Introduction.

On Sunday evening December 7th 1941 British war leader Churchill dined at his retreat at Chequers with the American emissaries Winant and Harriman. On the nine o'clock news the BBC speaker announced the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Churchill asked for a telephone call to be made to President Roosevelt, who confirmed the enemy attack. The President finished the conversation with the Premier with the remark: "We are all in the same boat now". Coalition warfare in the Far East was now a reality.

The war in the Pacific did indeed draw together an unlikely coalition of unequal partners: two colonial powers, Great Britain and The Netherlands, a powerful but anti-colonial neutralist state, (the United States of America), and a British Dominion and pillar of the British Empire with major military interests in the fate of South-East Asia: i.e. Australia. Within three weeks the four states involved would constitute the first integrated military alliance of the Second World War: ABDA-Command. ABDA stands for American - British - Dutch - Australian. ABDA-Command failed to stem the Japanese tide, which subsequently washed away all vestiges of colonial empire in the whole of South-East Asia. The collapse of western power in South-East Asia was disastrous and total, to the surprise of all contestants involved.

The allied defeat in that area had far-reaching consequences. The failed effort to defend colonial possessions and their inhabitants stimulated enormously the desire of the indigenous elites to attain political independence. In the thirties colonialism and empire-building were accepted manifestations of western superiority over indigenous peoples. Colonialism was considered to last indefinitely, or at least another century. Hardly anybody expected its demise within a short time span - least of all the white colonists in S.E. Asia. Twenty years later all over the world colonialism was finished and dead. This dramatic reversal of a system of power projection which was considered normal in the two hundred years of western dominance over other peoples, was mainly due to that easy and historic defeat of western powers by an Asian nation, Japan. In its turn the Japanese defeat in Burma by another Asian power, India, guaranteed the end of colonialism on the Indian subcontinent. Another factor in the ruin of colonialism was of course the emergence of two superpowers which were both pursuing anti-colonialist policies, be it from different perspectives: the Soviet Union and the United States of America.

For the Netherlands the results of the lost war in the Far East proved to be traumatic. Almost forty thousand Dutch nationals lost their lives in the war against Japan and during the Japanese occupation; another three hundred thousand Dutch subjects, the Romusha, perished in Japanese forced labour camps all over the archipelago. After the war Dutch efforts to regain their colonial empire failed after four years of bitter struggle against independently minded Indonesians, who argued that the military failure of the Dutch to

---


2 These were indigenous young men, enticed by the Japanese into slave labour for infrastructural and defensive building activities.
avoid the Japanese occupation also meant the end of Dutch sovereignty. After the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia the Netherlands lost their status forever as what they perceived to be a European medium power with rich and extensive colonies. To this day, the loss of the Netherlands East Indies (abbreviated NEI) has been a national trauma, resulting in periodic heated discussions in the Dutch media. It also resulted in the painful transfer from the NEI to Holland of more than three hundred thousand Dutch nationals in the fifties, eliminating the largest European population which existed in S.E. Asia before and during the war in the process.

The subject of this study however is not the war in S.E. Asia itself, but the period immediately preceding the war. The study is limited in time to events in the interwar period, and is geographically limited to East and South-East Asia and Australia with an emphasis on S.E. Asia. The study ends with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

What are the reasons for this dissertation? What is its *raison d'etre*?

In the first place, in Anglo-American historical literature there is a decided lack of knowledge and insight about the military and naval capabilities which the Dutch possessed in the NEI, and their re-armament efforts before the war. This is caused by a paucity of English-language publications by (Dutch) historians on this subject, publications which were themselves in some instances even misinformed especially on the subject of the Dutch colonial army. This publication in the English language therefore will hopefully fill a void in literature on the Dutch military side of South-East Asian history, information which is even scarce in Dutch. Secondly, by comparing Dutch defence measures with those of other colonial powers and the United States in the S.E. Asian area, a better perspective is gained on Dutch military and naval plans and capabilities, and furthering this insight in comparative strengths and weaknesses is decidedly one of the aims of this study. Third, it is the purpose of this study to fill in the existing void on the Dutch side of the military balance in S.E. Asia, using primary sources which are not easily available to English-language historians.

A fourth motive for this study is a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of the grand strategies of the countries involved and a comparison of their efficiency in translating grand strategies into foreign policy objectives and military and naval contingency plans for their possessions in S.E. Asia. The fifth reason is the rather unique feature of this dissertation that the evolution of all three military services (navy, army and air) is discussed in an integrated approach towards each country involved, making it possible to compare countries on this score.

Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that the dissertation has a strong bias towards the role of The Netherlands in S.E. Asia. This is not only explicitly dealt with in a rather sizable chapter on the NEI, but each other country chapter has a subchapter dealing with the relations between that country and the Netherlands/NEI. This might be one of the strengths of this study.

Military plans and preparations are a derivative of foreign policy and diplomacy, which in their turn are derived from the "Grand Strategy" of any state. The term "Grand Strategy"
here refers to the set of paradigms, dogmas, myths, beliefs, theories and perceived limits in very different areas like economics, culture, morale, finance, and defence and military history, that forms the core of each nation's will to survive in a tumultuous and dangerous world. Grand Strategies are formulated and modified by internal political, social and economic factors, but they shape foreign policy, diplomacy and military and maritime capabilities of each state. The term in a more narrow sense than used here has been coined forcefully by Paul Kennedy\(^5\), but its origin can be traced back to Sir Basil Liddell Hart before the Second World War. Our use of the term Grand Strategy is illustrated below.

According to Kennedy, Grand Strategies are rationally reasoned survival strategies. One of the surprising findings of this study however is the strong influence of irrational arguments on grand strategies, at least as developed for the Far East. On the Japanese side the belief in the invincibility of the Japanese soldier and in divine protection offered to the sons of the old Yamato race strongly influenced the military component of their Grand Strategy. But the Allies were as irrational in some aspects, as - for example - the innate belief in the superiority of the white race held by many in the British and Australian military establishment. The Dutch maintained the paradigm of absolute loyalty of their indigenous subjects towards their government and the ruling House of Orange. This paradigm proved to be a delusion. The Americans were the most rational in their Grand Strategy, but they too cherished some irrational beliefs which influenced their Grand Strategy\(^8\).

Many English language histories on the approach of war in the Far East deal with either Great Britain, or Australia, or the United States. Most of those books only deal with diplomatic history. Integrated service histories in which the developments in navy, army and air departments are described, as affected by diplomatic events, are even more rare. In most of those histories, the "Grand Strategy" of each of those nations in the interwar years has been described only rudimentarily. The same applies to French-language studies. Moreover, in existing literature no comparisons have been made between the different colonial states in how their grand strategies were translated into foreign policy and defence with respect to their possessions in S.E. Asia.

In the early thirties the grand strategies of the western powers differed dramatically from each other. In order to contain the ever growing menace from Japan, more co-operation was needed between those western powers, but the then existing grand strategies of those powers blocked any meaningful discussion of an alliance against Japan. One aim of this thesis is to analyse the way of thinking by which policymakers in the countries concerned tried to modify existing grand strategies in order to make a common front against Japanese aggression possible. As will be shown, this adaptation was not only due to the Japanese menace. The catastrophe in Western Europe in June 1940 caused within each country a re-evaluation of and a change in its grand strategy, which at least for the western powers except France resulted in the accomplishment, that indeed in the end nearly everyone was in the same boat.

This result can be partly attributed to the groundwork laid by secret diplomacy between the powers involved in the interbellum, diplomacy according to Kennedy being one of the key

---


components in executing a Grand Strategy. There were a number of secret meetings between representatives of the armed forces of Great Britain and the U.S.A. in the interwar period. These meetings are not very well-known among historians even today. There were also pre-war secret contacts between the British and Dutch governments, which are even less well-known, due to the convulsive attitude towards neutrality by the Dutch. However, the fact that there were contacts in peacetime between the colonial forces of Great Britain in British-India and Malaya with the Dutch colonial army is an intentionally well-kept secret which has been revealed by my research. That applies also to the close cooperation between British and Dutch counterintelligence officials in catching Japanese spies in Malaya and the NEI, and to the virtually unknown military cooperation between the Dutch and Australian armed forces in the year leading up to Pearl-Harbor. The question which then has to be answered in this thesis is about the effectiveness of these secret contacts and exchanges with respect to the defensive capability of each of the countries concerned.

Some contemporary historians have blamed the various pre-war disarmament conferences for the general unpreparedness of the western nations in the face of the coming war, the most spectacular of which was without doubt the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference of 1921-1922. This thesis will try to answer the question of what the unintended consequences of that Conference and the subsequent Naval Conferences at London in 1930 and 1935 were upon the defence of the western possessions in S.E. Asia.

