

Road to Infamy: Interwar Pacific Under the Washington Naval Treaty

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Abstract: As Japanese expansionist policies toward mainland China threatened the “Open Door Policy” in early 20th century, United States’ decade-long determination to defend its overseas economic interests across the Pacific put the two nations in a trajectory of conflict.

At the dawn of a Pacific arms race, the Washington Naval Conference of 1921 brought nine nations to discuss interests in the Pacific and naval disarmament. The resulting Washington Naval Treaty was a diplomatic triumph in that it successfully halted naval buildup and mitigated rising animosity. Yet the treaty did not resolve the root cause of conflict. Anglo-American reluctance to back the treaty with naval presence in the Pacific failed to check continued Japanese aggression and ultimately led to the tragedy at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Keywords: Interwar Period, Naval Disarmament, Open Door Policy, 20th Century Pacific

ELEMENTS OF INSTABILITIES IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY EAST ASIA

The Scramble for China: Western Imperialism and Spheres of Influence

Towards the end of the 19th century, internal weakness of China and heightened worldwide imperialism led western powers in China to carve out respective spheres of influence in which they exerted de facto political power and gained exclusive privileges to commerce and resources, such as the rights to banking, mining, and railroad construction. German initiated the “scramble for China” when it coerced Chinese government to accept a list of demands, including major concessions in Shantung province.[1] Britain followed by establishing its own influences along the Yangtze River; Russia then gained control of Manchuria; Japan annexed Korea and Fukien; France acquired authority in Kwangtung, Guangxi, and Yunnan provinces.

The race to expand these peripheral zones created tension and distrust among the imperialist powers throughout the first half of 20th century. After Chinese defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Treaty of Shimonoseki ceded Liaotung Peninsula to Japan. However, fearing the possession of Liaotung Peninsula would give Japan excessive influence over Peking, Russia, Germany, and France protested and pressured Japan to give up the territory in what was known as the Triple Intervention. This event was one early example of the many following conflicts of interests among imperialist powers that complicated the regional situation, and it led to two profound developments: 1) The formation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 as part of Japan’s measure to counter the combined influence of other western powers; and 2) A national humiliation for Japan that prompted the Russo-Japanese War of 1904.

Open Door Policy: Equal Economic Opportunity and Territorial Integrity

American businessmen actively traded and invested in China. Should China be partitioned by European powers with significantly greater imperialist holdings, American access to Chinese market might have eventually been lost. Thus, it was in the US interest to maintain political and territorial integrity in China and to avoid the expansion of exclusive economic privileges.

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Leading American China experts clearly regarded Chinese independence as the guarantee of both American economic interests and regional stability, as manifested in Secretary of State John Hay's letter mentioning "the importance of safeguarding our great commercial interests in that Empire..." and when Charles Denby Jr., a US diplomat in China, wrote: "if her [German] example of seizing Chinese territory is followed it is not unlikely that war will result among the European powers." [2][3]

The majority opinion among the McKinley administration and American businesses leans toward the uphold of equal opportunities under Chinese sovereignty instead of American acquisition of its own spheres of influence. [4] Secretary of State John Hay shared such views, and turned to William Rockhill, an old China hand, for advice in articulating an American policy in the Far East. William Rockhill formulated the Open Door Policy, which stressed several major points: 1) Territorial and administrative integrity of China; 2) Equal treatment in trade and investment; and 3) International recognition of the Open Door Policy and cooperation among the powers. In September 1899, Secretary of State John Hay dispatched official notes to France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Japan, and Russia, formerly declaring the Open Door principle. The responses to the Open Door Notes were more or less equivocal, as the powers expressed vague approval on the condition that other nations also comply. [5] Nevertheless, John Hay declared that all nations has expressed "final and definitive" consent to the principle by March 1900. [6]

The Open Door Policy was soon put to a test when the Boxer's Rebellion erupted and quickly spread to Peking in June 1900. As the Eight-nation Alliance marched onto Peking, Hay issued a second Open Door note reiterating the determination to "preserve Chinese territorial and administrative entity", fearing that the occupation army would take advantage to carve up more territorial concessions. [7] By characterizing the Boxers as rebels, Hay avoided war with China, which could possibly have led to the collapse of the Qing government. [8] Nevertheless, despite being the central American policy in East-Asia throughout early 20th century, the Open Door Policy remained largely unenforceable given that each imperialist power desired exclusive access to the resources and economic opportunities in their own spheres of influence. Another failure embedded in the Open Door Policy was its futility in containing future expansion of foreign spheres of influence, as evidenced by the Russian invasion of Manchuria in 1900.

