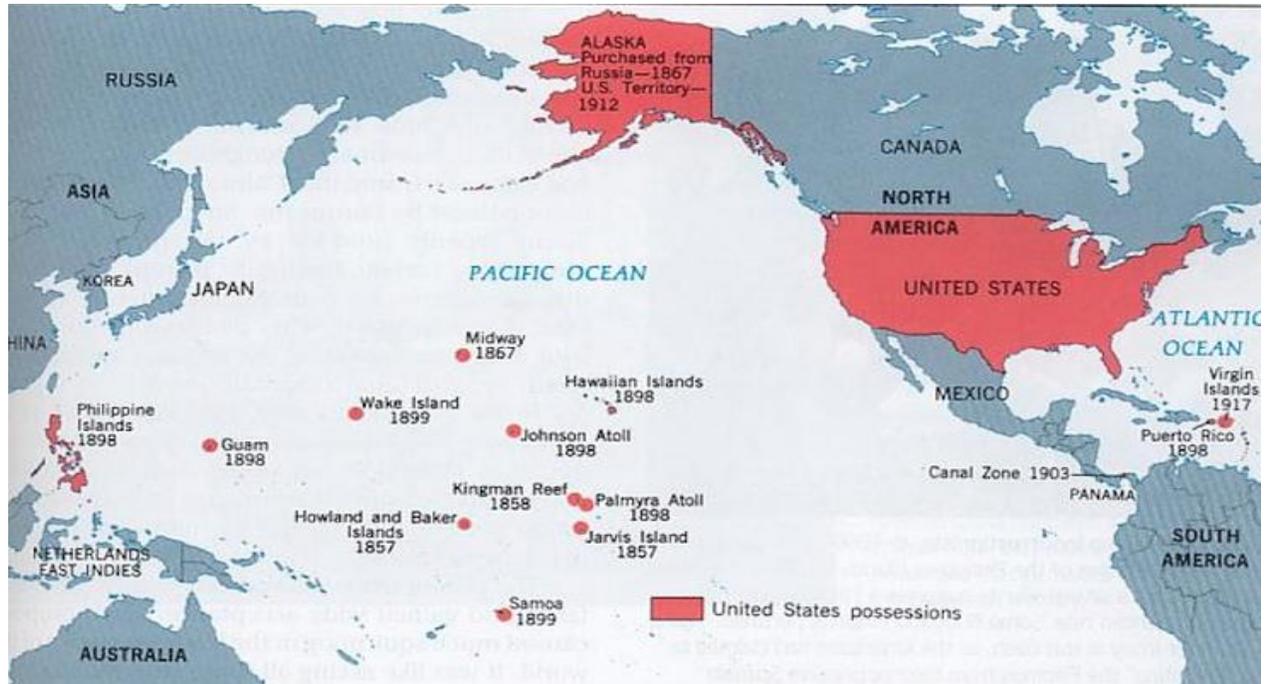


An abridged form of this essay appeared as 'German War Plans in the Pacific, 1900-1914, *The Historian* (Michigan State University Press), Vol.60, No.3, Spring 1998.

## 13 German naval planning against the USA in Asia



*'The aim of the Cruiser Squadron's advance against the west coast of the United States is firstly to prevent naval forces in East Asia and possibly also those of the west coast from proceeding to the Atlantic to unite with their battle fleet...'*<sup>1</sup>

The above quote puts into clear perspective the wider world-political strategic aims of German naval planning in the event of war against the United States. It is ironic that the current relations of the principal nations involved in Asia to each other bear many of the attributes of the European balance-of-power system of the nineteenth century. Any significant increase in strength by one of them is almost certain to evoke an offsetting manoeuvre by the others. The stability of the Asia-Pacific region and the underpinning of its prosperity is the consequence of an equilibrium which will need increasingly careful and deliberate tending in the current political climate. One may well ask what relevance events of a century ago have for today. The future of American sea power still turns on the US Navy's ability to exercise ready access to East Asia. As in the past, America's strategic gaze is still fixed squarely on the maritime eastern hemisphere.

The historian Paul Kennedy observed that the study of operational planning before 1914 is of particular importance because it was the first time that war plans were formulated in a systematic manner in peacetime.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the rationale of action against the trade and ports of the North American west coast as the second arm of a pincer movement

<sup>1</sup> German Federal Military Archive, Freiburg, (Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, hereafter BA-MA), RM5/v 885, 'Zum Immediatvortrag. Stand der Operationsarbeiten', 14 February 1903.

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Kennedy (Ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 1-2.

in tandem with operations against the United States east coast; and against Canadian trade and ports primarily in a war with Great Britain, but also in war with the USA alone.<sup>3</sup> The German aim was to hold American naval forces in the Pacific and stop them reuniting with the Atlantic fleet to oppose a German attack against America's east coast. Was conflict a reality? German involvement both in Latin America and its actions in Asia caused the United States considerable apprehension.

It is important to set the background context to the prewar issues at play. Following the thesis that imperial Germany was focused less on external issues prior to 1914 in order to concentrate fully on continental politics is not valid.<sup>4</sup> The entry of Imperial Germany onto the world stage was the result of cold Wilhelmine calculation. It was generally believed that only states of continental scale had any chance of holding their own as great powers in the twentieth century.



The American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan<sup>5</sup> put a relevant twist on this view but it was in any case clear from immediate history that it was far easier to build empires outside Europe than within it. German naval planners were deeply influenced by his view that maritime commerce decisively influenced the wealth and fate of nations. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890) influenced German Naval Secretary Alfred Tirpitz and was translated by the Navy Office and distributed widely. According to Mahan, Britain, Germany, and the United States were entering the final phase of a struggle for economic supremacy. Mahan's concept of sea power extended beyond naval superiority; that in peace time, states should increase production and shipping capacities, acquire overseas possessions, either colonies or privileged access to foreign markets.<sup>6</sup> This put the United States on a collision course with similar German aims in Asia.

<sup>3</sup> 'Operationsplan III', conceived by successive Admiralty Chiefs Otto von Diederichs and Wilhelm Büchsel in cooperation with the Chief of the Army General Staff Alfred Graf von Schlieffen and formulated 1898-1906, in its final version anticipated a full naval advance via the Azores and West Indies to attack New York or Boston. Holger Herwig & David Trask, "Naval Operations Plans between Germany and the United States of America 1898-1913", *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 2/1970, 17.