As already stated, for each power there is an intimate relation between grand strategy, foreign policy, diplomacy, and defence. If there is a mismatch between grand strategy and a defence establishment to support it, that means trouble. One of the purposes of this study is to analyse this relation for a number of countries with interests in S.E. Asia. It will be shown that almost all states involved in the Far East indeed had a mismatch between Grand Strategy objectives and military means to support those objectives at least in the Far East.

In this context grand strategy defines ways and means of surviving as an independent country or nation and/or of projecting power and influence towards other nations. The Dutch interwar grand strategy was founded on absolute neutrality with a low level of armament, and particularly avoidance of anything which could involve the country in a war, be it in Europe or the Far East. In the twenties much was expected of the collective security offered by membership of the League of Nations. When collective security failed in the early thirties, this resulted in foreign policy based on aloofness, and diplomacy which tried to keep The Netherlands out of any conflict at almost all costs. Neutrality does not have to result in a weak defence force, as both Sweden and Switzerland, and to a lesser extent Finland and Austria amply demonstrated in or after the Second World War. The Netherlands however, for reasons which will be discussed later in this thesis, maintained in the interwar years a minimal naval presence in their colonies in both the Eastern and Western hemisphere. One of the reasons was the lack of a proper armaments industry, but it was not the sole reason, although this argument has been used as an excuse to explain

7 Paul Kennedy, Ibid., 5.


the low military profile of the Dutch in the Far East. Dutch neutrality was so ingrained and part of Dutch political culture to such an extent, that even after the Dutch became allied to Great Britain in Europe, it took almost a year before effective military liaisons were established on all levels with the British in the Far East. Nevertheless, the loss of the motherland to the Germans forced the Dutch to move from a grand strategy of unarmed neutrality to a grand strategy of armed neutrality in S.E. Asia. backed up by secret diplomacy to secure a guarantee from either Great-Britain or the United States. and secret staff conferences to prepare for close defence cooperation. It is a little paradox, that this peace-oriented country had to execute a pre-emptive military operation together with the Australians against neutral Portuguese Timor in order to prevent the Japanese being there first. This operation openly violated Portuguese neutrality and put the Dutch government in an acute crisis of conscience because of the conflict between the operational requirements of the NEI and the moral imperatives of a policy of neutrality of almost 150 years.

British grand strategy in the prewar decades could be classified as upholding the Empire - the largest in world history. It was therefore strongly based on maintenance of the status quo by deterrence executed by the Royal Navy, resulting in a foreign policy which tried to restrain those developments threatening the status quo. In the Far East those threats came from Japan and also from the Soviet Union after its consolidation in the twenties. As an upcoming imperialist power Japan challenged the Pax Britannica indirectly, by way China with its manifold British interests. So did the Soviet Union, which also shared a long common border with the Japanese after their occupation of Manchuria in the thirties. The aims of British diplomacy were to keep Japan out of S.E. Asia, to minimize Japanese economic penetration and military incursions in China, and to direct their expansionism to the North, e.g. Siberia. Normally they would have backed up this diplomacy with a formidable fleet in S.E. Asia. The British however could not provide that fleet after the Washington Conference, due to the "peace dividend" they obtained for themselves by disarming. The only exception was British India, were the British maintained a rather powerful colonial army, although that was more oriented towards the Soviet menace than towards the Japanese menace. Moreover, British India was a potential source of Empire troops, as experience in the First World War had proven. The Royal Navy was still the largest navy in the world, but very much stretched out all over the globe, and challenged not only by the Imperial Japanese Navy, but also by the Kriegsmarine and the Italian fleet. It lacked presence in both the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Therefore, British diplomacy was increasingly based on bluff, backed by secret diplomatic contacts with the U.S.A., particularly after the European reversals against the Germans in 1940. The Japanese were not to be outwitted by the bluff, however, and in the end exposed the British military weakness, which in its turn doomed the Dutch.

One of the unintended and unforeseen effects of the British lack of teeth in the Far East was an unofficial transfer of power from the United Kingdom to the United States in the Far East, a peaceful transfer which took place a few years before Britain had to yield to American Great Power politics in Europe in 1945. Only after the U.S. Government guaranteed the British possessions in the Far East at the end of 1941, did the British Government extend those guarantees to lesser powers like the Dutch and the Thai.