Russo-Chinese relations in Manchuria deteriorated in previous decades due to the lease of Liaotung peninsula and resulted conflicts of taxation. The fragile situation escalated into undeclared war between Russia and China when Boxer Rebellion spread to Manchuria in June 1900. [9] Russian forces fought Chinese imperial troops and boxers in a series of battles and succeeded in occupying most of Manchuria by October 1900. [10] In an effort to resolve the Manchurian conflict, the Li-Lobanov Treaty granted Russian railway concession in Manchuria and free movement of Russian troops. Nominally, the concession was granted to the Russo-Chinese Bank instead of the Russian government so to make the concession a joint project. In reality, the terms of the treaty were tantamount to the Russian annexation of Manchuria. [11]

However, despite limited long-term effectiveness, the Open Door policy reflected increasing American involvement in Far East affairs at the dawn of 20th century, after its annexation of the Philippines and a number of Pacific islands. This expansion of American overseas interests, as well as the Open Door philosophy that guided such expansion, inevitably placed US in a position of rivalry with Japan, another new imperialist power who saw its destiny in carving the entire East Asia into its "Co-Prosperty Zone".

The Rising Sun: Early 20th Century Japanese Dominance in East-Asia

During the Meiji Era, Japan embarked on a series of social, economic, and industrial reforms that transformed the isolationist, feudal nation into a heavily westernized modern country. Abolishment of traditional social status, especially the samurai class, supplied the necessary human resources and provided the financial capacity for

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a modern, progressive-minded bureaucracy. Foreign economic investment and consumption of western goods stimulated rapid industrial growth and a prosperous national economy.

In the meantime, Japan enacted intensive military reforms, including the establishment of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and a nationwide conscription law in 1873 which stated "...men are to be picked from among the people, seventeen or eighteen to thirty-five years of age." and that "The service extends over three years." [12] This measure effectively enlarged the size of Japanese military within a short time. In 1878, the IJA had 10,158 conscripts on active service. When the First Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894, the number was 22,354. The active-duty army personnel doubled again in the decade after the Sino-Japanese War, with the number being 52,040 in 1898. The length of entire service had also been extended to twelve years and four months. [13] Japan was determined to create a modernized military that could rival those of traditional western powers. Western military institution was fully embraced in Japan, from the adoption of western weapons to the hiring of foreign advisors from France, Britain, and later Germany to introduce new training and tactics.

Successful Japanese military expeditions in Korea and Manchuria through the late 19th century was the evident sign that Japan had rose to become a regional imperialist power through a process of complete westernization. Despite the fact that both China and Japan adopted western weapons to varying degrees as the means, the most decisive difference lay in the end that they attempted to achieve. China mainly used modern weapons to resolve its internal issues and to strengthen traditional Qing rule, as the army equipped with muskets were used to quell internal rebellions. In comparison, Japan's ultimate goal was to become a dominant power in Asia and undertook westernization in social and economic aspects across the board. [14]

The results of such difference were fairly obvious at the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War. At the time, the Imperial Chinese Army was composed of three forces. The 250,000-strong Manchu bannermen were the elite army, and most of them were assigned the task of guarding Peking and other metropolitan areas. The Green Standard Army, a 600,000-strong Han Chinese gendarmerie force, made up the majority of Chinese troops. These troops received little training during peacetime yet were the main combat force during wars. The third component were local militias called Braves, and their number was ever-fluctuating. [15] Overall, the Chinese army lacked modern tactics and weaponry due to the unwillingness of many Qing officials to accept western culture and standards. The Imperial Japanese Army had a strength of 120,000 men under two armies and five divisions, and adopted modern standards from training to tactics, as well as uniform and weapons. Thus, the better-equipped and well-disciplined Japanese army easily defeated the Chinese imperial troops in a six-month expedition into Korea and Liaotung Peninsula.

Through a series of conflict at the turn of century, including the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, the subsequent Russo-Japanese War in 1904, as well as WWI, Japan annexed significant portions of East Asian and Pacific territory, among which were Manchuria, Korea, Formosa, Liaotung Peninsula, Fukien, and the Marshall Islands. Asides from territorial gains, these military successes fostered an increasing nationalism and militarism within Japan. More than ever, Japanese expansionist policy, driven partly by its imperial ambition, directly violates the Open Door Policy. As a result, Japan increasingly saw United States as the biggest obstacle to achieving Asia-Pacific dominance.

The Uneasy Alliance: Gradual Breakdown of WWI-Era Diplomatic Dynamics

After World War I, factors were at work that undermined relationships between the Allied Powers.