<sup>4</sup> For this thesis. see Andreas Hillgruber. 'Zwischen Hegemonie und Weltpolitik: Das Problem der Kontinuität von Bismarck bis Bethmann Hollweg' ('Between hegemony and world politics: The problem of continuity from Bismarck to Bethmann Hollweg'), in *Das kaiserliche Deutschland*, Ed. Michael Stürmer (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1976), 187-204. A subsequent interpretation is in Charles Stephenson, *Germany's Asia-Pacific empire: colonialism and naval policy, 1885-1914* (Rochester N.Y: Boydell Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Mahan founded the Naval War College in Newport and wrote a number of books based on the theme of naval power in history Mahan's basic idea was that to remain great and strong in an ever more competitive world, America needed a powerful maritime force, both naval and commercial, and an overseas infrastructure of naval bases and coaling stations to support an increased fleet.

<sup>6</sup> Philip A. Crowl, 'Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian,' in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, Eds. *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (1986), 451, 460. The post-1898 period marked the triumph of the Mahanian conception of seapower and command of the sea as the basic strategic foundation of American naval policy. It was fully accepted by the Navy, the Executive, Congress, and an eager public and press.

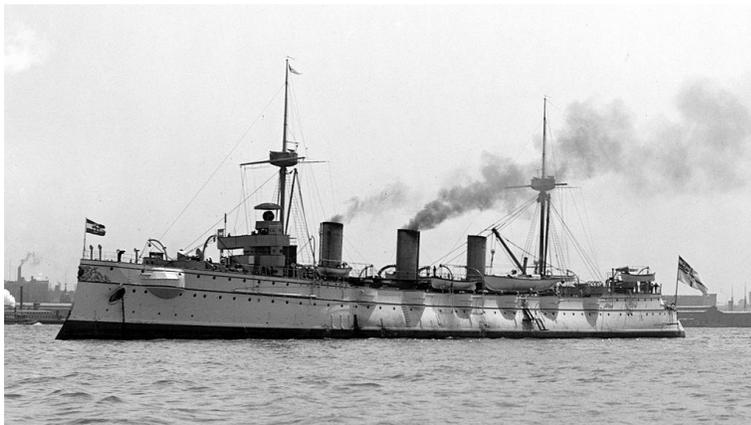


Why was the United States so interested in the Asia-Pacific? It had always been driven by the idea of 'manifest destiny' which was at first the idea that the USA was to expand over the whole continent of North America. While Canada and Mexico seemed blocked to further expansion, with the reaching of the western frontier the impulse to further expansion spilled out into the Pacific and onward into Asia. Mahan's ideas, which dovetailed with the notions of social Darwinism, were not the only ideas that propelled Americans' thoughts beyond their borders. The culmination of this newly evolving American foreign policy was a renewed confidence in the essential idea of an expanded Monroe Doctrine—that the United States was the gate keeper and protector of the Western Hemisphere. Many Americans, including expansionist President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-9) and Secretary of State Elihu Root<sup>7</sup>, felt that to safeguard its own interests, the United States had to stake out spheres of economic influence as well. That view was seconded by a powerful naval lobby, which called for an expanded fleet and network of overseas ports as essential to the economic and political security of the nation. From the beginning, the German Admiralty Staff was concerned about the expansion of American power into the Pacific and East Asia where the United States was a rival to Germany's own economic and political aims.



*The US 'Great White Fleet'  
which was enthusiastically welcomed in Australia, 1910*

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of War 1899-1904, Secretary of State 1905-9.



'Kaiserin Augusta' in New York, 1893

Holger Herwig made an extensive early analysis of pre-1914 planning by the German Navy against the U.S. Atlantic seaboard.<sup>8</sup> This paper extends the theme by focusing on strategy devised for warfare in the Asia-Pacific region. Decades before the outbreak of World War I, Germany, the United States, Britain, and Japan were already on a collision course in the Pacific. In the rush to acquire colonies, Japan laid claim to Taiwan in 1894 and Korea in 1910, and Germany acquired a forced lease on the Chinese mainland in Kiautschau in 1898 where it developed the major naval base of Tsingtau<sup>9</sup> and purchased the Marshall and Caroline Islands from Spain in 1899. The United States also had longstanding commercial interests in China<sup>10</sup> and the Pacific. Making the journey to China and maintaining the US presence there also required a network of ports extending across the Pacific, and the China trade soon compelled the United States to expand its presence throughout the region. In 1898 it gained the Philippines after the Spanish American War and annexed the Hawaiian Islands in 1898. Germany viewed these developments with increasing concern. There was a pressing need, as viewed from the German Admiralty, for a permanent base in the Pacific area to accommodate the vessels of the East Asian Cruiser Division, as it was then known.<sup>11</sup> The *Washington Post* commented in 1898 that the German Empire was 'prosecuting a scheme in direct opposition to our national policy...it has always promoted colonisation with the ulterior design of territorial acquisition'.<sup>12</sup> The role America might play was noted early. Ambassador Paul von Hatzfeldt in London commented with some foresight in 1889 that 'The monetary surplus in the American treasury makes possible an almost unlimited increase in naval forces which...could play a part in a possible European conflict'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Holger Herwig, *The Politics of Frustration. The United States in German Naval Planning 1889-1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); a consideration is Friedrich Forstmeier, 'Deutsche Invasionspläne gegen die USA um 1900', *Marine-Rundschau*, Bd. 68, 1979, 344-351.

<sup>9</sup> The German spellings for Jiaozhou and Qingdao have been retained here.

<sup>10</sup> The United States negotiated the Treaty of Wangxia with the Chinese Government as early as 1844, and soon thereafter US ministers and consuls took up residence in Beijing and port cities.

<sup>11</sup> A precursor to this force had been formed in the early 1880s, and its importance had grown commensurate with the acquisition of colonial territories. It became a permanently constituted unit in September 1894 following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.

<sup>12</sup> German Foreign Office Archive Bonn, (Politisches Archiv im Auswärtigen Amt, heratfter PA-AA) R17407, *Washington Post*, 27 November 1898, encl. Bericht A253, 29 November 1898.

<sup>13</sup> PA-AA, R17 407, Hatzfeldt-Bismarck, 1 February 1889.



