Arms Control in Dynamic Situations: A Study of the Washington Treaty System

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The Washington Naval Conference instituted a system of arms control in an international environment characterized by structural factors which ought to have rendered such a treaty extremely difficult. This was accomplished by successfully addressing the security concerns of all parties involved. However, the dynamic nature of Japanese security concerns, and the uniquely security-conscious nature of the Japanese government, combined with unwillingness on the part of the United States and Britain to alter the terms of the treaty, quickly led to the Washington Treaty system’s obsolescence. The success and failure of this arms control regime contains potentially important lessons for modern policy-makers interested in creating arms-reduction treaties.

In 1922, representatives of each of the major naval powers, Britain, the United States, and Japan, and the two minor naval powers, Italy, and France, met in Washington, D.C. to discuss naval arms limitation and the state of East Asia. There they created a series of agreements known as the Washington Treaty System, and successfully imposed an arms control regime on a multipolar world in the grip of an arms race. Their success, together with the rapid failure of the arms control regime they

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created, has the potential to teach contemporary scholars and policymakers significant lessons on the nature of arms control.

Prior to the inception of the treaty, a three-way arms race had been brewing between Britain, the United States and Japan. The race originated around the time of the First World War, when the United States began building a navy that it hoped to make “second to none.” The British began a similar program meant to shore up their naval dominance and the Japanese began moving towards an eight-eight (that is, eight first line battleships and eight battle cruisers) fleet meant to assure victory against a potential American expedition across the Pacific. This arms race represented a classic security dilemma wherein each action meant to enhance one nation’s security threatened that of another. Beyond the normal forces acting against arms control, such as the resistance of the security establishment and a desire to avoid the appearance of weakness, the security dilemma was enhanced by a belief in the superiority of offensive military action, identical offensive and defensive weaponry and the tripolar power structure of the time.

A general belief in the dominance of offensive action pervaded naval doctrine during this period. Offensive dominance, defined by Robert Jervis as a situation in which “it is easier to destroy the other’s army and take its territory than it is to defend one’s own”1 and by George Quester as the preponderance of “technology and techniques that reward counterforce initiatives,”2 tends to make arms control more difficult. The offensive dominance of the time is perhaps best demonstrated in the works of A. T. Mahan, whose writings provided inspiration to planners on all sides. Mahan

stated that “however defensive in origin or in political character a war may be, the assumption of a simple defensive in war is ruin. War, once declared, must be waged offensively, aggressively. The enemy must not be fended off, but smitten down.” Mahan emphasizes the ability of an attacker to concentrate its forces in the face of a defender who, as a result of the vastness of most coastlines, must spread out to defend the entirety of the attacked country. Thus, a defender “take[s] for granted the impossibility of [its] own permanent advance and the ability of the enemy to present himself before [its] front in superior numbers.” For Mahan, a defensive strategy only became viable if one was too weak to expect victory.

As a political tool also, Mahan felt that the navy maximized its utility on the offensive. Writing about Spanish and French participation in the American Revolution, Mahan generalizes his critique of Spanish strategy into a greater lesson:

“The united fleets thrice appeared in the English Channel, once to the number of sixty-six ships of the line, driving the English fleet to seek refuge in its ports because [it was] far inferior in numbers. Now, the great aim of Spain was to recover Gibraltar and Jamaica; and to the former end immense efforts, both by land and sea were put forth by the allies against that nearly impregnable fortress. They were fruitless. The question suggested is this: would not Gibraltar have been more surely recovered by controlling the English Channel, attacking the British fleet even in its harbors, and threatening England with annihilation of commerce and invasion at home than by far greater efforts directed against a distant and very strong outpost of her Empire? […] Napoleon once said that he would reconquer Pondicherry on the banks of the Vistula. Could he have controlled the English Channel, as the allied fleet

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5 Ibid., 90.
did for a moment in 1779, can it be doubted that he would have conquered Gibraltar on the shores of England?"\(^6\)

Mahan clearly considered the political value of a navy to be in its capacity as a counter-value force. However, before such a force could be brought to bear on a country, the navy of that country needed to be dealt with. A blockading force must spread out to cover a great deal of territory, thus rendering itself vulnerable to attack by the presumably more concentrated fleet of an enemy. Therefore, Mahan concluded that the fleets of two belligerents would collide in a massive battle to determine who would carry out counter-value attacks upon whom. Due to the relative weakness of merchant ships, the counter-value portion of the navy’s mission may be carried out by almost any armed ship; therefore the primary value one must seek in their navy is a capacity to win in a major collision with another navy.