Disagreements and suspicions among the Allies resulted from attempts to reach post-war settlements, among which was the disposal of Germany's High Seas Fleet. By the war's end, Britain interned the remaining German warships. France and Italy wished the fleet divided among the victorious nations, while United States and Britain preferred the fleet destroyed. As the nations negotiated, the German crews managed to scuttle most of their ships due to the temporary absence of the British patrol. [16] The French and Italians were enraged and

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suspected British collaboration behind the scuttling. This incident revealed the growing rivalry and conflicts that embedded the former alliance.

The 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance also weakened during the beginning decades of 20th century. By the alliance, the Imperial Japanese Navy would defend British possessions in the Far East, in exchange for British recognition of Japanese “special interests” in China. However, continued Japanese expansion in China resulted in the Twenty-One Demands, which hindered other European imperialist attempts. The exclusive interests Japan followed strained the alliance, and Britain increasingly saw her foreign principle in line with that of United States’.

Increasingly, Japanese saw themselves as a better race chosen by god to rule over Asia. American anti-immigration laws, among which the California Alien Land Law of 1913 that prohibited Japanese from owning land, further spurred nationalistic sentiment and hostility toward the U.S. in Japan.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WASHINGTON NAVAL TREATY

Post WW1 Rapid Naval Buildup

The decades preceding and following World War I were marked by rapid development of naval weaponry and strategies. The combat capabilities of battleships were dramatically enhanced by new technologies, among which were 1) high velocity heavy ordnance that allowed greater range and penetration, 2) advanced telescopic sights that improved long-range accuracy, 3) alloy steel armor that offered better protection, 4) quick-firing medium and small caliber guns as defensive weapons. [17] These technological advancements meant that 20th century battleships were becoming increasingly heavier, faster, and better-armed — factors that significantly increased their capabilities. Accompanying these technologies were new tactics, including aerial reconnaissance, night attacks by torpedo fleets, integrated artillery assaults etc. In the meantime, other branches of naval technologies, including cruisers and submarines, were also developing at staggering rates.

Aside from the technological developments, WWI-era naval power balances were also disrupted by the elimination of Central Power’s naval forces, especially the High Seas Fleet. Members of the former Allies had to adjust to the new power dynamics, and all wished their own naval superiority, at least regional if not global. Under this context, a naval arms race seemed the rational response to new technologies and threatening shifts in naval balance.

Influenced by WWI naval events, especially the blockade of Germany and the Battle of Jutland, President Woodrow Wilson was convinced that a powerful navy “equal to the most powerful” must be built to defend the American shores as well as her overseas economic interests. The Navy Department General Board proposed a fleet of 10 dreadnoughts, 6 battlecruisers, 10 cruisers, 50 destroyers, and 67 submarines to be built by 1925. The battleships were to carry 16-inch guns and displace 32,000 tons or 42,000 tons. [18]

Since 1908, Japan had viewed U.S. as the hypothetical enemy due to the two countries’ unavoidable conflict in seeking dominance in the Pacific and the Far East. The Imperial Japanese Navy expected to have at least 70% tonnage of the U.S. fleet. Based on the assumption of 25 U.S. capital ships, Japanese Naval General Staff planned on building 8 battleships and 8 battlecruisers, known as the Eight-Eight Fleet Program. The Diet of Japan was initially reluctant, given the expensive cost of battleships, but gradually approved all sixteen ships across several years.

Britain proposed similar naval construction plans, fearing the U.S. surface fleet surpass the Royal Navy and Britain losing its maritime supremacy. By November 1921, Britain had started or planned the construction of eight new capital ships, all of them were newer in design than the Japanese and American counterparts.

Global Factors Encouraging Naval Disarmament

Despite the ambitious naval construction plans proposed by each power, numerous factors were at work

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during the years after WWI that strongly discouraged the implementation of these plans, among which were the potentially exorbitant cost of a naval arms race that Britain and Japan feared to undertake, rising pacifist sentiment in the U.S. after WWI, and the demobilization and reconstruction that dominated major power's domestic politics.

Even prior to the Washington Naval Treaty, the majority of Japanese Naval General Staff clearly recognized the disparity between Japanese and American industrial capacity and the naval strength they could each support. Thus, the Japanese intended on maintaining a navy 70% the size of the U.S. navy. Since the entire Japanese fleet was concentrated in the Pacific, such a ration was expected to provide an acceptable victory margin over the U.S. Pacific fleet. Nevertheless, Japanese domestic economy experienced a series of major slumps after WWI, and in 1921 the annual spending on naval arms reached an unsustainable 31.6% of national budget.[19] As a result, the Eight-Eight Fleet Program was repeatedly delayed by the Diet of Japan, with the final authorization in June, 1920. Similarly, the British Admiralty was aware that Britain lacked the industrial might to maintain its superiority in a naval arms race, as British Prime Minister David Lloyd George concluded that arms race with the U.S. would end in "bankruptcy or war".

