Lessons from the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922: Wider Security Contexts, Measurable Agreements, and Parochial Interests

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Abstract: *What lessons can scholars and policy-makers learn from diplomatic conferences of the past? The Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922 offers lessons in how conference diplomacy can be used for arms control. Because the conference produced such a dramatic result, it has continued to play a vital role in debates on arms control theory. Three principles can be drawn from the conference that are applicable to success in modern-day arms control: the ability of negotiators to address arms control issues in a wider security context relevant to all parties; the ability to set fixed, measurable goals that take into consideration the vital interests of the states involved; and, perhaps most importantly, the ability of civilian negotiators to reconcile and overcome the pressure of domestic interest groups.*

1. Introduction

Much of what is written and discussed about the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922 is framed within a recognition of its success. Allen Dulles (1927), the future head of the CIA, would note that the "spectacular achievement" of the conference seemed to have happened "almost overnight" (p. 413). Nothing could have been further from the truth. While the conference did lead to several outstanding successes, there was nothing easy about the negotiations nor the compromises each party had to make to reach their agreements. At the time of the conference, three major naval powers--America, Japan, and Britain--had all begun major building programs in capital ships, the "weapons of mass destruction" of the time, as a way of counterbalancing the other. Realizing the danger uncontrolled naval building represented to their collective security and their economies, the three major powers met in Washington to discuss an arms limitation treaty and a political arrangement that would settle questions of security and trade regarding the Pacific territories and China. In concrete terms, the conference led to three major treaties: the Five-Power Treaty, the Four-Power Treaty, and the Nine-Power Treaty. The net effect was to nearly freeze naval arms competition for approximately a decade, ease concerns over a war in the Pacific, and bring Japan back into the international system.

Although these treaties were an outstanding accomplishment, there is a danger in overstating their success. While the conference did ease tensions between the three great naval powers of the time, the conference did not preclude the need for follow-up negotiations in 1927 and 1930, nor did it prevent the coming of a Second World War. Nevertheless, to the participants and general public of the time, the results of the conference exceeded expectations. A good portion of the surprise the conference elicited no doubt can be attributed to the pessimistic estimates held by the three major powers, fueled by dire reports and analyses from their respective naval departments about the intentions and plans of their rivals. Because it produced such dramatic results, the conference still finds currency among scholars of arms control as an exemplar of negotiation and compromise. As John Maurer (1994) writes: "modern-day arms controllers and their critics have examined it in an attempt to validate current-day policy prescriptions" (p. 268). The general depiction of the Washington Conference as a model of success stands in contrast to what scholars have noted as the

generally modest nature of arms control agreements (Stanford Arms Control Group, 1984, p. 34). Kenneth Adelman (1984) writes in the midst of the nineteen-eighties arms buildup between the US and the Soviet Union: "Of all the emotions arising from strategic arms control today, the most profound is disappointment" (p. 240).

What then, if anything, can account for the success of this conference? Even as we explore themes and principles from the Washington Conference, it is also important to keep in mind the very contingent nature of the successes realized at the conference. As Jay Luvass (1982) says on the limitations of history and historical study: "solutions to problems are not to be viewed as interchangeable parts" (p. 85). In looking at what John Maurer (1994) calls the "generic" (p. 268) aspects of arms control at this conference, I will also try to keep in mind the limited applicability of these themes.

As this essay will show, three principles can be drawn from the conference that are applicable to success in modern-day arms control: the ability of negotiators to address arms control issues in a wider security context relevant to all parties; the ability to set fixed, measurable goals that take into consideration the vital interests of the states involved; and, perhaps most importantly, the ability of civilian negotiators to reconcile and overcome the pressure of domestic interest groups; in the case of the Washington Conference, especially the interests of naval departments.