American cartoon putting Germany on notice. It had already been undermining Spanish rule in the Philippines with an aim to acquisition by supporting Tagalog rebels. <http://muntingnayon.com/100/100965/index.php>

The United States now held a strategic advantage in the southeast Asian and central Pacific region through its possessions in the Philippines and Hawaii. As Germany also sought to expand its commercial and naval presence in the Pacific, Captain Baron von Lüttwitz of the General Staff took to heart Mahan's dictum that 'Naval strategy may win victories even in peace-time by the acquisition of local bases on foreign shores.' Further, Lüttwitz' recommendation for 'the destruction of the enemy's depots and the base[s] at home' - meaning on the US pacific coast- was incorporated into detailed planning.<sup>14</sup>

German naval operational planning against both the western and eastern United States seaboards is complemented by cruiser warfare<sup>15</sup> which was to be carried out by the East Asian Squadron based at Tsingtau.<sup>16</sup> With the emphasis on battleship construction for an expected clash with Britain in the North Sea, why did the German Navy devote so much effort to wartime planning for the Asian-Pacific region - which included the extension of operations to the North American Pacific coast? The German documents expressly state that the merchant trade of Britain, its Empire and allies would be a prime wartime target. There was absolutely no doubt in the minds of German planners that an attack on American and Canadian merchant shipping and port facilities was both feasible and essential. In tandem with similar plans against Australasian trade through Suez, and in South American<sup>17</sup> waters, the aim was to disrupt the British economy by the interdiction of raw materials and foodstuffs, and cause social unrest which would force the British Government to negotiate

<sup>14</sup> Captain Baron von Lüttwitz, 'German Naval policy and Strategy', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (March 1897): 322, 326. Concentration was on 'the destruction of the enemy's dépôts and the base at home as the principal or as a collateral object'. *Ibid.*, 322. In 1900, Lüttwitz was seconded from the General Staff to the Admiralty Staff in a liaison capacity, and it can be assumed he had considerable insight into overall strategic aims and tactical planning.

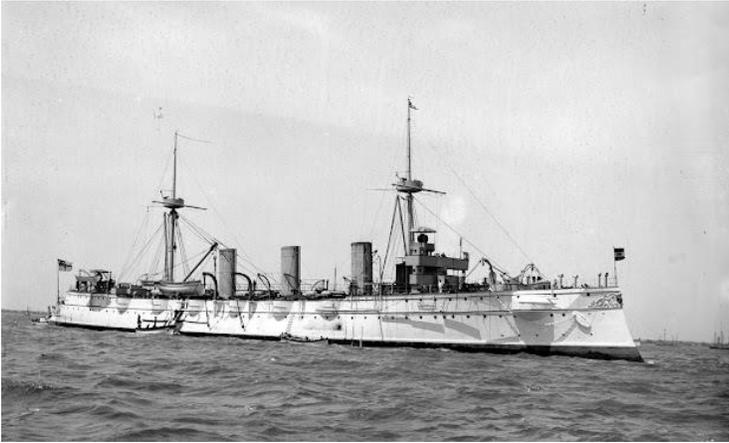
<sup>15</sup> The term *Kreuzerkrieg* can be translated both as cruiser and commerce warfare, since the sinking of merchant shipping and the interdiction of trade routes to Britain from its sources of supply latter was the Navy's prime function in the Asian-Pacific region.

<sup>16</sup> Ivo Lambi touches on it briefly in *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862-1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 233-5, 409-10.

<sup>17</sup> Britain was particularly dependent on meat imports from Argentina at this time. Similarly with wool, grain, and minerals from Australia. See R. J. Hammond, 'British Food Supplies, 1914-1939', *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1946), 1-14 .

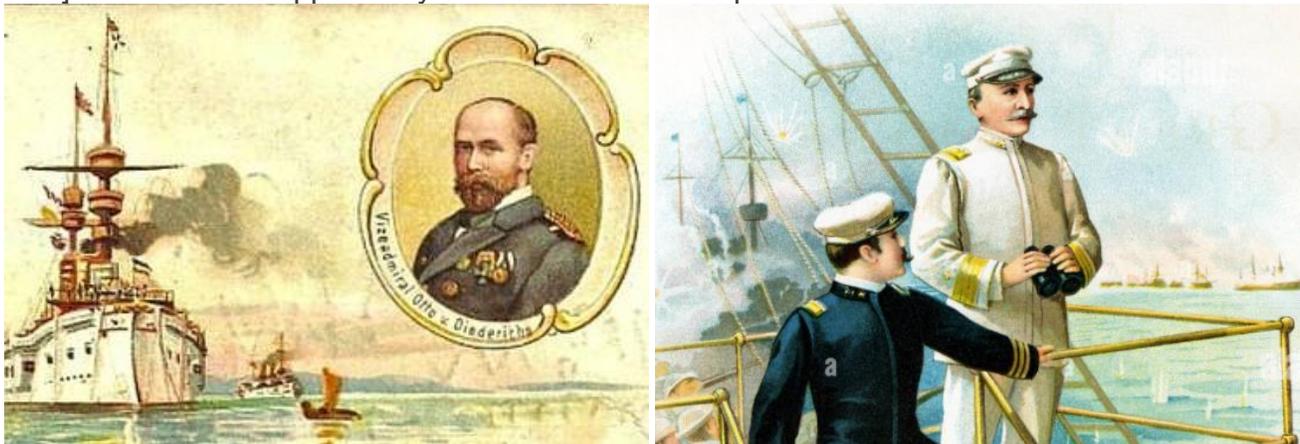
on terms acceptable to Germany.<sup>18</sup> Thus German activity in the Asia-Pacific region is placed in a world-political context of significance.

## A Clash of Interests in the Pacific



*SMS Kaiserin Augusta, flagship of Vice-Admiral Otto von Diederich's Squadron confronting the American Navy under Admiral Dewey in Manila Bay, 1898.*

Germany had objected to the American annexation of Hawaii in 1898 as the nullification of all Hawaiian treaties was regarded as a threat to German interests. German shipping needed maritime bases in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and dispute over such possessions brought Germany into contention with the United States over Hawaii, Samoa, and the Philippines. Foreign Secretary Bernhard von Bülow believed that possession of the Philippines would determine control of Far Eastern waters, and in 1898 Admiral Eduard von Knorr elaborated in detail the Admiralty Staff's interest in obtaining at least a foothold there. Kaiser Wilhelm II emphasized that the 'main object of German policy [toward the Philippines was] is to leave no opportunity unused ... for the acquisition of maritime bases.'<sup>19</sup>



Ongoing tension over Samoa created a residue of ill-feeling towards the United States which grew and culminated in the famous 1898 encounter between Squadron Commander Otto von Diederichs, later German Admiralty Chief and Admiral George Dewey in Manila Bay.