Furthermore, offensive and defensive weaponry was almost impossible to distinguish. Although clearly defensive weaponry such as shore batteries and minefields did exist, such weapons could never defend more than a narrow area close to shore near ports and other strategically significant locations. Even these strong defenses would not stand up to the full firepower of an enemy battle fleet, and as emplaced defenses they could not move to counter the maneuvers of such a fleet. Additionally, air power at this time, although its potential had been demonstrated by Mitchell’s famous destruction of the German battleship Ostfriesland, was limited in its potential and vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire.\(^7\) Therefore, defending a large area of shore distant from strategically important locations in such a way (so as to prevent invasion) would be prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, even without an assault, the counter-value function of a navy could be exercised offshore through the imposition of a blockade. Purely defensive weaponry was weak, and although

nations could and did invest in it, dual purpose weapons would enhance any power’s security by a far greater degree. Unfortunately, a battleship built for defensive purposes and a battleship designed for offense look much the same to a potential enemy. In a situation in which the offensive force has the advantage and offensive weaponry is indistinguishable from defensive, every unit of security acquired by a power entails a greater decline in security for another power. For this reason, Robert Jervis describes such a situation as “doubly dangerous” for any power not seeking war.\(^8\)

The third enhancement of the security dilemma sprang from its tripolar nature. Ignoring France and Italy, whose navies were of negligible strength at the time, any arms control agreement would likely allow any two of the great powers in attendance to gang up on, and bring superior power against, the remaining one. Winston Churchill evidenced such fear when, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he noted that:

> “Besides the Great Powers, there are many small states who are buying or building great ships of war and whose vessels may by purchase, by some diplomatic combinations, or by duress, be brought into the line against us. None of these powers need, like us, navies to defend their actual safety of independence. They build them so as to play a part in world affairs. It is sport to them, it is death to us.”\(^9\)

This fear lay at the root of Britain’s attempt to maintain a two-power standard, that is, the capacity to militarily defeat any two navies in the world combined prior to the American naval armament during and after WWI, and Britain’s eventual demand at Washington that they maintain such a standard after it, allowing the United States as an exception. Japan, as the weakest of the three powers, was most vulnerable to such an attack, a vulnerability that was often brought up by Japanese advocates of

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\(^8\) Jervis, 47.

increased naval power who correctly guessed that the cooperation between America and England at the Washington Conference could be extrapolated into the future. Likewise, the two-decade old Anglo-Japanese Alliance worried America as it entered the conference by posing what it saw as a significant strategic threat despite assurances from both Britain and Japan that the alliance did not apply to the U.S.

However, despite the factors complicating arms control, the powers signed a treaty. Signed in 1922, the Washington Naval Treaty restricted Britain and the United States to 525,000 tons of capital ships, defined as ships greater than 10,000 tons and carrying guns in excess of 8.1 inches, while giving Japan 315,000 tons. There was an additional 10-year building holiday imposed on all new capital ship construction. The same 5:5:3 ratio applied to aircraft carriers. In this case, delegates at the Washington Conference successfully ameliorated the security dilemma in a multi-polar, offense dominant environment in which offensive and defensive weapons could not be differentiated. Theoretically, arms control in such an environment should be considered nearly impossible. Although mutual arms reduction treaties have occurred since, most notably those governing nuclear weapons signed between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., they occurred in a bipolar environment in which nuclear deterrence rendered offensive action almost impossible, a situation significantly more conducive to international arms control than that faced by the Washington delegates.

Those treaties also lasted longer. While the Washington Conference may have been miraculous in its initial success, it failed to set up a lasting arms control regime that could prevent the security dilemma from escalating to full scale war. Problems began very early. The Japanese National Defense Policy of 1923 made the United States the hypothetical enemy, the enemy with

11 Quester, 55.
whom one prepares to fight a war, for both the army and the navy. Previously, Russia had been the army’s hypothetical enemy. Additionally, the policy stated that:

“[T]he longstanding embroilment, rooted in the conflict of interests and estrangement of emotion will become increasingly serious in the future […] Such being the Asiatic policy of the United States, which maintains bases in the Pacific and the Far East and possesses powerful armaments, a clash with our Empire will become inevitable sooner or later.”

Furthermore, there is evidence that the Japanese quickly began cheating. During 1924 and 25, the Japanese laid down the hulls of the Myoko, the Nachi, the Haguro, and the Nichira. Each of these cruisers displaced at least 12,000 tons and was therefore an illegal capital ship.