Australia's grand strategy was one of compliance to the support and military requirements of the world-encompassing British Empire. Its fleet was integrated into the Royal Navy, due to the doctrine of unified command at sea. The Australian Imperial Forces (AIF), together with British Indian troops were the backbone of the Imperial Forces, and therefore the AIF and the British Indian Army were deeply involved in war theatres in Greece and the Near
East and Middle East as early as 1940. Australia's war commitment and front was near Suez, and not in the Far East, and therefore Australia was very vulnerable to a Japanese military advance towards the South, but it counted on the Royal Navy and the Gibraltar of the East: Singapore. When British bluff was successfully challenged by the Japanese, the Australian government and people were shocked to find out how vulnerable they were, with most of their divisions in Egypt and their fleet in the Mediterranean. It was a shock which reverberated throughout this strongest pro-British Dominion of the whole Empire, and resulted in a gradual re-orientation of the Australians to the U.S.A. during the Pacific War. It was the U.S. Fleet, and U.S. troops, which saved Australia from Japanese occupation.

This brings us to the United States. The Grand Strategy of this potential giant between the two world wars was isolation, fed by a distrust of everything which smacked of supranational directives by the League of Nations, to which the U.S. did not belong. The Americans had disarmed even more radically than the British, resulting in a U.S. Army in the thirties which was the seventeenth in size in a worldwide comparison of armies. The same applied to the airforce, although American genius produced remarkable warplanes in the interbellum. The U.S. Navy was the only service which was rather powerful, being only slightly inferior to the Royal Navy. It was America's only trump card; but American foreign policy in the early thirties could only be qualified as quite moralistic and strongly suspicious of British aims in the Far East. Americans supported Gandhi's drive to more autonomy in British India, which did not endear them to the British. The American declaration in 1934 stating that the Philippines would be independent in 1945, spooked the Dutch in the NEI, who saw this as a clear abandonment by the United states of its imperial responsibilities in the Far East.

The colonial power in the Far East, overlooked by many historians, was France, with its sizable presence in Indochina. In French grand strategy the colonies were seen as sources of manpower, urgently needed to augment the dwindling numbers of French conscripts in stemming the German tide. The military establishment in French Indochina was therefore primarily based on raising indigenous troops for deployment in France. French foreign policy and diplomacy was aimed at keeping the Chinese out of Indochina, which in its long history had been invaded by the Chinese many times. France perceived Japanese expansionism as a severe threat only when the Japanese occupied the island of Hainan in February 1938. This island was positioned on the doorsteps of Hanoi, and its occupation by the Japanese was a rude shock to the French, who however consistently underrated the Japanese as a military force, an error which was also made by the other two European powers which confronted Japan: Great Britain and the Netherlands.

The French demise against the Germans in June 1940 changed the Vichy-French grand strategy into a strategy of naked survival aimed at maintenance of French sovereignty over its colonies at nearly all costs. This made the French very vulnerable to Japanese blackmail, which was promptly applied. Where France and the United Kingdom had closely worked together in the defence of the Far East between September 1939 and June 1940, the French armistice changed all that. The Japanese succeeded in drawing the French into their orbit, first by mediating in a fierce local conflict between French Indochina and Thailand, thereafter by promising continuing French sovereignty over Indochina against Japanese bases and jump-off points for the Singapore campaign against the British.

Challenging the local status quo in the region was a small power in S.E. Asia, namely Thailand. After a military coup had deposed the aristocratic rulers of old, Thailand under
the military dictator Pibul Songgram started a quick re-armament program, buying weapons from the Japanese and the Italians. In 1940 its defence forces were well-equipped. Like the Japanese, Thai grand strategy became one of expansionism, but this expansionism was aimed at recouping the territories lost to both the French and the British (Northern Malaya) at the end of the nineteenth century. Thai foreign policy became increasingly belligerent towards the French, as they had extracted part of Cambodia and Laos from the Thais at the end of the nineteenth century. This "terra irredenta" caused much furor within Thailand, resulting in a shooting war with the French in December 1940/January 1941. The conflict was arbitrated by the Japanese, who thereafter held far more influence at Bangkok.

