

North Africa and the Mediterranean in British grand strategy planning for the opening of the second front in 1942

Abstract

Contrary to the thesis developed by Michael Howard in his book *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, which states that Great Britain had no pre-planned strategy for the Mediterranean, this country had from the very beginning of the war, started to evolve a consistent approach in which the control of North Africa and the Mediterranean was a central priority for waging the future war in Europe. This article attempts to show how Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister and his Chiefs of Staff had developed their war strategy for the Mediterranean and North Africa and how they manoeuvred with their American counterparts to make of this area the only possible option for a second front in 1942.

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ملخص

على خلاف ما ورد في كتاب مايكل هاورد الموسوم بـ: الإستراتيجية المتوسطية في الحرب العالمية الثانية: بأن بريطانيا العظمى لم تكن لها استراتيجية مسبقة لخوض الحرب في البحر المتوسط، فإنها بدأت منذ بداية الحرب ترسي مقاربة جديدة يحرز فيها شمال إفريقيا والحوض المتوسط على أهمية قصوى لمواجهة الحرب في أوروبا ويسعى هذا المقال إلى توضيح كيف أن وينستون تشارتيل الوزير الأول البريطاني ورئاسة الأركان طوروا استراتيجيتهم الحربية في البحر المتوسط وشمال أفريقيا وناوروا بمعونة شركائهم الأمريكيين لجعل من هذه المنطقة المكان الوحيد لفتح جبهة جديدة ضد المحور في سنة 1942.

1.Early British Approach to take control of the French Navy and North African Colonies

The collapse of France in June 1940 was a disaster for London. The British feared a German move through Gibraltar to seize the French colonies of North Africa and her fleet which was still intact. The French authorities repeated assurances that their fleet would never fall in German hands but for the British the only course of action acceptable was the departure of the French vessels either to British ports or the West Indies which the French refused. Therefore, on June 26 1940, the British War Cabinet instructed the Naval Staff to draw plans for naval action to seize the French fleet. Admiral Andrew Cunningham advised against the attack on Mers El-Kebir such action would affect "North Africa where friendly attitudes may greatly affect naval operation later on." However Churchill ordered the attack on Mers El-Kebir which resulted in heavy losses on the French side without capturing the French vessels. This attack alienated the French authorities and turned them from a defeated ally to a passive enemy. The French Navy as a victim but also as a traditional rival of the Royal Navy found ample

ground to justify hostility and hatred of the 'Perfidious Albion'. However Churchill remained adamantly determined to go still further to secure the effective command of the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Tentative planning was undertaken by the British Inter Services Planning Staff for operation 'Susan' a landing in Morocco. The aim of 'Susan' was to seize Casablanca and make it available for future British warfare use. The capture of Casablanca was also meant to constitute a 'rallying point' for the French movement which the British Prime Minister was trying to boost in order to rally French Colonies and French servicemen. However, the British Chiefs of Staff opposed this project on the ground that carrying out 'Susan' would mean depriving Britain of important forces for her own defence. They argued that if operation 'Susan' was carried out successfully, the maintenance of the expeditionary force taking part in it would constitute a serious drain on home resources. The Chiefs of Staff's opposition did not deter Churchill from working to enforce the British position in the Mediterranean and North Africa to Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington he explained that "attempt to set up a French Government in Morocco...and to open up a campaign in Morocco with a base on the Atlantic is in my opinion vital."²

To that end, Churchill had also attempted to promote military cooperation with de Gaulle whose dissident movement was willing to fight the Axis out of the French colonies.

Thus slowly but steadily, Churchill was operating a shift in British strategy. A home defence was promoted to prevent the Germans from invading the British Isles and in the Mediterranean and North West Africa, a more aggressive posture was adopted to insure the security of the British sea communications and supplies.

