, and advocated that Commonwealth troops be sent immediately to the Netherlands East Indies. Australia’s special representative in London, Earle Page, told the British war cabinet early in November that the Curtin cabinet did not fully endorse ‘Britain’s insistence that the United States must always take the lead’ in dealing with Japan, and suggested that ‘if Britain were more resolute America would recognise the necessity of going to her aid’. In communications to London, Evatt criticized America’s refusal to give details of its secret negotiations with Japan to Australia, and sought Britain’s assistance in requesting such information from Hull.

Changes in America’s policy after early November 1941 made Australia’s activities essentially redundant. On 5 November the joint board of the army and navy concluded that ‘military counter-action’ should be undertaken ‘if Japan attacks or directly threatens
United States, British or Dutch territory’. It recommended that a joint American-British-Dutch warning of military counter-action be issued to Japan if it attempted to advance in Thailand west of the 100th meridian or south of the 10th parallel in the Kra Isthmus, ‘or into Portuguese Timor, New Caledonia, or the Loyalty Islands’. Roosevelt in effect decided to aid the British Commonwealth if Japan attacked southwards. In response to this, Churchill declared that if America was drawn into war, Britain would declare war against Japan immediately.51 Late in November, Hull withdrew his proposal for a modus vivendi with Japan, although Britain and Australia believed the American-Japanese talks over a compromise Pacific settlement should continue.52 He presented an uncompromising counter-proposal to the Japanese ambassador, Kurusu, demanding complete withdrawal of Japan’s forces from China and Indo-China as a precondition for a negotiated settlement.53 The terms of this proposal (or ‘ultimatum’, as ‘revisionist’ historians label it) had always been unacceptable to Japan. By advancing it, Hull consciously negated any prospects of a lasting detente.

Hull’s inflexible proposal was influenced by an intercepted Japanese message of 5 November advising Kurusu that negotiations must be completed by 25 November. Later this deadline was extended to 29 November. After this date, Japan intended to commence further advances southward. Australia was unaware of this information and viewed the prospects of a negotiated settlement far more optimistically than the US.55 Indeed, as late as 22 November the Australian legation in Tokyo had reported:

The [Japanese] Government’s attitude all goes to confirm the view that they are genuinely anxious to secure agreement with the United States and avoid at present anything that might prejudice discussions in Washington.56

Basing its policy on incomplete or misleading information, Australia continued to hope that a temporary compromise settlement, possibly similar to Hull’s modus vivendi proposal, would be negotiated. Evatt advised Casey to intervene ‘discreetly’ in the hope that this might prevent a breakdown of the talks.57 Both men believed that a compromise settlement, ‘however temporary’, would at least delay the outbreak of hostilities and increase the likelihood of a commitment of America’s support before war commenced.58 After Hull abandoned the modus vivendi proposal, Casey met secretly with Kurusu in an unsuccessful attempt to mediate between Hull and the Japanese representative.59 Only a week before the outbreak of war, Curtin remained amenable to compromise:

We again repeat our opinion, that, even at this late stage, a further endeavour should be made to encourage the United States to establish a modus vivendi with Japan which can be made satisfactory to China as well as to the other powers concerned.60

Although Australia continued to support a negotiated settlement, its objective was to gain an explicit guarantee of US belligerency if Japan advanced further south. Curtin also wanted formal reciprocal assurances of military intervention in the Far East from Britain and the Netherlands East Indies. During late November he asked Churchill what aid Britain would give to Australia if Japan attacked the Netherlands East Indies or Thailand. Churchill refused to give an assurance of military assistance if either contingency developed.61 Australia’s anxious appeal and its willingness to contemplate a negotiated settlement were influenced primarily by the apparent ambiguity of America’s policy in the Far East. Curtin informed Bruce:

If we were certain that [the] United States’ lead in talks [with Japan] would be followed by similar lead in armed defence against armed aggression, [the] position would be transformed; but there now seems grave danger of further armed aggression by Japan without any United States armed intervention.62
Curtin’s anxiety was expressed against a background of intelligence reports that Japan would attack the Kra Isthmus and invade Thailand ‘about 1st December’. Britain advised that this ‘might involve us in war’, but it was determined to promote simultaneous American involvement. Britain recognized that Japanese occupation of Thailand and the Kra Isthmus would undermine the security of Singapore and all British territory in the Far East. It thus renewed its efforts to gain assurances of military intervention from Roosevelt.63

After receiving details of Japan’s intentions, however, the Curtin government refused to accept that an American commitment of support was a necessary precondition for British military action against Japan. Curtin recognised that a Japanese attack on Thailand might result in the worst possible situation for the British Commonwealth, but he argued that Commonwealth powers should intervene militarily against Japan if it invaded Thailand, the Kra Isthmus, British territory or the Netherlands East Indies, regardless of America’s response.64 In contrast, Churchill was prepared to support military action against Japan only after an American assurance was given, unless Japan actually attacked British territory.65 US actions in the first five days of December averted possible escalation of Australian-British friction over this issue.