Maintaining their own course were the Japanese. After a remarkable ascent in less than four decades from a rather backward Asiatic kingdom to a world power in 1905 (after the defeat of Russia), the Japanese were clearly on the path of Imperialist expansion. Korea was finally annexed in 1910, and the participation of the Japanese in the First World War resulted in them taking over Micronesia from the Germans. In the interbellum, Japanese "Grand Strategy" was economic and military expansionism, justified as the only means to avoid overpopulation and to reach economic autarky as beffited a major power. Economic expansion took place in China and Manchuria. The Japanese army of occupation in Southern Manchuria, the Kwantung Army, started a drive to occupy the whole of Manchuria, which was completed in 1934. For the Japanese Army, its primary enemy were the Russians. For the Navy, it was the United States of America. While the Army prepared for war against the Soviet Union, the Japanese naval troops by their concession in Shanghai attacked the Chinese in 1934, in order to steal the limelight from the Army which had won public admiration for its unauthorized occupation of Manchuria. With the almost automatic back-up of the Naval Staff, this resulted in deviation from its main objective, which was the U.S. Fleet. Army and Navy decided the destiny of Japan, abetted by the Meiji Constitution which forbade civilian control over defence aided by a strictly constitutionalist Emperor. Japanese foreign policy and diplomacy in the thirties were therefore strongly influenced by Army and Navy. Imperial rescripts on general education issued during the reign of Emperor Meiji had prepared the way for a very jingoistic public opinion. Japan tried to incorporate its own colonies and those of the Western powers in a Japanese-dominated Greater East-Asian co-prosperity sphere. The French consented; the Dutch however refused. The Japanese occupation of French Indochina finally resulted in an effective allied response: all Japanese assets were frozen, resulting in the imposition of an embargo on oil and oil products, in addition to other strategic raw materials. This lit the fuse of the time bomb of war, pushing Japan in a war it could not win.

The relations between the nations mentioned above were so complex because they were not balanced. In China the U.S.A and Great Britain tried to maintain the status quo, which the Japanese, the Soviets and the Chinese themselves were bent to upset to their own purposes. In Manchuria the Japanese and the Soviets confronted each other rather uneasily. Relations between Japan and the USA, Japan and Great-Britain, and Great-Britain and America were rather strained. French Indochina came into the Japanese sphere after the French collapse in 1940, and had to cede territory to an increasingly powerful Thailand. French aims were maintenance of their sovereignty at almost any cost. The Dutch in NEI were vulnerable, and - to the dismay of the Japanese - staked their future on increasing co-operation with Great Britain and the USA. The war in China was for the Japanese a war at the wrong place, and at the wrong time, due to meddling of the Navy, resulting in a shooting war which started in earnest in 1937. Trying to cut off Chinese supply lines across the seas, the Japanese conquered the whole Chinese coast, and occupied Northern Indochina, and later on Thailand and Burma too. All this is to
illustrate the complexity of international relations between those states mentioned above in the interbellum.

In order to disentangle all those numerous reciprocating influences from each other, this dissertation is built on the discussion of history, foreign policy and defence preparations by each of the nations in S.E. Asia and Japan. We have excluded chapters on China and the Soviet-Union however. (See below) Their political and military influence on the balance of power in S.E. Asia has been taken into account, however. Where applicable, cross-links have been identified between the states dealt with in separate chapters towards each other and to China and the Soviet-Union in this devilish stew of conflicting aims and feedback loops in South-East Asia.

As already stated on page 2, the main purpose of the dissertation is to compare the grand strategies with respect to the common Japanese menace by the three major western players (United States, Great Britain and France) and two smaller western players (The Netherlands and Australia) and one small oriental player (Thailand). As those grand strategies diverged considerably for all involved players, no common ground existed, and the western powers did not therefore have an effective answer to the Japanese challenge. That started changing after the commencement of the Chinese-Japanese war in July 1937 and the start of the second Presidential term for Roosevelt early that year. Roosevelt’s visionary policy resulted in a gradual awakening of the American public to the dangers beyond their own continent, and therefore resulted in a changed grand strategy which evolved after the loss of France in June 1940, committing America’s might to a global strategy to combat fascism and militarism. The changes in grand strategy by all powers involved happened specifically in the two years after the start of war in Europe. Their mutual relations is one of the subjects of this study. In the course of this study, we will try to answer the question why the Dutch failed to get a military guarantee for their rich possessions in the Far East from the British and later from the Americans.