The British who were shaping up their new strategy for the conduct of the war approached the Free French Movement led by dissident General Charles de Gaulle with a view of mounting an attack to capture the French naval base of Dakar. General de Gaulle who had already gained some support in West Africa wanted to rally to his cause the French colonies in this area and North Africa. For the British Prime Minister, de Gaulle's cooperation was a blessing as the capture of Dakar could stand as a good substitute for the old 'Susan' – meant to capture Morocco – was abandoned due to his Chiefs of Staffs' opposition.

The British Prime Minister agreed quickly with General de Gaulle who planned to seize Dakar in a British-free French operation and start a northward march for the restoration of France and her empire relying on British military cooperation and on the human and economic potentials of the French colonies. De Gaulle believed that the French colonies would spontaneously join his movement as had previously done Equatorial Africa, the Gabon and the Chad.

The British planners adapted their strategy to the new situation in which the seizure of Dakar was to be the beginning of a strong movement in West Africa before a Northward military march to rally Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. But the Anglo-free French attack on Dakar was a total failure. This was a terrible blow to Churchill who took full responsibility for the failure of the operation and immediately afterwards started looking for a substitute for de Gaulle who "...could not make good his assurances."³ However the Prime Minister was no by means prepared to abandon his

strategy in which the Mediterranean and North Africa were paramount. He started looking for a more effective French leader who could deliver what de Gaulle failed to do. The substitute, in Churchill's view was General Maxime Weygand the newly appointed Delegate General for North Africa. Churchill wrote to the French General to urge him to head a French rebellion in his area of command and bring North Africa to fight for the restoration of France⁴. The French however remained adamantly reluctant to join again the British leaving Churchill uncertain as to how to achieve of his Mediterranean strategy.

2. North Africa and the Mediterranean Grand Strategy following Pearl Harbour Attack

It was in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour that Churchill's strategy, which foresaw Anglo-America combined operations, took its final shape. Fearing a heavy American commitment in the Pacific to counter the Japanese advance, detrimental to Britain and the Atlantic theatre and the Mediterranean, Churchill immediately after Pearl Harbour approached President Roosevelt suggesting that they meet to discuss the conduct of the war "in the light of reality and new facts⁵."

In December 1941, during the 8-day voyage from Great Britain to the United States the Prime Minister produced three papers which defined the course of his 'Grand Strategy.' In the first paper, he showed the importance of North Africa and advocated that the Anglo-Americans should initiate action in 1942 to occupy the whole coast line of Africa and the levant from Dakar to the Turkish frontier.⁶

Churchill was also very much aware of the danger hanging over the British possessions in Asia, but, by then he was primarily concerned about the security of the British Isles, and the protection of their supply lines in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. His concern for the security of the British Isles was translated into a global strategy which gave priority to the Atlantic theatre of war. Churchill planned his 'Grand Strategy' to take place in three stages:

(1) closing the ring around the Axis powers; (2) liberating the populations of Europe; and (3) assaulting the German citadel.⁷

In his 'Grand Strategy' Churchill's approach to Northwest Africa and the Mediterranean basically aimed at securing them for the Allies. In a further step, according to Churchill. North Africa would be used as a spring board to attack Italy, the 'soft underbelly' of Europe in his own terminology.

On 23rd December, 1941, at the First Washington Conference, Churchill explained that Britain was expecting the situation to develop in her favour in Libya which would permit his Majesty's Government to have 55,000 troops ready for action in Algeria. He suggested that the United States should adopt a comparable position and act likewise by sending troops to occupy the western coast of Morocco.