During 1-3 December Roosevelt promised Halifax that America would give ‘armed support’ to Britain if it resisted Japanese aggression in British or Dutch Territory or Thailand.66 The British war cabinet interpreted this verbal assurance as a definite commitment and on 4 December advised the government of the Netherlands East Indies ‘that if any attack was made on them by Japan, we should at once come to their aid.’ Britain now had ‘every confidence’ that the US would take identical action.67

Roosevelt’s verbal assurances were immediately translated into a formal commitment. Australia was advised that Britain had received an explicit, secret commitment of American military intervention in any one of the following contingencies:

- if Britain found it necessary either to forestall a Japanese landing in the Kra Isthmus or to occupy part of the Isthmus as a counter to the Japanese violation of any part of Thailand;
- if the Japanese attacked the Netherlands East Indies and Britain at once went to the support of the Netherlands;
- if the Japanese attacked British territory.68

The commander of British forces in the Far East, Robert Brooke-Popham, was authorised to implement agreed Anglo-American action (MATADOR) if Japan violated Thailand’s sovereignty or moved its navy towards the Kra Isthmus.69

In an article published in 1963, Esthus demonstrated convincingly that available British, Australian and American evidence ‘was sufficient to justify the conclusion that Roosevelt gave Britain’, and by implication Australia and the Commonwealth generally, ‘a commitment of armed support in the case of a Japanese attack on British or Dutch territory or on Thailand’ by 5 December 1941.70 Additional evidence made available by release of British war cabinet papers in 1972 supports this conclusion.71 Yet, as Esthus has also emphasised, armed intervention by American forces could only have occurred after congress had approved such action.72 Roosevelt’s commitment doubtless reflected his belief that congress would immediately approve intervention if Japan attacked British or Dutch Territory, or Thailand. After early November 1941, Roosevelt and his senior advisers correctly anticipated that congress and the American public would overwhelmingly support such action. In the weeks immediately preceding Roosevelt’s commitment, the administration had drafted messages designed to prompt congressional action. In a recent study Roberta Wohlstetter has concluded: ‘All the evidence would suggest that the attention of the President and his top advisers was centered on the most
effective way to urge Congress that America should join with Great Britain in a war to stop further Japanese aggression.\textsuperscript{73}

In the light of the evidence presented it is tempting to assume, along with Roosevelt’s ‘revisionist’ critics, that Roosevelt and Hull deliberately adopted uncompromising policies which were unacceptable to Japan in order to provoke a Japanese attack on British and possibly American territory, and thereby ensure congressional support for a declaration of war against all the Axis powers. Nonetheless the evidence for this interpretation remains, at best, circumstantial.\textsuperscript{74}

Understandably, the Curtin cabinet was reassured by Roosevelt’s secret commitment to the British Commonwealth. But it believed that Roosevelt and Churchill should also issue a joint, public warning to Japan. In an interview with Roosevelt on 6 December, Casey requested a joint warning against Japanese expansion in Thailand. Roosevelt did not agree, primarily because he desired to suggest directly to emperor Hirohito that Japan halt its aggression. However, the president agreed to issue a public warning in a message to congress on 8 December if the emperor had not replied satisfactorily by then. He suggested that the Commonwealth powers could offer a similar public warning on 10 December.\textsuperscript{75}

Japan’s sudden attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December (US time) negated Australia’s final attempt to involve America in political action to deter Japan from further expansion. Most significantly, however, the precipitate Japanese action ensured that the US and Australia would now co-operate militarily, politically and economically against the Axis powers.

The\textit{ de facto} Australian-American wartime alliance was born of immediate strategic necessity, not conscious Australian or British diplomatic initiatives. Gradually, but decisively, America’s isolationism broke down after 1939 as the Roosevelt administration moved towards unqualified support for the Allied powers. Changes in administration policy and public opinion reflected the view that an Axis victory in Europe or Southeast Asia would seriously threaten America’s long-term security and vital interests. These changes were influenced only marginally by joint Commonwealth or separate Dominion diplomacy.