2. The First Lesson: Wider Contexts

One major lesson of the Washington Conference is that arms limitation agreements are more likely to produce results when they address issues within a context of larger security concerns common to all parties. The Washington Conference came about because each of the three major naval powers of the time had reason to fear the other. The US, Japan, and Britain were all looking for mechanisms to prevent an unnecessary arms buildup and possible conflict in the Pacific, while at the same time maintaining the force structure needed to protect their vital interests. The Anglo-Japanese alliance, an alliance between Britain and Japan that began in 1902, had proven to be a thorn in the side of US-English relations. Given the scale of US naval building and the burden an arms race would have put on the British economy and the government's ability to pay off war debt, creating a cooperative framework with the US was crucial. Britain was looking for nothing less than a framework for dissolving their alliance with Japan and creating closer ties with the US government, all without antagonizing the Japanese government. The US, for their part, was worried about an increasingly assertive Japan and how this would impact the security of their territories in the Pacific, as well as how Japanese territorial expansion would affect trading rights with China. The most pessimistic of US naval officers worried that in a worst-case scenario the US would have to fight a combined Japanese-British naval force. The Japanese were worried that they were increasingly becoming isolated from the international system, and that an encroaching Pax Americana would drive a wedge between themselves and the British (Asada, 2006, p. 215).

At the center of all these calculations and estimations was anxiety over the expanding influence of each state relative to the other. Naval analysts on each side regarded the plans of the other with equal measures of alarm and suspicion. To American naval analysts, "convincing proof of Japan's aggressive designs lay in her determination to push her eight-eight naval program" (Braisted, 1971, p. 538), a program that aimed for a first-line defense of eight battleships and eight battle cruisers.

The Japanese, for their part, had watched as US power had expanded to Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines, and their naval strength had grown since 1907. The British, meanwhile, watched as their once significant lead in naval power withered away. In the face of growing public anxiety over their aggressive actions in the Pacific, Japan was eager to avoid a collision with the US, as well as a general clash with the larger Western world. As Sadao Asada (2006) writes, the "escalating naval arms race in the Pacific brought about a crisis in Japanese-American relations, even a war scare" (p. 214). At stake in this conference, then, was nothing less than preventing the start of a naval cold war.

The successful conclusion of the 5:5:3 tonnage ratio among the three great powers, which would constrain burdensome arms building for nearly a decade, would not have been possible if some kind of accommodation had not taken place over larger issues of strategic importance. As Maurer (1994) argues, there were three issues between the great naval powers that first needed to be negotiated: an agreement between the United States with Japan regarding China, a revision of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and an agreement that would contain the naval rivalry between the US and Japan. Maurer (1994) writes: "The linkage of these three security issues was essential for reaching an overall settlement" (p. 288). The comprehensive inclusion of these interrelated issues also created a context where bargaining could take place across sectional lines. Thus Japanese concessions on tonnage ratios in the Five-Power Treaty were acceptable because the US could offer assurances that they would not expand their bases in the pacific (Braisted, 1979, p. 610). Similarly, Japanese and British willingness to allow France into the Four Power Treaty was essential for US negotiators to reassure Congress that the agreement was not one more pernicious "secret alliance" (Braisted, 1979, p. 626).

In the end, each treaty was essential to the success of the other. Although the Five-Power Treaty was the arms control success of the conference, the Four-Power Treaty between the US, Britain, France, and Japan helped ease tension between Japan and the US. The Nine-Power agreement, which institutionalized the Open Door Policy in China, helped ease US anxieties about a Japanese threat to their territories in the Pacific and trade interests in China. Together, these treaties provided the framework in which the established ratios could be viewed as practical by all sides.

3. The Second Lesson: Fixed, Measurable Goals

The second major lesson from the Washington Conference is that the ability to set fixed, measurable goals that take into consideration the vital interests of the states is an important ingredient for success. The US's early adoption of their "stop now" program, while a great morale boost to the conference and popular with the US public, would have ultimately meant a vastly unfavorable ratio in warship tonnage for Japanese forces and the sacrifice of one of their much-valued battleship, the still under construction Mutsu. While US negotiators originally envisioned a dramatic stop to the major building programs of each state, the US's flexibility with this policy eventually allowed each of the states to agree to a ratio they could all live with.