<sup>18</sup> BAMA, RM47/v 525, Admiralty report of 9 November 1914.

<sup>19</sup> Bülow to Kaiser, 14 May 1898, in J. Lepsius, A. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, F. Thimme, Eds., *Die Große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871-1914: Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes* (Berlin, 1922-6), (hereafter GP), vol. 15 (Berlin, 1924), Nr. 4145; Bülow to Hatzfeldt, 18 May 1898, GP, vol. 15, Nr. 4146; 'Anlage betreffend Flottenstützpunkte ...' 1 July 1898; PA-AA R2533; Bülow to Holleben, 1 July 1898, with Kaiser's marginal note; GP, vol. 14, pt. 1, Nr. 4151.

Bülow believed that whoever controlled the Philippines controlled Far Eastern waters.<sup>20</sup> Effective use of commerce destroyers required dispersion, which necessitated overseas ports where they could coal, arm, and seek refuge

In 1903, the historian Ernst Francke railed against the American attempt to achieve a trade monopoly in both Americas while also attempting to control the Pacific, 'the Mediterranean of the future', where great decisions of world policy would be made.<sup>21</sup> Germany's interests in these regions were seen to be menaced by American competition. Conversely, American concerns about German intentions had two clear aspects: penetration into Central and particularly South America; and German designs on positions in Asia which were considered essential to American economic expansion and strategic security.<sup>22</sup> The Pacific was seen as the new resource-rich area of exploitation for the expanding American economy. Its industry demanded supplies of metals such as manganese, tungsten, antimony, tin, nickel and chromium, which were found around the Pacific rim, and this combined with trade and commercial investment, particularly in China, brought a convergence of economic and political interests between Germany and America.<sup>23</sup> In the view of the *New York Times*, 'Germany seeks with the fiercest earnestness three things...colonies, sea power, and foreign commerce'.<sup>24</sup>

There were also purely strategic interests. In his 1909 book, *The Coming Struggle in Eastern Asia*, B. L. Putnam Weale stressed the 'tremendous importance of the question of mastery of the Pacific': 'The United States...must place on the Pacific waters the marine equivalent of steel rails-war ships and merchant vessels in large numbers.'<sup>25</sup> While the public German attitude towards the United States was 'effusively cordial', as exemplified in the 1902 visit to the USA of the Kaiser's brother Admiral Prince Heinrich, below the surface the two nations 'were engaged in a bloodless but desperate contest over policies and enterprises which...seems bound to culminate in a conflict.' The announcement of a permanent German West American Station in 1902 was seen as 'the next step...toward the acquisition of naval bases' and caused considerable unrest in naval circles given the existing concern about what the Germans planned with their East American Station. German designs on Asia were also threatening to American economic expansion and strategic security. America had to be made completely secure in the Pacific, and 'an absolute naval mastery there is consequently the first thing which should be aimed at.'<sup>26</sup> A clash of German-American interests now seemed inevitable. It was a short-sighted observer indeed 'who does not see in these powerful German squadrons, patrolling the American continent on the East and West, the possible fore-token of momentous eventualities.'<sup>27</sup> Conversely, naval strategist Vice-Admiral Curt von Maltzahn observed in 1912 that the German merchant marine was a thorn in the Americans' eye, and they certainly would hope to be its heirs should an unfortunate war sweep it from the sea.<sup>28</sup> In Washington, Ambassador

<sup>20</sup> GP, Vol. XV, No. 4145, Bülow-Kaiser, 14 May 1898.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Francke, 'Weltpolitik und Seemacht', *Nauticus* (Berlin, 1903), 143.

<sup>22</sup> See A. T. Mahan, 'The Monroe Doctrine', *The National Review*, February 1903, 871f.

<sup>23</sup> Discussed in the report by Commodore G. W. Melville, *Senate Documents* (Series 3600), 55th Congress, Second Session, No. 188, 14 March 1898, 3-33.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, 9 September 1902, PA-AA, R17407, encl. Bericht A322, 23 September 1902, 24.

<sup>25</sup> B. L. Putnam Weale, *The Coming Struggle in Eastern Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 613.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.

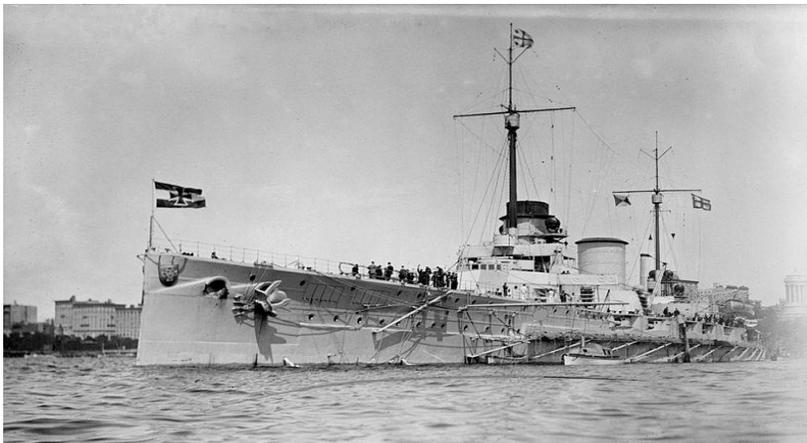
<sup>27</sup> *Army and Navy Journal*, 18 October 1902, 161.

<sup>28</sup> Vize-Admiral Frhr. von Maltzahn, 'Seestrategie in ihren Beziehungen zur Landstrategie nach englisch-amerikanischem Urteil', *Marine-Rundschau*, Heft 7, 1912, 884. Maltzahn became a protagonist of the opposition to Alfred von Tirpitz. Although he wanted to break Britain's supremacy at sea, as a tactical expert he considered the armament with a strong battle fleet propagated by Tirpitz to be wrong and supported the establishment of a cruiser fleet that could have been done more quickly and more cheaply.