Australia’s decision to establish diplomatic relations with the US and the policies subsequently pursued by the Menzies, Fadden and Curtin governments towards it were also essentially conditioned by security considerations. In response to rapid Axis successes in Western Europe, Japan’s expansion in Asia, and Britain’s diminished capacity and willingness to jeopardise its national security in order to reinforce its Pacific territories, Australia sought assurances of military assistance in the Pacific from America. Yet neither the conservative nor Labor governments departed radically from British policy during 1939-41. Moreover, despite Casey’s work in Washington, both governments promoted their foreign policy and defence objectives by collaborating intimately with London, and generally permitted Britain to speak for Australia and a united Commonwealth in Washington. Although increasingly preoccupied with developments in the Far East rather than in Europe, Australia realised that Anglo-American co-operation was essential if Japan’s southern drive was to be halted or at least delayed. The Dominion governments generally abandoned or adapted their policies in order to foster Anglo-American harmony and greater American leadership and responsibility in the Far East. Despite some reservations, the Menzies government supported economic sanctions against Japan. Similarly, in the face of hardening American policy towards Japan, the Menzies cabinet abandoned its stated willingness to bargain China’s sovereignty for a compromise settlement with Japan. Although less prepared to appease Japan than its predecessors, and determined not to sacrifice China in return for a compromise with Japan, Labor supported a negotiated settlement with Japan, at least as an interim measure until unequivocal assurances of American assistance had been received. Curtin’s government was also less willing than its predecessors or Churchill to defer automatically to American leadership in negotiations with Japan. Nor was it uncritical of
apparent US policy in the Far East, especially concerning possible action if Japan continued its advance towards Singapore and Australian territory.

In practice, however, these independent attitudes and policies were subordinated to the general objectives of developing firm assurances of American military assistance and broad Anglo-American unity against the Axis states. After the Pearl Harbor attack, when America’s belligerency was assured and Britain’s inability to defend its Far Eastern possessions painfully revealed, Labor was able to act decisively to ensure that Australia was defended and its immediate regional interests not subordinated to British interests in Europe. It established more direct bilateral political contacts with Washington, sought a separate voice in the higher direction of the Pacific war, encouraged close military and economic co-operation with the US, accepted American operational leadership against Japan, and concentrated all possible defence forces in the Southwest Pacific to bolster Australia’s immediate security.

The Curtin government did not share Churchill’s confidence that America’s entry into war against both Japan and Germany signalled eventual victory for the British Commonwealth. 76 But Australia’s concern with Japan was modified. 77 US involvement in the Pacific brought decisive assurances to Australia and added new dimensions and significance to relations between the two countries. But Australia and the US were unequal alliance partners with separate interests and military priorities. Both desired to achieve victory over Japan, but disagreed over the methods and strategy involved. Although military collaboration was never seriously jeopardised during 1942-45, it was accompanied by serious problems concerning political, military and economic consultation and co-operation. These were consistently resolved in accordance with the wishes of the major alliance partner, the US. During the drift to war in the Pacific, Australia played at most a supporting role to Britain in the crucial Anglo-American negotiations which culminated in American intervention. Despite unprecedented diplomatic assertiveness and its vital strategic importance to the US after the Pearl Harbor attack, Australia’s influence on Allied Pacific policy remained only marginal.

NOTES

1. UK Cabinet Record, August 1941, quoted The Sydney Morning Herald, 3 January 1972, p. 5.
4. Roosevelt to Grew, 21/1/41, United States Department of State (USDS), Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers (FRUSDP), IV, 1941, p. 7.


12. ibid., p. 139; Megaw, op. cit., pp. 610-11, 625-30.

13. The *New York Times*, 13/4/39, p. 12. It reported that the Australian government originally intended to appoint Lyons as minister when the legation was finally established; Esthus, op. cit., pp. 68-69.


21. ibid.


23. Menzies to Bruce, 9/7/40, Menzies to SSDA, 17/9/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 3.

24. Menzies to Bruce, ibid.

25. Hull, Memo, 28/6/40, USNA 711.94/1581.

26. Fraser to Menzies, 3/7/40, Bruce to Menzies, 6/7/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 2.

27. Fraser to Menzies, ibid.

28. Menzies to Bruce, 9/7/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 2.

29. Menzies to Bruce, 6/8/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 3.

30. Casey to SSDA, 7/2/41, CAO A981, Japan 185; SSDA to Menzies, 21/11/40; Menzies to Bruce, 27/11/40, CAOA1608, A41/1/6, pt 4; Menzies to Bruce, 25/7/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 2; SSDA to Menzies, 12/5/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 5.

31. ibid; Esthus, *Enmity*, op. cit., p. 78.


33. Menzies to Bruce, 8/8/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt 2; Bruce to Menzies, 6/8/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 3.