In order to limit the scope of the study, I have decided not to take into account in a systematic way the grand strategies of countries like the Soviet-Union and China, both of which exerted strong influences on the destabilisation of the Far Eastern status quo after the end of the First World War. Both powers, however, will be dealt with in their relations with Japan. The same applies to New Zealand. That small Dominion at times exerted influence on western defence politics in the Far East far in excess of her importance. New Zealand will be dealt with in relation to Australia and Great Britain. Another dominion which rapidly gained importance after the defeat of the democracies in Western Europe was India. The role of India in the British Imperial Forces will be highlighted in the chapter on Great Britain. None of the four countries mentioned, however, will be given a separate chapter in this study, as then it would become unwieldy. Moreover, all four countries mentioned are peripheral with respect to S.E. Asia, resulting in another very important reason not to include them systematically in this dissertation.

Originally the objective of the study was to limit the research to the war plans and their contingencies of the western powers facing the Japanese menace. It turned out, that primary sources on these plans were hard to get, specifically for the Netherlands and the NEI due to the wholesale destruction of military archives in both The Netherlands and the NEI during the war. The situation is better with respect to British, Australian and American war plans. In the respective state archives much detailed planning is available for research, and has already been partly described in books and other secondary sources. (See the Bibliography) Alas, after the war archivists in both the United Kingdom and the
U.S.A. after the war considered primary documents on military relations with lesser powers like the Dutch less significant than those dealing with more important allies, which again resulted in the loss of many valuable primary resources on these co-operative aspects. Writing a study based on such incomplete sources did not look very promising. Consequently, I decided to turn the core of the dissertation from only military plans and interrelations between the Western Powers in S.E. Asia towards an inclusive study of their foreign policy and diplomacy, and the way in which these were supported by their military capabilities. This study therefore evolved into an integrated comparative diplomatic and military history of S.E. Asia during the interbellum. Much primary source material on the diplomatic side of this history is available in Dutch, British, American and Australian state archives.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. For each country a short introduction on its history is given in order to place the grand strategy of that particular state in its historical context. This is followed by an analysis of the interbellum foreign policy and resultant diplomacy with respect to Japan and the other colonial powers present in S.E. Asia. An analysis is then made of defence requirements versus capabilities, as codified in war plans and war contingencies. Each chapter on a specific power closes with conclusions and a summary.

The arrangement of the chapters has been rather arbitrarily chosen. As the Japanese menace was the common factor for all western powers, it could be argued that the character of Japanese foreign policy and military preparedness should be discussed first, after which the reactions and preparations of the western powers would follow. The same could be said of the most important colonial empire in existence at that time, that of Great Britain. I have chosen however to start the study with the United States, which in hindsight at least was the dominant power of the whole 20th century. Then British foreign and military policies are discussed with respect to S.E. Asia, followed by the Dutch and the Australian policies. This sequence follows that of ABDA-Command, which is of course no coincidence.

In a separate chapter the French and Thai interrelations and their involvement with Japan will be discussed. It was the Japanese occupation of southern French Indochina, bringing Singapore and the Dutch oil fields within striking range, that started the western embargo of Japan, and with that the inexorable slide towards the Pacific War. The last country-oriented chapter will be therefore on Japan, the challenger of the comfortable colonial status quo in S.E. Asia.

The results of the research into each of those powers is presented in a concluding chapter. As this is a comparative study, I hope to present underlying commonalities and differences in diplomatic and defence posture of the powers concerned, subject to limitations in time to the interwar period and in space to South-East Asia. This comparative study is intended to provide answers to questions, such as the one on the effectiveness of the ground troops in each case. Another question is whether the war in Europe - and specifically the German Blitzkrieg in Poland - did indeed change the doctrines and plans of the military in the respective colonies.

As the western powers and Japan met each other at a number of important international Conferences in the interwar years, it was a matter of expediency as to which chapter should include such international meetings and their consequences. I have chosen a geographical perspective. The Naval Disarmament Conference at Washington in 1921 - 1922 for example will be covered extensively in the chapter dealing with the United States.
The follow-on Naval Disarmament Conferences in London in 1930 and 1935 however will be dealt with in the chapter on Great Britain, as will the very important secret Staff Conferences in Singapore between all western powers in S.E. Asia. The important Japanese economic missions to the NEI will be discussed in the chapter on the Dutch, but the even more important diplomatic discussions after the imposition of the oil embargo will be covered in the chapter on the United States. There will therefore be many cross-references between the respective chapters, as can be expected in a comparative multinational study like this one.