Throughout the process of interwar arms limitation, Japan was the make or break country. While the Americans and the British faced significant domestic pressure to rein in their defense spending, Japan had no such impetus. Due to nationalist rhetoric, there was in fact a great deal of popular support for naval building in Japan. Children donated their pocket money to help finance battleships. The budgetary incentive for arms control certainly existed in Japan; the Japanese navy occupied a massive 31 percent of the national budget in 1921, and Kato Tomosaburo, the leader of the Japanese delegation to Washington, had earlier recognized the futility of military competition with the richer United States. However, Japanese interest in naval reduction stemmed solely from budgetary issues and whatever political carrots and sticks the Anglo-American

14 Asada, From Mahan to Pearl Harbor, 75.
15 Ibid., 100.
16 Ibid., 57.
powers cared to offer. Furthermore, these carrots and sticks would have had to influence a government in which civilian control of the navy was undermined by the power wielded by the General Staff.\textsuperscript{17} This rendered the government far more sensitive to issues of relative naval strength, and far less sensitive to budgetary arguments which offered the opportunity to save through decreased naval building, or liberal arguments which would appeal to the civilian politicians. These factors made Japan the weak link in the arms control chain, making the way that the negotiators handled Japanese security concerns essential to the system’s chances for success.

The Washington Treaty system of arms limitations arose in spite of massive structural disincentives for arms limitation due to the expert statesmanship of those involved in addressing those problems and creating a solution that addressed the security needs of all of the interested powers. However, it existed as a snapshot of the strategic situation of 1922. Because the American and British negotiators of the treaty insisted that the treaty represented a triumph of liberal ideology regarding arms control rather than acknowledging their own success in addressing security concerns, the treaty system proved incapable of adaptation in the face of easily foreseeable changes to the Japanese sense of security after 1922. This resulted in increasing Japanese discontent with the treaty system and Japan’s eventual withdrawal in 1936.

\textit{Why Did it Work?}

Capability to adapt on security issues characterized the negotiators at Washington. American Secretary of State Hughes

\textsuperscript{17} The navy minister was generally an active, rather than retired, naval officer who took his direction from the general staff instead of the prime minister. This gave the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) far more political power than its American or British counterparts. The IJN even had the capacity, occasionally exercised, to veto a cabinet by simply refusing to participate. (Evans and Peattie, 26)
and Japanese Naval Minister Kato Tomosaburo both came to the conference ready to compromise. Hughes spoke privately of a willingness to concede a 10:8 ratio to the Japanese in exchange for the end of the arms race;\textsuperscript{18} Kato Tomosaburo fought tooth and nail to convince the home government that the treaty was worth signing even without a 70 percent ratio, living up to his statement that “naval limitation must succeed whatever it takes.”\textsuperscript{19} This distinguished him from the rest of the Japanese naval establishment, which believed that arms control could only take place under certain circumstances extremely beneficial to Japan. For these two states, arms control was not simply a positive outcome of successful negotiations and political reconciliation but rather an extremely desirable outcome in and of itself. To this end, the participants in the Washington Conference enacted a number of important reforms which neutralized the negative effects of dominance of the offensive, the identical nature of offensive and defensive weaponry and the tri-polar nature of power relations.

The creators of the Washington Naval Treaty replaced the Mahanian emphasis on offensive action that dominated doctrine with a system meant to ensure core security for each of the great powers in East Asia by reducing incentives for offensive action. By establishing a 10:6 ratio of American to Japanese capital ships and prohibiting the fortification of American or British bases in East Asia, the treaty effectively rendered each side incapable of attacking the other with any assurance of victory. This is perhaps best evidenced by the massive parallel backlashes in each country’s naval establishment against the treaty. Any navy’s utility depends entirely on its ability to carry out its mission and its strength when compared to other navies. Supporters of naval armament on both sides were keenly conscious of the relative nature of naval strength, and did not hesitate to air their concerns. Captain N. H. Goss, of the United States Navy

\textsuperscript{18} Kaufman, 60.

\textsuperscript{19} Asada, \textit{From Mahan to Pearl Harbor}, 81.
answered the question asked in the title of his essay “Have We a Navy?” with a resounding “no,” concluding that the navy was inadequate for its tasks, and with histrionics characteristic of the naval establishments at the time, recommended that the navy be disbanded, because “unless the navy is adequate to carry out successfully all its duties, it is a failure and as a business proposition does not justify the money spent upon it.” Shortly after Japan accepted the 10:6 ratio Kato Kanji, a Japanese admiral and navalist who had staunchly opposed naval limitation from the outset, was seen tearfully shouting that “as far as I am concerned, war with America starts now. We’ll get our revenge over this, by God.” Although Kato Kanji did not accept that the United States had ceded victory in a shorter war, believing that Japan needed a 10:7 ratio in order to successfully defend against an American incursion into the Western Pacific, he did correctly identify the threat that the United States posed in an extended war. Given America’s vast superiority in naval production capacity, America would certainly win any drawn out conflict with Japan.