To his satisfaction, the Americans agreed that if the Germans are held in Russia, Hitler would most certainly try something else. And both agreed that the most likely line for action open to the Germans in 1942 would be Spain and Portugal en route to North Africa. The prospect of a British victory in Libya together with the French North African colonies possibly brought to side with the Allies were good enough reasons for the Germans to make a move into Morocco whenever favourable conditions were met. In a cable to the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff in London, Churchill reported that

both parties agreed that it was vital to forestall the Germans from occupying Northwest Africa and the Atlantic Islands.⁸ And the conference agreed on the “adherence to a Germany-first strategy.” Thus the United States party at the conference adopted the plans Churchill and his military advisors had drafted during their voyage to the USA and which “called for the replacement of British forces by American troops in Northern Ireland, [and the] American participation in an invasion of North Africa.”⁹

The general understanding at the conference was that the occupation of North Africa by the Allied forces would significantly contribute to the security of the western hemisphere and the Mediterranean and would give the Allies great advantage in future operations in Europe. Furthermore, the Allies regarded the French in North Africa - 120,000 troops- permitted by the Armistice- as potential allies; the Anglo-Americans also estimated that if satisfactory political conditions were met, and if they could provide the necessary military equipment, North Africa would raise a substantial number of troops to fight on the Allies side. Churchill showed enthusiasm and optimism for this course of action because he could not afford to put a large number of British troops in North Africa. He wanted to make it certain that the government of the United States would commit itself actively in ‘Gymnast’ as the projected Anglo-American operation was code-named. President Roosevelt agreed with Churchill’s plan to move into North Africa with or without invitation from the French.¹⁰

However, the agreement for the planning of ‘Gymnast’ encountered very strong opposition from the American military chiefs. The latter headed by General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, estimated that only a direct attack across the English Channel would bring about Germany’s rapid defeat. General Marshall was of the opinion that an Anglo-American operation in North Africa would only delay a direct attack on the North of France.

But despite the American army chiefs’ opposition to the British proposal for operation ‘Gymnast’- which General Marshall’s senior advisor on Grand Strategy, Maj. Gen. Stanley D. Embick, qualified as “persuasive rather than rational and much more motivated by political than sound strategic purposes.”¹¹ It was agreed at the Washington Conference that the Anglo-American forces should make landings on the North Western coast of Africa. This agreement had the blessing of both the President and the Prime Minister. The latter being the initiator of the idea.

The objective of operation ‘Gymnast’ was the establishment of an Anglo-American bridgehead in Morocco that would function as a base for an advance into the Spanish zone of Morocco. Once Spanish Morocco was under Anglo-American control, the most likely line of advance for the German forces would be blocked. The whole occupied area in Morocco would then function as a rear base from which the Allied forces would extend their control to Algeria, Tunisia and finally strike at the Axis’ forces in Europe.

For the landings, the Joint Planning Committee selected Casablanca and the western coast of Morocco most certainly because the Americans did not want to go for an inside operation, i.e., against a Mediterranean ports of North Africa, lest the German forces occupy Gibraltar and cut off the American troops from their supply lines. The scope of ‘Gymnast’ was, however so extended – and at a striking distance from the Axis’ naval and air forces – that neither Great Britain nor the United States had the necessary forces available to undertake it single-handed. For this reason the Joint Planning Committee, though stressing that North Africa was one of Great Britain’s

strategic responsibility, recommended that 'Gymnast' be a combined Anglo-American operation.

At the conference, it was clear that the British party had a well defined global strategy for the conduct of the war. In this strategy the Atlantic theatre came first on their agenda. Accordingly, in their talks with their American counterparts, the British stressed this option lest the Americans shift their war effort to the Pacific against Japan to the detriment of Europe. In their effort to convince the Americans of the opportunity to under take 'Gymnast' the British representatives were very much aware of Roosevelt's interest in North Africa since the collapse of France. They, therefore aimed at convincing him, knowing perfectly well that only the President could overrule the American military chiefs' objections and commit the United States to 'Gymnast' rechristened 'Super-Gymnast.' The American President's decision was made rather hurriedly which disappointed his military chiefs but in no way diminished their opposition to the North African option.