34. Casey to ADEA, 3/10/40, CAO A901, Japan-USA 177.

35. Lothian, cited Casey to Menzies, 27/9/40, CAO A981, Japan 57.

36. Casey to Menzies, 16/9/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 2.

37. Casey to Menzies, 7/10/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/6, pt. 2.

38. Secretary Australian Prime Minister’s Department to Secretary Australian Department of Defence, 10/10/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 2; Menzies to SSDA, 11/10/40, CAO A1608, Z27/1/1; SSDA to Menzies, 7/10/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 2.


40. Casey to Menzies, 16/10/40, 4/11/40, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 2.
43. SSDA to Fadden, 12/9/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 3.
45. R.A. Esthus, ‘President Roosevelt’s Commitment to Britain to Intervene in a Pacific War’, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 50, June 1963, pp. 33-38. This article gave additional, perhaps indirect, support to the ‘revisionist’ view that ‘Roosevelt followed policies that he knew (or should have known) would lead to war in Asia and Europe and would involve the United States’ (Cole, op. cit., p. 606).
46. Langer and Gleason, op. cit., p. 760.
55. According to Hasluck, Casey had ‘been reliably informed of the instructions to Kurusu’. But Canberra was not advised of the actual details of the Japanese messages intercepted and decoded by Americans. Hasluck, op. cit., p. 549; Casey to ADEA, 24/11/41, CAO A981, Japan 178. On 19/12/41, the Australian legation in Washington forwarded details of the *modus vivendi* proposal to Evatt. See Heydon to Evatt, 19/12/41, CAO A981, Japan 177, pt. 2.
56. Officer to Evatt, 22/11/12, quoted Hasluck, op. cit., p. 549.
57. Evatt to Casey, 24/11/41, quoted ibid.
58. Curtin to Casey, 24/11/41, CAO A981, Japan 178.
59. Casey to Curtin, 30/11/41, CAO A981, Japan 178.
60. AWCM 1524, 1/12/41.
61. ADEA, Memo AWC, 20/11/41, CAO A981, Pacific 8, pt. 2; Page to Curtin, 16/11/41, CAO A981, Pacific 8, pt. 1; Curtin to Bruce, 29/11/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/3, pt. 4; UK War Cabinet, *Minutes, September 1939-May 1945*, 112th Conclusion, 1st Minute, 12/11/41, PRO, WM(41), Cab. 65/24.
63. UK Minister, Bangkok, to AWC, 27/11/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 4; Casey to Curtin, 28/11/41, CAO A981, Japan 178; SSDA to Curtin, 27/11/41, 30/11/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 4.
64. Curtin to SSDA, 30/11/41, CAO A1608, A41/1/5, pt. 4.
65. Bruce to Curtin, 1/12/41, cited Hasluck, op. cit., p. 554.
66. United States Congress, op. cit., pp. 413-17; UK War Cabinet, *Minutes, September 1939-May 1945*, 124th Conclusion, 4th Minute, 4/12/41, PRO, WM(41), Cab. 65/24. This assurance was not given to Thailand at this time. Peck to Hull, 4/12/41, USNA 740.0011 PW/673.

67. UK War Cabinet, *Minutes, September 1939-May 1945*, 124th Conclusion, 4th Minute, 4/12/41, PRO, WM(41), Cab. 65/24; Eden, Memo, UK *War Cabinet Memoranda, 1939-1945*, PRO, WP(41), 296, Cab. 66/20. These reveal that Eden, not Churchill, was principally responsible for this decision, and suggest that the US mistook that Britain had undertaken to assist the Netherlands East Indies as early as August 1941. Esthus, *Enmity*, op. cit., p. 116.

68. SSDA to Curtin, 5/12/41, cited Hasluck, I, pp. 555-56.

69. Esthus, *Roosevelt’s Commitment*, op. cit., p. 34; Kirby, op. cit., p. 175.

70. Esthus, ibid. In contrast the 1946 United States Congress, *Investigation of Pearl Harbor Attack*, p. 172, concluded, ‘While no binding agreement existed it would appear from the record that the Japanese were inclined to believe that the US, Britain and the Netherlands would act in concert’. This view has been generally endorsed by historians. R.W. Leopold, *The Growth of American Foreign Policy: A History*, New York, 1962, p. 591, concludes, ‘At no time had Roosevelt committed the United States to defend non-American lands in Asia’.

71. UK War Cabinet, *Minutes, September 1939-May 1945*, 124th Conclusion, 4th Minute, 4/12/41, PRO, WM(41), Cab. 65/24; UK *War Cabinet Memoranda 1939-1945*, PRO, WP(41), 296, Cab. 66/20.