The study is aimed at an international audience of fellow historians, who have a general understanding of the general history of the powers concerned and on what went on during the interbellum, but who are unfamiliar with more specific historical details. As it is both a diplomatic and a military history of that period, it is hoped that those historians who have specialized in one of those subjects may find the dissertation stimulating. I have tried to make the study interesting for lay readers to read too, who have a general interest in S.E. Asia at that time of history.

This study is primarily a diplomatic and military study. It is obvious however that economic factors played an important role too. One has only to consider the nefarious influence of the Great Depression on all countries discussed, although some countries were hit harder than others. The economic paradigm of the interwar years was market protection, and this meant that colonies were not only viewed as parts of the respective empires, but also as markets for the exportable part of each state's industrial production.

The decade of the thirties saw the consolidation of the British Empire into one big market, protected from cheap imports from the outside by high tariff walls. This one market included the Pacific Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. Another large, but protected market, was formed by the United States of America and its possessions including the Philippines. The Americans demanded, however, free access to the Chinese market, which was contested by the British and the Japanese. The other large Empire, France, also constituted one market with its colonies. French Indochina's trade therefore was strongly oriented towards imports and exports from and to France, with crude oil and refined oil products being the exception, as these were imported from the NEI.

The Japanese formed a Yen-bloc with Korea, Manchuria, Formosa and parts of China under their control. Their ultimate goal was to obtain complete autarky, in order to be able to avoid being dependent on strategic raw materials under the control of potential enemy states, like the United States and Great Britain. In order to accomplish that, the NEI had to be absorbed into the Greater East-Asia co-prosperity sphere together with French Indochina and Thailand. We will analyze why the Japanese ultimately failed in attaining this goal by peaceful means, resulting in a shift to the military conquest of these areas.

The territory in S.E. Asia which suffered most from the Depression were the NEI. The Dutch had always maintained a careful "Open Door" policy towards western investors. As the Dutch market was too small to absorb the NEI agrarian export products, the colony only prospered, as long as it could export its products to American, Japanese and European markets. Therefore the colony suffered terribly when these traditional export markets erected high tariff walls. As the defence estimates for NEI defence were largely paid by the NEI government, defence budgets had to be cut severely. This partly explains the parlous state of Dutch defence of the NEI around 1935.
Economic considerations were also fundamental in shaping re-armament policies in the Far East, Japan being the sole exception. During the thirties Japan invested more than half of its total yearly estimates in defence: warships, planes, tanks. It had developed a truly national defence industry, which made it independent of eventual adversaries. Australia was busily building up its own defence industry, but had also access to the weapons production facilities in the U.K. The same applied to Indochina.

The situation was however rather different in the NEI. The Defence establishment in the NEI traditionally had bought its weapons from Germany and Austria. In the early thirties the economic slump resulted in a reduction of funds for armament purchases. At the end of the thirties, when the economy picked up speed, the two main supplier countries were lost to NEI weapons purchases, which had to shop around to obtain the scraps which other re-arming countries allowed it to purchase. In other words, the Dutch realised too late, that the NEI needed their own industrial base to produce weapons for the Dutch colonial army and ships for the navy.

In addition to the economic factors mentioned above, there are a number of recurrent themes in the chapters dealing with individual powers. Some of these themes will be identified in this foreword in short, in order to enable the reader to recognize them when he reads this study.

A recurrent issue in the Grand Strategies under comparison is the Western power’s vision on the future of their colonies, and the consequences regarding the use of indigenous troops for defence of colonial territories. Great Britain for example saw British India as the storehouse of imperial manpower, and consequently raised Indian divisions, based on volunteers, which fought with distinction at the Egyptian and Ethiopian fronts and in Syria and Iraq. It is known, that Churchill was afraid of too large an Indian Army, as the country was yearning for the day of reckoning with the British. The British needed Indian manpower, but at that time they were unwilling to pay the price of colonial independence.

In its colonies, France also raised many hands in its colonies, who were then shipped to France as auxiliary troops. Like the British, the French also employed indigenous officers, some of whom had already attained an elevated rank, but the French upheld the illusion of a holy Union between France and its colonies even stronger than the British. No independence therefore for Indochina.

The United States had sent their chief of staff, General Douglas MacArthur, to the Philippines in order to set up an independent Philippine defence establishment. The U.S. were the only western power, which had openly declared that within ten years from 1935, the Philippines would be completely independent. It proved to be a wise decision, for the Filipino soldiers were the only ones in S.E. Asia who, following the Japanese conquest, started a lively guerilla against the Japanese.