In return for ceding the United States victory in a long war, a near certainty even without the treaty, Japan received virtual invulnerability in a short term conflict. The United States agreed not to fortify any holdings west of Hawaii while the British agreed to do the same east of Singapore. With a Japanese navy 60 percent as strong as that of the United States, Kato Tomosaburo and the U.S. naval establishment agreed that the United States would face long odds if it attempted to liberate the Philippines and Guam due to its lack of a nearby port for repairs and re-armament. In the words of Sadao Asada:

21 Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, 92.
22 Asada, *Culture Shock and Japanese-American Relations*, 111.
23 Kaufman, 70.
“The Five-Power Treaty made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the U.S. Navy to wage offensive warfare against Japan in the Western Pacific. In the event of war with Japan, the United States would have to fall back on the Hawaiian Islands as its base of operations. Japan would have enough strength to defend itself, but certainly not enough for offensive operations across the Pacific […] The Washington system effectively replaced the ‘security dilemma’ or zero sum game with a regime that simultaneously enhanced the security of both the United States and Japan.”

This security enhancement came about because in the new system, neither offensive dominance nor the ambiguous nature of weaponry impacted either state’s estimation of the costs and benefits of war in the same way they had before. The preference for offensive action, and its attendant pressure to strike first had been dealt with by replacing the expectation of victory should offensive action be undertaken with the expectation of defeat. Likewise, even though offensive and defensive weaponry appeared identical, offensive action could not be undertaken by either side. It did not matter whether one nation misunderstood the true intentions of the building nation because the treaty precisely calibrated the capabilities of the two in order to provide security guarantees.

Additionally, the Washington Conference set up a system in which calculations involving only two actors could occur despite the presence of a third naval power. By replacing the Anglo-Japanese alliance with the Four Power Treaty, which included provisions meant to maintain the status quo, the delegates to the Washington Conference effectively neutralized one of the major fears of co-operation among the actors involved. Despite the aura of inevitability that the special relationship between Britain and the United States has now attained, at the time, numerous reasons for alarm existed in American circles regarding potential Anglo-Japanese co-operation against America. Most obviously, at this

24 Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, 91.
point, Japan and Britain’s alliance had lasted two decades. Additionally, despite the British judgment that “friendly co-operation with the United States is for us a cardinal principle,”25 Anglo-American relations suffered from a number of disputes, including an American demand for repayment of war debt.26 By breaking apart the Anglo-Japanese alliance the Treaty nipped fears of Anglo-Japanese co-operation in the bud. Japanese fears of Anglo-American co-operation also found some, albeit smaller, modicum of reassurance in the Four Power Treaty, which called for a conference should any disagreement get to the point where it might cause war.

Through the creation of new political and strategic realities more conducive to international arms control, the delegates attending the Washington Conference established an international system that dealt with most of the structural problems facing arms control. The political and strategic assurances granted by the Washington Treaties reshaped the security calculations of the involved powers into something more accepting of an international arms control regime.

**The Role of Kato Tomosaburo**

In the years leading up to the conference and during the conference itself, Kato Tomosaburo was the only calculator of Japanese relative security who mattered. As the situation stood in 1921, should both the American and the Japanese building programs proceed without modification, Japan would achieve its goal of an eight-eight fleet in 1927. At this point, Japan’s capital ship fleet would displace 200,000 tons and be far less than 70

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percent of the size of the United States Navy.\footnote{Evans and Peattie, 192.} Drawing conclusions from World War I, Kato believed that any future war would take the form of a contest of industrial might.\footnote{Ibid.} He realized that Japan could not hope to win an industrial competition against the massive industrial superiority of the United States. Since an arms race is also a contest of industrial might, the same logic could be applied, and the same conclusions could be drawn. Japan was doomed. Before the conference even started, Kato realized that the quest for naval parity with the United States would bankrupt Japan and that the avoidance of an arms race would require co-operation with America and Britain.\footnote{Ibid.}