Finding the right mix of ratios for each party in the Five-Power Treaty was anything but simple. Each state needed to find a comparative number that simultaneously acknowledged the interests of the other party while protecting their own. Early disagreements flared between the US and Japan.

While the US preferred a 10:10:5 advantage over the Japanese in naval building, and the Japanese wanted a 10:10:7 ratio, both sides eventually were able to compromise on the issue to form the 10:10:6 ratio. Though this compromise proved somewhat difficult for both sides, especially to their naval departments, the Japanese still felt that they were being taken advantage of. It was only American willingness to halt the expansion of bases in the Pacific (framed in Article XIX) that assuaged Japanese fears of American expansion.

Even after this compromise had been reached, the Five-Power Treaty ratios met stiff resistance from the French. Though the 175,000-ton limit that was being proposed for France was much more than the country had in heavy ships at the time, the French were outraged that they were being limited to an amount not even half that of Great Britain and drastically less than that of Japan. Though Italy was happy to settle at the 175,000-ton limit, they argued that their tonnage level should match any limit set for the French. Britain, for their part, argued that their interests necessitated a combined tonnage of both the French and Japanese fleets. Thus, French resistance could have led to a shift in British ratios—which no doubt would have led to the collapse of the treaty. France eventually agreed to the 175,000 ton limit on capital ships and aircraft carriers, but their refusal to compromise on cruisers and submarines frustrated efforts for wider controls on smaller craft.

No less important to reaching a conclusion was the fixed, measurable nature of the agreement. The fact that the agreement focused on weapons that were concrete and measurable, the total tonnage of capital warships and aircraft carriers, is not an insignificant point. The agreement could have settled on vague, symbolic promises, or applied measurements loosely across multiple classes of weapons. Dulles (1927) notes that French and Italian naval experts "opposed the use of the limitation of naval vessels, class by class, with a fixing of definite and separate maximum tonnages for capital ships, cruisers and submarines. They favored limitation by limiting total tonnage alone, leaving each Power free within the limits of this tonnage to construct the type and number of vessels, whether battleships, cruisers or submarines" (p. 416). If the agreement had left details vague over which class of ship was to be limited, it is possible that the treaty would have done little to constrain actual arms building. For one, once total tonnage was applied across multiple classes of ships, verification on building would have become significantly more complicated and open to interpretation. Second, it is possible that loopholes would have been created that allowed for a different kind of arms race, one based on technology and type. Indeed, it was this very failure in terms of cruisers and submarines that would lead the great powers to the negotiating tables later in the decade. Had the conference been able to set similar limits on cruisers and submarines the conference might have been a much greater success.

4. The Third Lesson: Overcoming Domestic Interests

The third major lesson from the Washington Conference is that the ability of negotiators to reconcile and overcome pressures from domestic interests is a key ingredient for reaching meaningful compromise and agreement. As Hans Morgenthau (1952) writes, sectional interests and national interest usually meet at the "lowest common denominator" (p. 148); much of the disappointing results produced by arms control conferences are a result of the conflicting pressures of domestic interests, such as arms manufacturers and bureaucracies. That the Washington Conference successfully produced comprehensive agreements on behalf of the great powers of the time had much to do with the ability of civilian political leaders, in particular the negotiators, to