The Dutch government distrusted deeply the potential for indigenous uprisings, dating back to Diponegoro and the disastrous Java War of 1825 - 1830. The Dutch colonial army however consisted of almost 70 % Javanese and other indigenous forces, who with only a few exceptions could not attain a rank higher than that of non-commissioned officer. The colonial army was used as an internal instrument of suppression, and as will be covered in the appropriate chapter, handled critical situations efficiently, avoiding mutinies in the rank and file. There was enough manpower available in Java to form a sizable Army, but such an army would have been able to revolt against the Dutch colonial masters, so the Dutch
left the situation as it was. It will be argued, that this official distrust contrasted sharply to
the universal Dutch belief in the loyalty of their indigenous subjects towards the Government
and the Queen. It has to be pointed out here, that this belief exerted powerful
influence even after the Japanese capitulation. The Dutch government believed earnestly,
that by rounding up the nationalists who had collaborated with the Japanese, the indige-
nous peoples would in fact welcome the pre-war Pax Neerlandica.

Another recurrent theme in this study is that of racism eq ethnocentrism. Western feelings
of superiority were rampant in the early years of the twentieth century, and racism
permeated the thinking about the capabilities of e.g. the Japanese Army and Navy, but
also of the performance of indigenous troops. Racial discrimination was the norm in all
western colonies, with a scale running from blatant discrimination in the British colonies via
paternalistic discrimination in the NEI to subtle discrimination in French Indochina. In no
way was discrimination limited to the western powers only; the Japanese discriminated
against the Chinese, Koreans and Taiwanese. The Japanese elite did not so much
discriminate against Westerners, but underestimated their staying power. They overestima-
ted Japanese spiritual superiority over the West however, with disastrous consequences
because Japanese leaders were unable to make rational decisions about peace or war.
Therefore, ethnocentrism and even racism on both sides was to characterize the upcoming
struggle between Japan and the western powers.

Yet another theme in the country chapters is that of Intelligence. Tactical Intelligence about
the capabilities of the Japanese war machine was lacking on the western side, also
because the western powers cherished preconceived racist-coloured images about the
Japanese. The American Intelligence services were the most realistic at estimating
Japanese capabilities, but both the English and French intelligence communities badly
misjudged the Japanese.

On the other hand, the Japanese Intelligence community was very well informed about all
aspects of colonial life, the weapons and morale of the indigenous and western colonial
troops, the military and naval units and their movements. They also estimated the degree
of loyalty, which the western masters could expect from their colonial servants, more
realistically. It was far less than the colonial administrators themselves expected. But the
Japanese lacked insight into the logistics of war and specifically into potential industrial
capacity. Their leaders badly misjudged the Chinese opposition to them in the thirties, and
made a fatal error in judging the Americans who had enormous potential industrial
capacity. Racial preconceptions made them also unaware or at least insensitive towards
the differences between the British, French and Dutch on one side and the Americans on
the other side. What each side knew about the other in terms of defence capabilities and
potential will be covered in all country chapters.

A common factor in all chapters is the drift toward war, due to a thousand different
influences. Nevertheless, this drift was not unavoidable. It is be made clear, however, that
in the last year of peace all parties concerned made serious errors, which hastened the
onset of war, which the Western powers at least had hoped to avoid for six more months
at the minimum. Describing these errors of judgment will bring into the open the extensive
role played by fallible humans in the unfolding drama. Many diplomats and defence
commanders blundered, and their way of reasoning will be discussed, illustrating that not
all of those errors were clearly discernible at that time. The people I have in mind are the
Japanese side people like Hirota, Konoye, the Emperor, Tojo and Yamamoto on the
Japanese side. On the western side personalities like Roosevelt, Churchill, Cordell Hull,
Stanley Hornbeck and their role in shaping policies and military developments is covered.

As this is also a diplomatic history, I have dealt rather extensively with the diplomats and consular officers who represented their countries. I have observed from my point of view, that most western diplomats based in Tokyo had a far better grasp of Japanese policy than their superiors in their capitals, and this observation is also valid for most of the Japanese diplomats and their superiors. Empathy for another nation's angle of view indeed decreased with distance proportionally at that point in time.

Summarizing, this study covers the diplomatic and military events which shaped the history of the interbellum in S.E. Asia, and tries to explain in a rational manner why things happened as they did. It ends with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which transformed the war at that moment into a real world war - the war which was called World War II and which has determined the twentieth century more than any other war of that violent century.