Kato decided early that bandwagoning with America would be far more profitable than attempting to balance against them, no matter what concessions America required. Kato attempted to obtain a 70 percent ratio, but resigned himself early in the negotiations to the possibility of having to sign the treaty as Hughes had presented it in his speech opening the conference, which would have required both a 60 percent ratio and the scrapping of the battleship \textit{Mutsu}. The \textit{Mutsu} was a completely modern battleship that mounted 16-inch guns and could outrun any American battleship. Schoolchildren donated their spending money to finance its construction. It was 98 percent complete. Scrapping this ship would have proven immensely unpopular with the Japanese populace, yet Kato asked for authorization to give it up.\footnote{Asada, \textit{From Mahan to Pearl Harbor}, 75, 79.}

Although he had a following among other officers, most notably Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, the eventual planner of the Pearl Harbor attack, Kato defied a bureaucratic consensus that the eight-eight fleet, the 70 percent ratio, and non-fortification in the Western Pacific by the U.S. and Britain were all necessary to
Japanese security.\footnote{Evans and Peattie, 193.} When faced with resistance from the mainstream of the Japanese naval establishment at the conference, Kato overruled them. The iron fist with which he led was uncharacteristic of a Japanese policymaker. Instead of consulting the bureaucracy, he ignored it. A 1921 resolution of the special committee on arms control, which had been convened at Kato’s request, stated that the navy “absolutely requires the naval ratio of 70 percent or above \textit{vis-à-vis} the American Navy.”\footnote{Sadao Asada, "From Washington to London: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the Politics of Naval Limitation, 1921-1930." In \textit{The Washington Conference, 1921-22 Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability, and the Road to Pearl Harbor}, by Erik Goldstein and John Maurer, 147-191. (Portland: Frank Cass, 1994), 152.} Kato failed to endorse its report going into the conference.\footnote{Evans and Peattie, 193.} Additionally, during the conference, he threatened to resign if the government did not give him permission to compromise on the issue of the 70 percent ratio and suppressed anti-treaty pressure among his own delegation, most notably from Kato Kanji.\footnote{Asada, \textit{From Mahan to Pearl Harbor}, 91-92.} The younger Kato pushed hard for a 10:7 ratio at the conference, at one point implying to Theodore Roosevelt Jr. that he would have to commit \textit{seppuku} were he to return to Japan without that ratio.\footnote{Ibid., 76.} Kato Tomosaburo believed that war with the U.S. would end in disaster and should be avoided at all costs. For him, an effective navy merely needed the ability to act as a deterrent to the United States. The 10:6 ratio and the concession by the United States on base-building allowed this limited aim.

\textbf{Why Did the System Fail?}

Kato Tomosaburo died in August of 1923 after serving as Prime Minister. The assumption of viability regarding a 10:6 ratio died with his ability to unilaterally determine Japan’s naval security needs. Instead, a cadre of naval officers best represented by Kato
Kanji began a rise to prominence. These officers did not share Kato Tomosaburo’s optimism regarding the intentions of the United States or his views on the future of warfare.\textsuperscript{36} The fact that they were wrong on both counts, the United States had no intention of fighting to preserve the open door in China, nor did the next war involve a decisive battleship collision as they predicted, does not matter. Any nation’s sense of security depends entirely on its perception of the international situation. With the rise of this new group as the calculators of Japan’s security requirements, the 10:6 ratio versus the United States transformed from an assurance of security into a massive liability.

For the next decade, a bureaucratic battle centered on the naval limitation conferences that followed Washington raged between pro-treaty and anti-treaty forces within the Japanese Navy. The first, and obviously largest, sticking point was whether or not arms limitation treaties should occur at all. The group opposed to arms limitations on principle, headed by an increasingly unstable Kato Kanji, took the very Mahanian position\textsuperscript{37} that every nation had the right to build as much as it wished.\textsuperscript{38} The mainstream of the naval establishment, however, agreed that co-operation was in fact a necessity, as demonstrated by the report issued by the Nomura committee prior to the London Conference, which stated that the Washington Treaty was “on the whole advantageous” to Japan.\textsuperscript{39} The report, created by a very pro-treaty group, repeated Kato Tomosaburo’s point that a 10:6 ratio in

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{37} Mahan’s disdain for arms control treaties, and international co-operation in general, characteristic of his early work, can be seen in his statement that “time and staying power must be secured for ourselves by that rude and imperfect, but not ignoble, arbiter, force – force potential and force organized – which so far has won, and still secures, the greatest triumphs of good in the checkered history of mankind” (Mahan, \textit{The Interest of America in Sea Power}, 120).
\textsuperscript{38} Asada, “From Washington to London,” 159.
\textsuperscript{39} Quoted in \textit{Ibid}. 169.
capital ships was a better deal than Japan could expect in a fully fledged arms race.\footnote{Ibid.}