However, the setbacks suffered by the British forces in Libya under the command of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, together with the naval stringency of the time and Vichy France cooperation with the Axis, prompted the British and American authorities to lay aside 'Super-Gymnast.' The unfavourable circumstances gave the American planners the opportunity to attempt to reverse the priorities put forward by Winston Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff. Since 'Super-Gymnast' was for the moment shelved, the American planners with the approval of the President proposed a direct attack on the north of France for 1942 which was totally opposed to the British peripheral strategy planned to start in 1942 in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The President and General Marshall argued the case for a direct attack on the 'German citadel' to relieve the German pressure from the Russian front.¹² The Prime Minister promptly reacted to the American move. He recognised the strains on the Russians and their urgent need for more substantial military equipment but clearly expressed his opposition to engage British troops in a 'second Dunkirk.'

At the second Washington Conference held in June 1942, the British showed forceful opposition to 'Sledgehammer,' the American proposed attack in the north of France in 1942¹³, and revived their old project 'Gymnast' – in North Africa – to check any American proposal for action in Europe in 1942 and at the same time put pressure to bear on the Americans to open a second front against Germany as early as possible to relieve the Russian front.

However, the reversion to North Africa should not be understood as simply and only the direct result of British manoeuvres to which the American president, pressed for action, as it seemed, yielded. Indeed, the American interest in North Africa since the fall of France never diminished even when the chances of 'Sledgehammer' were not yet openly questioned. President Roosevelt, throughout 1941 and the first half of 1942 had been a staunch advocate of the consolidation of American influence in North Africa with the French colonists and the North African nationalists.

Therefore, the April agreement reached in London, and recommending 'Sledgehammer' looks today like a stratagem by which the British bought time in order to bring the Americans to accept the North African option as the only feasible one for 1942. The British skilful manoeuvre should be interpreted: (1) in the light of American eagerness to engage their forces against Germany as early as possible; and (2) in the

undertaking the Americans made to the Russians to open a second front in 1942; and (3) against the time factor which would, soon – if no firm action were taken very quickly – condemn the Allies to stand idle in 1942.

In these circumstances, the Americans had no alternative but to accept the British option of North Africa. However, the British Joint Chief Mission in Washington perceived a danger in the War Cabinet's approach of nothing but North Africa. Admiral Andrew Cunningham and Field Marshal Sir John Dill warned that:

If the African plan was pressed to the detriment of
The American build-up in the United Kingdom the Americans
would say they were finished with Europe
and the United States' Chiefs of Staff might react strongly
in favour of the Pacific war.

So to avoid a major disagreement between Great Britain and the United States, the British Joint Mission did their best to persuade the American Chiefs of Staff of the suitability of a combined operation in North Africa in 1942. General Marshall, the American Chief of Staff, Harry Hopkins, the President emissary and advisor and Admiral Ernest King went to London to take part in a combined Chiefs of Staff conference whose objective was to get a final agreement as to where the Anglo-American forces should open a new front in 1942. The American team brought again 'Sledgehammer', the attack in France but the Prime Minister refused to give way preferring to refer the matter to the President but the American party held to its position and described the north African option as 'strategically unsound as an operation either to support 'Round-Up' or to render prompt assistance to the Russians.

3. Roosevelt Overruled his Military Commanders

In these circumstances, General Marshall informed the President of the deadlock in London, and asked for further instructions. On the 23rd of July, he received the President's instructions which put North Africa top priority of the options to be considered. At the same time President Roosevelt cabled secretly Prime Minister Churchill to tell him that he was for the North African option and that he was influencing his chiefs in this direction.¹⁹ The President's instructions to his representatives made plain clear that it was imperative for the United States' forces to be brought into action against the Axis Powers in 1942.²⁰

In Washington, the President called Henry Stimson and Admiral Leahy, General Arnold and General McNaney to read to them the message he was sending to the Prime Minister authorizing 'full speed ahead' with the North African option. General McNaney reported to General Marshall in London to tell him that "the President's decision had been reached before we arrived and these was no discussion as to the relative merits of his decision and the plan recommended in your [Marshall's message] 625"²¹