Theodor von Holleben was instructed to emphasize the advantages of cooperation with Germany, which could function 'only on the basis of mutual considerations in questions such as coaling stations, maritime bases, and the like.'<sup>29</sup>

American Pacific commerce was extensive, estimated at some \$300 million by 1901.<sup>30</sup> Here China came increasingly into the equation. American commercial penetration there now also meant that the United States and Germany would be economic rivals. Germany had specific and far-reaching plans for Shantung Province from its foothold in Kiautschau, and had significant financial influence over Russian development in Manchuria. Major-General Arthur MacArthur regarded the doctrine of the Pan-Germans as 'being fostered and propagated by the imperial Government in every possible way' throughout the world. He predicted 'a war in the immediate future between the United States and Germany, and that the principal scene of the fighting would be in the Pacific Ocean...'<sup>31</sup>

Given that the American annexation of the Philippines remained long in German memory, others believed that Germany would attack the islands as their capture would enable the United States to be expelled from the Asian market.<sup>32</sup> At this time the American Navy in the Pacific comprised just four armoured cruisers capable of facing their German counterparts. It was clear to many Americans that the Philippines 'lie practically at the mercy of the first comer.' A powerful American battle fleet ploughing Asian waters would provide insurance against catastrophe, and the element which would create a new balance of power.<sup>33</sup> This is precisely what Germany sought to prevent.



*SMS Moltke in New York, 1912*

## German Planning to 1910

A remarkable aspect of overall German considerations at this time was the broad scale on which simultaneous undertakings were to be conducted. German planners envisioned several alternative war situations. In the years between the Spanish-American War and 1914, in Asia it was not Japan but Germany which became the prime potential opponent in the eyes of the US Navy. German naval plans for cruiser warfare against the USA can be traced to a study of March 1889 after the Samoan dispute, which developed into ongoing

<sup>29</sup> Bülow to Kaiser, 14 May 1898, GP, vol. 15, no. 4145; Bülow to Hatzfeldt, 18 May 1898, *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. 15, no. 4146; 'Anlage betreffend Flottenstützpunkte ...,' 1 July 1898, PA-AA Berlin, R2533; Bülow to Holleben, 1 July 1898, with Kaiser's marginal note, *ibid.*, vol. 14, pt. 1, no. 4151.

<sup>30</sup> Weale, 613.

<sup>31</sup> 'General MacArthur's Fear of War with Germany', *New York Times*, 11 December 1903, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Debate on the Naval Appropriation Bill for 1905, *Congressional Record*, Vol. 38, Pt. 3, 3 March 1904, 2732-3.

<sup>33</sup> Debate on the Naval Appropriation Bill for 1905, 3 March 1904, *Congressional Record*, 58th Cong., 2d sess., 38, pt. 3: 2732-3.

operational planning. An important corollary to the main war in Europe and the Atlantic would be harassment of British and American commercial shipping in the Pacific by the German East Asian Squadron.<sup>34</sup>



Operational planning for Asia and the northeastern Pacific had a direct supporting relationship to major operations against the Atlantic coast. In March 1903, Chief of Admiralty Staff Wilhelm Büchsel informed the Kaiser that

There can be only *one* objective for Germany's war strategy: direct pressure on the American east coast...a merciless offensive designed to confront the American people with an *unbearable* situation through the dissemination of terror and through damaging enemy trade and property.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed in 1903 the Americans considered, a full German attack against the Philippines as possible.<sup>36</sup> In Operationsplan III, formulated between 1898 and 1906, Büchsel and Diederichs, in cooperation with Chief of the Army General Staff Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, anticipated a full naval advance across the Atlantic via the Azores and West Indies to attack New York or Boston. The East Asian Squadron's main function was to keep its American counterpart occupied in the Philippine region to prevent it rejoining the Atlantic fleet, while the German expedition was attacking strategic points on the east coast. This was changed in 1903 because the United States was expected to strengthen its forces in Asia by five battleships, which now required the Cruiser Squadron to emphasise operations along the American Pacific coast.<sup>37</sup> Here trade and ports were particularly vulnerable. The 'throng of richly laden but helpless vessels will present to the enemy a noble field for attack by the *guerre de course*...'<sup>38</sup> In 1913 the Squadron Chief, Vice Admiral Maximilian Graf von Spee, observed that in the Pacific, the permanent stationing of a warship off the Mexican coast was intended to provide a position against the United States, '...the despatch of a few ships serves to indicate how we stand on the matter.'<sup>39</sup>

In the 1903 Operational Plan, the recent strengthening of the American Asian Squadron, particularly with battleships (Büchsel believed five, of which three were actually present) in his assessment made the existing orders to engage American forces at the Philippines

<sup>34</sup> Admiralty Report, 9 November 1914, RM47/v 525.

<sup>35</sup> BA-MA, Nachlaß Büchsel, N168, Bd. 8, "Zum Immediatvortrag", 21 March 1903, 12-14, in Herwig, *Politics of Frustration*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Navy Yard, Washington DC, War Portfolio No.1, Appendix: War College Studies and Conclusions, in Thomas Baecker, "Blau gegen Schwarz. Der amerikanische Kriegsplan von 1913 für einen deutsch-amerikanischen Krieg", *Marine-Rundschau*, Bd. 69, Heft 6 (Juni, 1972).

<sup>37</sup> RM5 885, 'Zum Immediatvortrag. Stand der Operationsarbeiten...', 14 February 1903.

<sup>38</sup> Melville, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Spee Archiv, Box T27/7, Vice-Admiral Maximilian von Spee-Grete von Spee, 29 October 1913, commenting on the *Nürnberg*.

impossible to implement, and also left Tsingtau open to attack. The solution appeared simple enough:

It can well be assumed that given the sensitivity of the Americans about attacks on their territory, the appearance of the Cruiser Squadron on the Pacific coast of the United States will result in an immediate recall of a large part of the [American] East Asian Squadron.<sup>40</sup>

If it were not possible for the German cruisers to continue operations because of American superiority, they could return to Asia or find useful activity in the Atlantic. These guidelines were incorporated into the new operational orders.<sup>41</sup> It was envisaged that the Squadron's ships would operate as a tight unit. An immediate thrust would be made against the Pacific coast of the United States, with the aim of drawing American naval units away from East Asia where the remaining cruisers would undertake commerce warfare. In the event of war with Britain, an advance would be made against Canadian Pacific ports with the aims of decimating trade in this region, and defeating British naval forces located there.<sup>42</sup> The prospects appeared good. The rich United States coastline excluding Alaska skirted one-third of American shores, 'exposed directly to bombardment from the sea'. The defences at San Diego, San Francisco and the mouth of the Columbia River were obsolete and considered easily neutralised.<sup>43</sup>