However, on the second question, that of non-capital ship ratios, there was a significant divergence from the earlier debates. At this point, the necessity of the 70 percent ratio had become dogma even to the pro-treaty faction. During the Washington Conference, the debate between the two Katos had occurred over a 10 percent difference. Kato Kanji wanted 70 percent of the naval force of America; Kato Tomosaburo didn’t want it enough to risk wrecking the negotiations and instead agreed to a force 60 percent the size of America’s. Throughout the post-Washington period however, the general consensus was that Japan needed a higher ratio. Both the majority and dissenting opinions of the Nomura report emphasized the necessity of at least a 10:7 ratio regarding auxiliary vessels. The report stated that the 70 percent ratio for auxiliary vessels was “absolutely necessary for the nation’s defense, nay, for its very existence,” considering that the previous concession of the 60 percent ratio in capital ships was only acceptable in that it brought about the American commitment to cease building bases in the Western Pacific. The committee concluded that negotiators at London could not be allowed to accept anything less than 70 percent.\footnote{Ibid, 170-171.}

This new stance became apparent to the rest of the world at the London Conference on auxiliary vessels. The prior conference at Geneva in 1927 on the same subject fell apart due to a dispute between the British, who needed many light cruisers to protect sea-lanes, and the United States, which did not need many light cruisers, but heavy ones meant to assist in major fleet operations and act as long-range commerce destroyers.\footnote{Evans and Peattie, 234.} The Japanese determination to attain a 70 percent ratio never had a chance to impact these talks due to this overriding conflict. However, at London the new conception of what was required for Japan’s
self-defense became apparent. In 1929, the Japanese Cabinet agreed to Navy Minister Okada’s “three basic principles.” These included a 70 percent ratio with the United States regarding auxiliaries, a special emphasis on the 70 percent ratio regarding 10,000 ton, eight-inch gunned cruisers, and 78,000 tons of submarines. Heavy cruisers were especially important because, with their large guns and extended range, they could act as semi-capital ships, and many within the navy considered them a necessary tool for overcoming the inferiority of the 10:6 ratio. However, it quickly became clear that the Japanese would not be able to achieve this outcome. Despite having considerable strength relative to America at the time of the negotiations, including 74 percent of American auxiliary tonnage and more than 80 percent of its heavy cruiser tonnage, Japan was faced with American assertions that since a 60 percent ratio had been acceptable at Washington, it should be acceptable in London. Given the fact that current relative levels of weaponry were the primary determinant of the Washington ratios, this was not taken well by the Japanese naval establishment in general and Kato Kanji especially. Eventually, diplomats in London reached a compromise and, after a great deal of internal strife, Tokyo acceded. The London Treaty gave Japan a 69.75 percent overall ratio in auxiliary tonnage. However, the ratio for tonnage in the most important category, heavy cruisers, held at 60.23 percent. The nearly equitable overall ratio came as a result of a 7:10 ratio in light cruisers, which the Japanese navy had little use for, and parity in submarines at 52,700 tons. This required significant cutbacks and, more importantly, actually reduced the relative size of Japan’s fleet.

Whereas the original Washington Treaties created a system in which every actor felt more secure, the London Conference resulted in radically decreased perceptions of security for Japan. While the Five Power Treaty essentially codified the status quo,

44 Ibid., 175.
45 Evans and Peattie, 236.
As a result of the London Treaty, Japan actually lost strength compared to the other two powers. Rather than responding to newly increased security requirements of Japan, the Anglo-American powers ignored them in favor of idealist rhetoric and the assumption that Japanese decision-makers operated with the same liberal mindset as Herbert Hoover and Ramsay MacDonald. While Prime Minister Hamaguchi did show signs of liberal leanings, this assumption discounted the political power accorded the navy itself in Japan’s government, and the anti-liberal force the navy would be able to exert. The lesson the Anglo-American negotiators took from Washington came from the rhetoric of disarmament and not from the successful calibration of relative security. Their apparent collusion to reduce Japan’s capacity to fight further cemented the perception of Japan’s weakness in the eyes of Japanese decision makers.