overcome opposition from their respective naval departments and domestic groups. As Braisted (1979) writes, US naval officers "deplored the 10.10. 6 or 5.5.3 ratio" holding fast to the opinion that the US "should maintain a navy twice as large as the Japanese" (p. 594). The idea of a navy twice as large as that of the Japanese, nothing short of a 10:10:5 ratio, was deeply entrenched in the naval strategic thinking of the time. In addition to naval opposition, the US also faced stringent pressure from a Congress that was especially suspicious of the Four-Power agreement as one more "secret alliance" that would eventually entangle the US in war (Braisted, 1979, p. 626). From the Japanese naval perspective, both the 10:10:5 and the later 10:10:6 proposals were nothing short of treasonous. As Sadao Asada (1994) writes, within the Japanese Navy "there was strong and growing opposition among officers, particularly those on the Navy General Staff, to the policy of arms limitations" (p. 147). The idea of a compromise along the lines of the 10:10: 6 rule was especially abhorrent to extremists at home and hot-headed young military officers, who at the time were all too willing to show their nationalist pride by assassinating their supposedly weak superiors.

Despite heavy resistance by naval interests, all negotiating parties were eager to conclude a treaty that would prevent costly building and perhaps another war. Braisted (1979) credits much of the success of the conference to the negotiators of the three major naval powers: Charles Evan Hughs (US), Arthur Balfour (Britain), and Kato Tomosaburo (Japan), "who were determined to reach a firm accord" (p. 639). That the negotiations were a resounding success, despite obstruction from their respective naval departments, can be seen in the all around scorn naval servicemen showed for the treaty, as well as the overall positive reaction elicited from the countries' respective publics (with the exception of Japan). The ability of civilian leaders, emboldened by public support, to overcome sectional pressure from their respective naval departments was crucial to realizing a final accord. This theme, as much if not more than the others, will resonate in future arms control negotiations.

5. Conclusion: The Enduring Value of Conferences and Negotiations

Throughout this essay, I have demonstrated how general themes within the Washington Conference are still relevant to today's arms control negotiations: the ability to address naval limitations in a wider context that takes into account issues of security related to all parties; the ability to set fixed, measurable goals that take into consideration the vital interests of the states involved; and, perhaps most importantly, the ability of each state to reconcile and overcome pressure from domestic interests. Even as the conference continues to find circulation within arms control circles as an example of success, it is also important to note the limitations of the conference. In the end, the famous 5:5:3 ratio applied only to the tonnage of capital warships and aircraft carriers. The failure to reach similar agreements on cruisers and submarines would necessitate follow-up negotiations in 1927 and 1930. It is equally important to note that the conference did not prevent the occurrence of a Second World War.

With the rise of fascism and militarism in Germany, Italy, and Japan, the agreements of the Washington conference soon lost their meaning. As John Maurer (1994) argues: "The Washington Conference demonstrates that arms control simply cannot exist in a political vacuum: a country's foreign policy objectives and domestic political make-up matter in determining whether arms control is a useful instrument for promoting international stability or a sham" (p. 289). To come

back to the point made by Luvass (1982) earlier in this essay: "solutions to problems are not to be viewed as interchangeable parts" (p. 85). Subsequent events show the limitation of arms control agreements: they are not good in-and-of-themselves, but instead, one more policy tool, dependent on political context for value. In the context of the three rising powers, Maurer (1994) argues the best thing Britain and the US could have done was to ignore the Washington agreement and out-build their enemies.

Arms control is a powerful tool for minimizing the negative economic impact of weapons programs and containing the threat of war; however, arms control is just one policy option among many, and not always the most prudent. As the Washington Conference also shows, it was pressure exerted by US naval building to begin with that brought Britain and Japan to the negotiating table (Braisted, 1979). Policy-makers and scholars need to recognize that even when the principles of good arms control negotiation are adhered to, agreements still break down, treaties collapse, and signatories fail to live up to their agreements. The failure of negotiations to breed concrete results does not necessarily negate their value. Even when arms control conferences fail to reach agreements they usually provide a valuable chance to understand the intentions of military rivals. The history of the Washington Conference shows that the estimations of the various parties, especially those issued by anxious naval departments, varied greatly (Braisted, 1979). The negotiations provided a much-needed check on the worst-case fears of analysts. Even if the conference had broken down, policymakers and analysts from each country would have come out of the conference with a much better understanding of the naval programs and intentions of their rivals.

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