In 1904 Büchsel clearly stated that the aim of action against the American Pacific coast was 'to hinder the Americans in sending their East Asian Squadron by the shortest route to the Atlantic war areas...[and] to relieve us in East Asia.' This operation had to be implemented as quickly and as forcefully as possible. To facilitate this there had to be a harbour more northerly than Valparaiso better suited for use as a central provisioning point.<sup>44</sup> In the case of war against Britain alone, San Francisco was seen as the most appropriate one, and intelligence agents were active there.<sup>45</sup> This period also saw some more fanciful schemes such as the Kaiser's idea of acquiring a naval base on the Mexican Pacific coast, which would reduce the difficulties of operational planning. Acquisition of Baja California was mooted, and Magdalena Bay could be 'a secret naval station of the utmost importance.'<sup>46</sup> Even the cautious Ambassador Theodor von Holleben believed that the day would come when Germany and the United States 'would have to settle this issue' of German aspirations in what was considered an American exclusion zone.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> RM5 885, Büchsel, 'Zum Immediatvortrag...'

<sup>41</sup> RM5 885, "Befehle für E. M. Schiffe im Auslande für den Kriegsfall", 17 February 1903, bearing the Kaiser's authorisation.

<sup>42</sup> RM5 886, Büchsel, 'Zum Immediatvortrag', 12 February 1904.

<sup>43</sup> Melville, 9.

<sup>44</sup> RM5/v 5968, Bl. 196, 'Aufgaben für SMS Falke während des Aufenthaltes an der Westküste von Amerika'. Despite its southerly position, the main reason Valparaiso had been chosen was that formal agreements had been made between the Navy and various German shipping firms which had extensive local supply networks.

<sup>45</sup> The Naval War Intelligence System (*Marine-Kriegsnachrichtenwesen*) in the Asian-Pacific region is outlined in my article "German Interest in Australian Defence, 1901-1914: New Insights into a Precarious Position on the Eve of War", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1994, 36-51.

<sup>46</sup> PA-AA, R 2537, 'Abschrift re Lower California', 1902. Congress discussed possible German plans for Magdalena Bay and elsewhere on 7 November 1907.

<sup>47</sup> PA-AA, Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, Nr. 5a, Bd. 18, Holleben-Bülow, 14 June 1901.



By late 1904 the installation of intelligence agents along the Pacific coast of the United States and Canada had established a more secure basis for operations in this region.



The new Squadron Chief, Vice-Admiral Kurt von Prittwitz und Gaffron, submitted an elaborated plan with changed emphasis to the Kaiser.<sup>48</sup> An attack on the west coast remained paramount as it would have the additional value of causing panic and directing public attention away from the main operation planned against the Atlantic coast. Prittwitz assumed that the weak American forces stationed on the Pacific coast in peacetime could be evaded there, and action would be against individual cities and coastal shipping and trade. If a force consisting of four to six cruisers (including one armoured cruiser) were able to force the mouth of the Columbia River, the ensuing destruction of the harbour facilities and associated economic disruption 'promise to have a considerable effect on the population'. While the Cruiser Squadron was too weak to force the entrance to Puget Sound and San Francisco, a bombardment of the naval facilities in San Diego could exert useful pressure.<sup>49</sup>

A revision of orders in 1905 was thorough and considered several questions which had arisen.<sup>50</sup> The first was the choice of route, which would be determined by the limitations imposed by the operational radius of the warships. Because there could be no individual

<sup>48</sup> RM5/v 6004, Bl. 45, Prittwitz-Kaiser, 28 September 1904.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> RM5/v 6256, Bl. 84, 'Der Vorstoß des Kreuzergeschwaders nach der Westküste von Nordamerika', Mobilmachungsübersicht des Kreuzergeschwaders, 1905.

stretches longer than 3,000 miles on a route, the normal trans-Pacific postal steamer routes (Victoria-Yokohama and San Francisco-Honolulu-Yokohama) could not be considered. Both could be replaced by a staged advance, in the north via the Aleutians, in the south via the Mariana and Marshall Islands. The choice between these two would be determined by a number of considerations, including the departure harbour in East Asia, the extent of operations on the American coast, which of the routes offered the greater support for the undertaking, and the possibility of attacking merchant shipping while underway. The Caroline, Marshall and Mariana Island groups were ideally positioned for the reception of intelligence from the new German Menado-Yap-Guam cable, and the Yap-Shanghai cable which was expected to be finished 1905-6. In a war against the United States, with San Francisco being the main target, Valparaiso would be the main source of supply. An island south of San Francisco in neutral Mexico would be used, such as Melpomene Cove on Guadaloupe Island.



An important factor was that of a route where damage could be inflicted on enemy forces while underway to the American coast. The southern route offered more opportunities. Guam and Honolulu were important naval stations and the coal there was 'of the greatest importance for both the American Navy and all merchant shipping.' An attack on these would also permit the destruction of the San Francisco-Honolulu-Midway-Guam-Manila cable which was the information lifeline for American forces in Asia. That such action would advertise the Squadron's position in fact would be an advantage, considering the main aim of the operation was to keep American forces occupied in the Pacific:

The aim of the Cruiser Squadron's advance against the west coast of the United States is firstly to prevent the naval forces in East Asia and possibly also those of the west coast from proceeding to the Atlantic to unite with their battle fleet...It can be assumed that this aim will be achieved by threatening the west coast, that already a definite message of our advance eastwards, for example, from our appearance at Guam, will suffice to cause the American squadron to follow us. Secondly, the advance will serve to damage the enemy by operations against Guam, Honolulu and the harbours of the west coast, primarily San Francisco.

This region also promised more fruitful attacks on the frequent shipping around Hawaii.<sup>51</sup>

When in December 1906, Squadron Chief Vice-Admiral Alfred Breusing advised the Kaiser of the state of current operational planning against the USA in Asia he noted that American forces recently had undergone a significant change in that both battleships had

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

been recalled and replaced with four Pennsylvania-class armoured cruisers. In a war with Germany, the USA could not afford to have such ships absent from the Atlantic.