Both the dominance of the offensive and the tri-polar system as causes for worry to Japan came back in force as a result of the London Conference. The unity of British and American attempts to push through arms control at lower ratios gave Kato Kanji’s assertions of “Anglo-American oppression” more weight. The British and Americans had earlier consulted each other on the question of cruisers, attempting to resolve the issues that sank the Geneva Convention. These negotiations failed in their specifics, but actually resulted in a visit to America by Prime Minister MacDonald, which increased general goodwill between the two countries and likely had a hand in their eventual co-operation at the conference in the face of Japanese resistance to the extension of the 10:6 ratio. For pro-Washington forces, the only justification of the original 10:6 ratio had been American and British political concessions on base building that brought about an increase in Japanese security. For anti-Washington forces, the 10:6 ratio never justified itself. Given the lack of concessions on

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46 Ibid., 237.
47 Kaufman, 113.
48 Quoted in Asada, From Mahan to Pearl Harbor, 86.
49 Kaufman, 125.
meaningful measures of naval strength or political issues, the results of the negotiations pleased neither group. Additionally, given the belief of both groups in a 10:7 ratio for auxiliaries as the absolute minimum required for Japan to defend itself from an American attack, the doctrinal dominance of offensive action caused Japanese naval thinkers to read more nefarious motives into the American and British insistence on a 10:6 ratio than actually existed. America appeared capable of attacking Japan, and moreover appeared to have actively worked with Britain to gain such a capability through the London negotiations.

Weaknesses of the Washington Treaty System

Although the Washington Treaties did an excellent job responding to the structural inhibitors of arms limitation in place at the time, the London Conference demonstrates the first of a number of the flaws inherent in the treaties which only became apparent as time passed. Most significantly, the Five Power Treaty influenced later inflexibility on the ratio issue. Throughout the remaining arms control conferences, the British and Americans often claimed that since a 60 percent ratio had sufficed for Japan in 1922, it should continue to do so indefinitely. This inflexibility likely would not have proven problematic had Japan secured a 70 percent ratio vis-à-vis Britain and America in the original bargaining session, as this number was widely accepted by the naval establishment as the requisite proportion for victory. The psychic wound inflicted on the Japanese naval establishment, especially Kato Kanji, by the treaty also would likely have been significantly reduced had Japan managed to attain a 70 percent ratio. Writing about the Japanese response to the treaty, Sadao Asada takes the position that “the political decision to accept the compromise settlement failed to take root in Japan’s subsequent naval policy; on the contrary, the reaction from naval men, if anything, reinforced their obsession with the 70 percent ratio.”

50 Asada, Culture Shock, 114.
for retribution, a Washington Conference resulting in a 70 percent ratio would have been a victory.

The lower ratio came about as a result of an unfortunate coincidence of Kato Tomosaburo’s extremely low calculation of Japanese national security requirements compared to that of the rest of the Japanese naval establishment and American cryptanalytic success. Secretary of State Hughes is recorded as having said that he would be willing to concede a ratio as high as 10:8 to Japan. This was an eminently logical position for Hughes to take. Hughes devised a system in which Japan would almost certainly win any short term war, allowing it to take America’s far Eastern holdings, but in which America would have the advantage in a drawn out conflict. Given such a system, significant latitude on the ratio issue could be accorded to Japan without upsetting the deterrent balance. However, Hughes never had to consider such an action. Thanks to American successes in breaking Japanese codes, he knew that Kato Tomosaburo would likely sign the treaty even if it included the 60 percent ratio. This led Hughes to take advantage of Kato’s unique willingness to compromise in order to secure a better strategic position for the United States.

Kato Tomosaburo understood that his willingness to compromise made him an aberration within the Japanese naval establishment. Foreseeing the problems that his acceptance of the 60 percent ratio would cause, he embarked on institutional reform of the navy. Meant to minimize the influence of the anti-treaty forces that dominated the General Staff by increasing civilian oversight and control, these reforms stood little chance of success due to the resistance of the army, and were definitively cut short by Kato’s death in 1923. Such reforms would likely have solved the problem of naval discontent caused by the terms of the treaty, but predicating a new order for the international

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51 Kaufman, 60.
52 Asada, From Mahan to Pearl Harbor, 78.
53 Ibid., 100.
system on the chances of one ailing elder statesman\textsuperscript{54} remaking the internal order of a country seems a recipe for failure.

A follower of Kato’s, Admiral Yamanashi, obliquely referenced these reforms when he reflected that “if fleet Admiral Kato Tomosaburo had lived several more years, Japan would never have placed itself in the position to plunge into the Pacific War.”\textsuperscript{55} I offer a different counterfactual. If Kato Tomosaburo died roughly a year and a half early, during the early negotiations at Washington, leaving his deputy Kato Kanji to complete the negotiations there, a similar outcome might have occurred. Under orders from Tokyo to obtain some arms control regime, a Kato Kanji-led delegation would likely have pushed until it received a 70 percent ratio \textit{vis-à-vis} the United States, a ratio we know Hughes may have been willing to offer. In such a situation, the Washington Treaty system would have fulfilled the security requirements of each involved player for a greater period of time and avoided the quick obsolescence to which it fell victim.