General Eisenhower described July 22 on which 'Sledgehammer' was abandoned, as the 'blackest day in history.' 'Gymnast,' rechristened 'Torch', was adopted on July 24th. The Combined Chiefs of Staff proposed:

If the situation in the Russian Front by the 15th of September,
Indicates such a collapse or weakening as to make 'Round-Up'
Seem impracticable of successful execution, the decision should be
Taken to launch a combined operation against the North and

West coasts of Africa at the earliest possible date before December 1942.²²

But even the latter provision made by the Combined Chiefs of Staff did not make of 'Gymnast' an irreversible commitment. The adoption of 'Gymnast' appeared to have been desired and worked out by the British Prime Minister and his Chiefs of Staff. So it was clear that when General Marshall suggested to the Chiefs of Staff that the final go-ahead for 'Gymnast' should be given on September 15, he was trying to buy time. This alarmed Harry Hopkins who cabled the President pointing out the necessity of naming a firm date for the operation to take place before October 30th. In this respect he wrote: "What I fear is that if we do not now make a decision on 'Gymnast' and fix a reasonable date, there may be procrastinations and delay."²³ Promptly, the President informed Henry Stimson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff of his decision to go for 'Gymnast.' Harry Hopkins, General George Marshall and Admiral Ernest King who were waiting in London were immediately informed. On Saturday 25th the Combined Chiefs of Staff also specified the objectives of 'Torch' which were the mounting of an Anglo-American amphibious assault on the west and North African coasts with the aim of occupying the area and advancing eastward into the Mediterranean. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had, on 24th July also agreed that as a matter of urgency, the British Staff Planners Section prepare a first outline plan as a basis for further combined planning.

It should be noted that the British Joint Planning Staff had already been working in this direction from as early as July 13th and had produced an outline plan for operation 'Mohican' the objective of which was the capture of North Africa from the west. To this end the Executive Planning Section made an early estimate of the shipping and escorts required for this operation.²⁴ The British initiative to start planning for a combined operation in North Africa was by no means a purely speculative undertaking. On the contrary, in view of the American President's strong plea for action in 1942, the British knew perfectly well that the rejection of 'Sledgehammer' left the Americans with North Africa as the only possible option for action unless they were to remain idle throughout 1942 which was contrary to the promise made to the Russians or for the Americans to shift their war effort to the Pacific. But knowing the President's and General Marshall's commitment to the Atlantic Theatre of War, it seemed highly unlikely that they would operate a major shift in the global strategy.

Conclusion

In this long and complex process of negotiations, the British who were staunchly committed to their strategy favouring the Mediterranean and North Africa, had, despite the American Chiefs of Staff opposition, finally won over the President to their cause. According to Harry Hopkins, the decision to carry out 'Torch' was "one of the very few major military decisions of the war which Roosevelt made entirely on his own and over the protest of his highest ranking advisors".²⁵

If, however, the adoption of 'Torch' seems to be the results of British skilful manoeuvres, the Americans' active and genuine interest in North Africa should not be completely underestimated. This was particularly true of President Roosevelt who had, since the fall of France, been making certain that North Africa would not fall in the Axis's hands. To this end he had closely watched the political and military

developments in the area and had through diplomatic, economic and clandestine action and means tried to win over the French colonial authorities to the Allies' side.

Thus the British strategy for the conduct of the war had made its first step in North Africa. The Combined Chiefs of Staff recommended that a combined Anglo-American operation be mounted with the objective of occupying Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. They agreed that the supreme commander be American and ordered that planning started immediately.

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5. Winston S. Churchill *The Grand Strategy*, Cassel and Co. Ltd. London, 1950, p.539
6. Ibid. p. 541. The second paper, completed after the British party had landed advocated that the Allies should aim at recovering naval superiority in the Pacific by May 1942. The third paper entitled "The Campaign of 1943" based on the assumption that part one of the Prime Minister's strategy would succeed, advocated a mass invasion of Europe in 1943.
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10. F.O. 371/32905
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