On outbreak of war at the latest a number would certainly be ordered home, the others would only remain here as long as Your Majesty's 'Fürst Bismarck' was out of battle range or damaged. Against two 'Pennsylvanias'... 'Fürst Bismarck' would be able to fight with prospect of success due to its superiority in artillery and armour, if it entered battle under favourable conditions.<sup>52</sup>



SMS Fürst Bismarck

In view of this assessment Breusing recommended awaiting the American force in Tsingtau, or drawing it into the immediate vicinity to give optimum battle conditions. Should a superior force appear before Tsingtau, then the presence of *Fürst Bismarck* still would ensure that the bulk of the American force would be pinned down there – the implication being that other American positions, particularly in the Philippines, would be exposed to German attack. It must be borne in mind that at this time Squadron Chiefs still anticipated the despatch of reinforcements from Europe.<sup>53</sup> Early in 1908 Squadron Chief Vice-Admiral Carl Coerper confidently reported that as a result of the withdrawal to the west coast of four armoured cruisers of the First Division of the American Pacific Fleet –as his predecessor Breusing had predicted- the comparative strengths of the forces in Asia had swung so much in favour of Germany that the Squadron core would be capable of immediately taking the offensive against the remaining American force.<sup>54</sup>



More comprehensive plans were formulated and issued in early 1910 by Squadron Chief Vice-Admiral Friedrich von Ingenohl.<sup>55</sup> Considerable independence in decision making was given to the captain of the cruiser on the West American Station, who

<sup>52</sup> RM5/v 5970, Bl. 248, Breusing-Kaiser, 3 December 1906. The *Fürst Bismarck* was Germany's first armoured cruiser; primarily intended for colonial duties, she served in this capacity until she was relieved from the East Asian Squadron in 1909, at which point she returned to Germany.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> RM5/v 5971, Bl. 139, Coerper-Büchsel, 15 January 1908.

<sup>55</sup> RM5/v 6679, Bl. 59, 'Operationsbefehle für SMS Bremen/einen Kriegsschiff für die Dauer des Aufenthaltes auf der Westamerikanischen Station', 4 February 1910.

received only general guidelines for all War Cases.<sup>56</sup> In the event of war against the United States alone, the early period was to be used for energetic action against American trade along the Continental Pacific coast.<sup>57</sup> This was a realistic prospect which the Americans took seriously. In an article in *The Times* on 1 December 1898, Mahan wrote that American coastal trade remained extremely vulnerable, 'one the protection of which will make heavy demands upon us in any maritime war...The bulky cargoes carried by it cannot be transferred to the coastwise railroads without overtaxing [their] capacities...all of which means...serious injury to all related industries dependent upon this traffic.'<sup>58</sup> In the event of war with the USA and Britain allied –resulting in the Squadron facing a superior force in northern Pacific waters- trade could be attacked along the South American coast with its heavily used routes from Argentina.<sup>59</sup> From 1910, with the *Dreadnought* race in full swing and increasing preoccupation with Britain and the North Sea as the main theatre of expected conflict, detailed yearly planning for the American Atlantic coast was discontinued.<sup>60</sup> Operations in the Pacific, however, retained their emphasis.

### Refining the attack, 1912-14



In November 1912, Squadron Chief Maximilian Graf von Spee composed a lengthy consideration of the directives. The problem lay in the nature of the American naval force which the Squadron could be expected to face. As long as only the regularly stationed American forces which were inferior to the German had to be dealt with, the existing operational plans for the Asian-Pacific region -including attacks on the American west coast- were valid. If the Squadron were in the south of the Station, a sudden strike against Manila, Olongapo or Cavite would produce a quick and morale-boosting victory.<sup>61</sup>

A key factor was the lack of firepower for the scale of operations planned. The previous year Spee had raised the issue of an insufficient support infrastructure on the American west coast. In operational terms, if the American forces could not be drawn from Asia to the Philippines, then the best course of action would be to establish a battle site on the extreme northern edge of the region. This would draw the Americans far from their operational basis in Manila, while the German Squadron could take full advantage of Tsingtau's facilities. After a possible weakening of American forces by mines<sup>62</sup> and torpedo attacks, the German armoured cruisers could attack at an opportune moment. To assist with this Spee requested an additional half flotilla, which was denied.

<sup>56</sup> Specific War Cases (*Kriegsfälle*) were designated for all the Powers. "War Case A" was for the United States.

<sup>57</sup> RM5/v 6679, Bl. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1911.

<sup>59</sup> RM5/v 6679, Bl. 59, 'Operationsbefehle'.

<sup>60</sup> See Forstmeier, 349.

<sup>61</sup> RM5/v 5973, Bl. 157, "Gemäß Ausführungsbestimmungen zu den Allerhöchsten O-Befehlen an S.M. Schiffe im Auslande für den Kriegsfall...", 4 November 1912.

<sup>62</sup> Spee raised the question of the use of mines previously in 1911. The Admiralty rejected this on logistical grounds outside German territorial waters. RM5/v, 5346, Bl. 233, 23 November 1911.

Spee strongly supported the view that the United States would strengthen its forces in the Pacific in the event of war with Germany. While there was some substance to the assumption that American forces on the Pacific coast would be withdrawn to the Atlantic, he was not convinced of this 'and from a military standpoint must take into consideration that the local forces will be strengthened.' In this event, it was essential that if the Squadron were to utilise its temporary superiority, action would have to be taken immediately. The only rational course of action was 'an energetic and speedy attack' on American forces around the Philippines.<sup>63</sup> Closer to the Continental USA, the cruiser on the West American Station would attack trade on the main Yokohama-Honolulu-San Francisco-Seattle route.<sup>64</sup>

In October 1913 Spee emphasised the strategic importance of the Pacific region and the Squadron's function in taking aggressive action in Canadian and American domestic waters:

If we wish to achieve a really tangible effect...A brief traversing of the main trade routes will bring only very small results...We have to appear in tight formation where the traffic comes together, before important harbours or in unavoidable passages.<sup>65</sup>

If Germany chose a time when any considerable part of the American Navy were in the Pacific, the results for the USA would be 'catastrophic'. In the Atlantic, the Germans would have time to send a superior force to Colon and block the Panama Canal, splitting American forces. Germany then would have practical control of the sea which would leave the United States in a 'desperate situation'.<sup>66</sup> In light of this, Büchsel's original aggressive operational plans for the Cruiser Squadron to hold American forces in the Pacific and prevent a unification with the Atlantic Fleet receive their proper significance.