The second major problem the Washington Treaty system faced as a result of its static nature was a failure to account for the potential of appearance of technology that might influence naval doctrines, and the contributions that this might make to international instability. The previously remarked upon obsession with the 70 percent ratio regarding battleships in the Japanese navy was paralleled by a similar emphasis on the continued worth of the battleship in the American navy.\textsuperscript{56} Whether as a result of hidebound thinking or internal resistance to the treaty, both navies faced similar problems abandoning the Mahanian logic that underlay these massive battleship fleets in light of new technologies that ought to have fundamentally changed the way that planners considered naval warfare. Large submarines offered the potential for long-range commerce-raiding operations without

\textsuperscript{54} At the time of the Washington Conference, Kato already suffered from the colon cancer that would eventually end his life (\textit{Ibid.}, 92).

\textsuperscript{55} Quoted in Asada, \textit{From Mahan to Pearl Harbor}, 104-105.

\textsuperscript{56} Kaufman, 124.
a large fleet first establishing dominance. Heavy 10,000 ton cruisers with an enhanced cruising radius allowed much the same thing. Since Mahan assumed the large-scale fleet collision to be necessary because it allowed naval counter-value operations, the potential to conduct such operations without resorting to a fleet battle ought to have given planners pause. Similarly, naval aviation offered the chance to introduce defensive weaponry that could not be mistaken for offensive weaponry. Land-based bombers had the capacity to destroy attacking naval forces without posing a threat to another actor’s own sense of security, while still preserving the mobility that gave naval forces the advantage over previously static land-based defenses.

Unfortunately, the Five Power Treaty banned the fortification of islands outside of the Japanese mainland or West of Hawaii. This included air bases that might have contributed to a more stable defensive balance of power rather than the offensive one necessitated by the state of things in 1922. Likewise, by extending ratios to encompass auxiliary craft, the London Treaty removed the capacity of navies to make use of technology that allowed auxiliaries, such as submarines and heavy cruisers, to sidestep offensive Mahanian logic. It would be unreasonable to expect the negotiators of the Washington treaties to foresee the future of naval technology. However, the system they put in place ignored the possibility that there could be new technology which might affect the balance of power at all, a frightful oversight given the speed with which technology advanced during this period, and thus proved incapable of adapting to new technologies which might have ensured further stability. Some attempt to do so would likely have yielded significant gains.

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[57] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, 121.
Conclusions

As the world heads towards an era likely to be defined by multipolarity and uncertainty, policymakers would be well-advised to examine the failures in addressing structural issues present in the Washington Treaty system as they consider future attempts at arms control. An arms control treaty cannot occur in a vacuum, certainly not in the midst of a geostrategic situation characterized by the type of structural factors influencing security considerations that existed in the interwar period. The vision of "beating swords into plowshares," while admirable, will not serve as a primary motivation for arms control. The claim that arms control has intrinsic value, even with the very real financial bonus that results from ending an arms buildup, will not convince regimes with significant subjective security concerns.

The process through which the recent replacement for START was negotiated demonstrates the potential difficulty of arms limitations talks in an offense dominant environment. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. negotiated the previous treaties in an environment characterized by an emphasis on counter-value strikes, according to Quester, a defense dominant system. The modern negotiations however, took place in the context of a rapidly improving American ballistic missile defense capability. A missile defense system increases the chances of success for a counterforce strike and threatens to transfer the advantage to offensive action. Within this context, Russia stonewalled on the issue of nuclear weapons reductions, demanding the option to pull out of the treaty should it deem American missile interception capability to pose a threat to its own deterrent. On this matter, Russia manifests the early signs of the same perception of insecurity in an offense dominant environment that made negotiating the Washington treaties so difficult. The Obama administration responded by arguing that the issue of missile defense was unrelated to the goal of reducing deployed nuclear weapons stockpiles and should be decided separately. Although Russia eventually acceded to US proposals and separated missile defense
and arms reduction, this was a mistake. By elevating the moral concerns of arms limitation over security issues, Obama made the same error as the negotiators at London.

Instead, one hoping to negotiate such an agreement must ensure, like the negotiators at Washington, that the security concerns of each involved party are met, and, unlike the negotiators at Washington, that a system exists to deal with potential changes in these concerns due to political or technological reasons. Diplomatic maneuvering and a reliance on the pressure exerted by world opinion, the strategy employed at London, may result in a temporary success, but the security dilemma cannot be dealt with that easily, and any victory will almost certainly be pyrrhic.
Bibliography