## Conclusions

By November 1909, it had become clear that Germany's naval construction program would leave it superior to the United States in just a few years. Already Germany had displaced it as the world's second naval power. While there was still some uncertainty in Admiral Dewey's mind about whether Japan or Germany would be the first and more probable opponent, it was accepted that the latter was 'the most formidable'.<sup>67</sup> The United States fully expected a clash with Germany as the economic and strategic interests of both nations increasingly came into conflict in the Asian-Pacific region. The American assessment is most clearly shown in the 1913 War Plan. As well as American opposition to Germany's plans in the anticipated division of China, there were 'latent causes that render a break with Germany more probable than with either of the other two great maritime powers...'<sup>68</sup> Yet in the German view, all seemed to augur success. Bülow wrote in 1914 that 'German policy...was able to secure support bases which promised well for our international interests in the future'. Kiautschou secured Germany's 'place in the sun in the Far East, on the shores of the Pacific which have a great future...'<sup>69</sup>

However the European situation was changing to Germany's disadvantage, due to the erratic machinations of Wilhelm II. As the German-British antagonism intensified in 1904 due to Germany's expansive shipbuilding program, the German government began to extend a hand of friendship to Washington. Both Wilhelm II and then Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow

<sup>63</sup> RM5/v 5973, Bl. 235, Spee-Pohl, 4 June 1913.

<sup>64</sup> RM5/v 5973, Bl. 207, 'Operationsdirektiven', 2 Juni 1913.

<sup>65</sup> RM5/v 5973, Bl. 260, "Strategische Bedeutung des Südseegebietes", Spee-Pohl, 9 October 1913.

<sup>66</sup> Navy Yard, General Board, 'Black Plan', War Portfolio No. 1, 48, 53, in Baecker, 359.

<sup>67</sup> Dewey-Meyer, 16 November 1910, General Board Letterpress, in William R. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909-1922* (Austin, 1971), 239.

<sup>68</sup> Navy Yard, General Board, 'Black Plan', War Portfolio No. 1, in Baecker, 351.

<sup>69</sup> Prince von Bülow, *Imperial Germany* (London, 1914), 94.

viewed a temporary German-American rapprochement as a possible strategy to safeguard the German battleship fleet during the construction period. By 1907, after Germany had become almost completely isolated by the Anglo-French Entente, the Anglo-Russian understanding about Persia and Tibet, and a Far Eastern system of ententes with Japan at its centre, the United States became an even more attractive potential ally. Unfortunately, there were few common interests providing a basis for a German-American understanding. In December 1914, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz nonetheless used an interview with the American United Press correspondent in Berlin to boost a German-American connection against the 'Japanese peril'. He indicated that Germany might support the United States in a Japanese-American war and he mentioned the possibility of global German-American cooperation against the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Since Kiautschau had already been captured by the Japanese, the interview seems more a continuation of the habitual German strategy of deflecting the United States to the Pacific and driving a wedge into the Anglo-American relationship.<sup>70</sup>

This also affected the Asian-Pacific region. Germany's failure to seize several opportunities to secure an accommodation with Japan meant that its unexpected entry into the War threw all plans for the region into disarray. But for this, the Cruiser Squadron would have attacked Anglo-Canadian and American merchant trade and ports on a full scale according to its operational plans. This is given a broader perspective when it is remembered that the German Foreign Office considered sabotage acts in Canada following the rumour in December 1914 that Japan planned to transport troops across the country and then on to Europe.<sup>71</sup> Although by 1914 Germany expected that the United States would remain neutral, attacks in American coastal waters and against American possessions in the Pacific remained a fallback option.

In 1914, the position of Kiautschau, in military and naval terms, was hopeless once Japan entered the war against Germany. This was a factor which planners did not take seriously into account. The overwhelming Japanese force ensured that German retention of the territory was impossible. The administration, under the leadership of Governor Alfred Meyer-Waldeck had little in the way of resources with which to defend the area from the military and naval power that the Japanese could deploy. From its Chinese campaigns, the Japanese Army had direct experience of conducting formal siege operations, which it proceeded to implement effectively against the undermanned German garrison. The loss of this base sealed the fate of the Cruiser Squadron and nullified all operations against the United States.<sup>72</sup>

What needs to be kept in mind is what was *intended* to be achieved. The topic is not one of those interesting but irrelevant 'what ifs' of history. The German plans speak for themselves, clearly spelling out the intention to attack shipping, blockade ports, and where appropriate engage warships in the coastal waters of the continental United States. For the latter, this would have been a major disruption to any active support of Britain, exposing the Atlantic coast to attack by requiring the detachment of significant naval forces to the Pacific for the duration.

Now freely able to expand across the Pacific, this fundamentally changed the global position of the United States. By 1914, it was a world power with substantial commercial,

<sup>70</sup> RM3, 2978, Ago von Maltzan- Bethmann Hollweg, 23 August 1914.

<sup>71</sup> See Martin Kitchen, 'Militärische Unternehmungen gegen Kanada im Ersten Weltkrieg', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 2/1970, 31.

<sup>72</sup> See P. Overlack, 'The Commander in Crisis. Graf Spee and the East Asian Cruiser Squadron in 1914', J. Reeve & D. Stevens, eds, *The Face of Naval Battle. The human experience of modern war at sea*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 70—91.

political, and military interests and territorial holdings throughout the Pacific region. But just as the first rival had been eliminated, a second and more dangerous one loomed as the twentieth century progressed.

**The Rationale for German Naval Planning against the USA in the Asia-Pacific Region to 1914**  
Dr Peter Overlack /Brisbane



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The eighth biennial King Hall Conference was held in Canberra on 23 - 24 May 2013. The conference was organised by the Sea Power Centre - Australia with assistance from the Australian Naval Institute, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of NSW Canberra, and the Australian War Memorial. The King Hall Conference has become a significant event in the national and international sea power communities for its wide-ranging discussion of topical naval historical and maritime strategic issues.

The theme of the 2013 Conference was 'The War at Sea 1914 - 1918'. As we approach the centenary of the Great War, it is important that we consider all aspects of this conflict and how it shaped our modern world. The naval war, in particular, deserves reassessment, for much of what has been written previously cannot be considered either comprehensive or reliable. By bringing together naval historians from around the world, this conference provided many new insights on a neglected topic.

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