In the United States, Woodrow Wilson's naval expansion plan was equally unpopular. The Congress disapproved Wilson's 1919 Naval Program, and during the 1920 Presidential campaign, U.S. domestic politics shifted to the pre-WWI isolationism. Contributing to this anti-war sentiment was the women suffrage movement, as organizations such as International Council of Women helped convince politicians that cutting military expenditures could save national budgets and win popular votes. Major Protestant denominations also advocated disarmament and curtail of naval spendings.[20] Warren Harding, the new Republican president, sought domestic popular support and reduction of taxes through naval limitations.

NAVAL DEVELOPMENTS AFTER WASHINGTON NAVAL TREATY

Diplomatic Triumph of Washington Naval Conference

In November 1921, U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes invited delegations of major naval powers to Washington to resolve the rising naval rivalry through a naval limitations conference. On the opening of Washington Naval Conference, Hughes enthusiastically claimed that "the way to disarm is to disarm". Wide public support of the disarmament movement, as well as each delegation's success in overriding their domestic "big-navy" voices, plus the U.S. deciphering of foreign delegation's communications, accounted for the general smoothness of the negotiations and the adoption of most U.S. proposals.

The U.S. delegation came to the conference with a clear list of objectives: 1) To restrain Japanese naval expansion in the Pacific; 2) To terminate the Anglo-Japanese Alliance; 3) To cut back naval spending through disarmament; 4) To maintain the Open Door Policy in China. To avoid technical disputes about the qualities of individual capital ships, the conference adopted quantitative measure, in terms of tonnage and armaments, to restrict the size of the navies. Helped by cryptographers who intercepted each delegation's communication with their governments, Hughes was able to engineer a minimum ratio that was acceptable to each party. Three months of negotiation resulted in a agreement of 5:5:3 tonnage ratio for capital ships of U.S., Britain, and Japan—525,000 tons for U.S., 525,000 tons for Britain, and 315,000 tons for Japan. France and Italy were both given the ratio of 1.75. Each battleship was also limited to 35,000 ton and 15-inch main guns. In addition, a ten-year naval construction holiday was agreed, in which no capital ships shall be built, except for a few exceptions to balance the tonnage ratios. As a result of the treaty, large numbers of capital ships were either scrapped or converted to aircraft carriers. The U.S., for example, scrapped 15 old battleships along with 13 under construction.

United States successfully achieved its major objectives through the conference. All Japanese capital ships of the second Eight-Eight Fleet Program were either cancelled or converted to aircraft carriers, with the exception of

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the Nagato class. The already weakened Anglo-Japanese Alliance was also terminated and replaced by the Four-Power Treaty, a loose alliance that lacked any actual meanings in international relations. Japan had also agreed to transfer Shantung peninsula to Chinese government as a sign of respecting the Open Door Policy. Lastly, the halt of battleship construction allowed the Harding administration to dramatically slash naval spending.

The British delegation's main objective was to preserve the security of its overseas empire under a restricted fleet. Although Britain agreed to the symbolic parity ratio with U.S., the delegation gained advantages in negotiating details. The treaty allowed Britain to build two new battleships to replace its older ones, and the restriction of battleship tonnage meant that Britain was spared the need to update its naval facilities to accommodate larger constructions. Most importantly, Britain successfully resisted the proposal of applying similar tonnage limits to cruisers, for the nation relied on its huge fleet of cruisers and armed merchants to protect and exert control over its colonies.

The Japanese delegation focused on maximizing the tonnage allowed for Japan, as well as the rather vague intention of restricting U.S. fortifications across the Pacific. Admiral Kato Tomosaburo, the head of Japanese delegate, recognized that the 5:5:3 ratio would allow Japan the third largest navy and, in the meantime, a naval balance point that could be sustained by Japanese industry. Despite that Japanese General Staff approved Kato Tomosaburo's opinion, the Fleet Faction represented by Kato Kanji wielded significant influence in the navy, which contributed to eventual Japanese renouncement of the London Naval Treaty.

Overall, the Washington Naval Conference was a diplomatic success in which all major powers believed that they had concluded the best possible deal for themselves. More importantly, the treaty effectively delayed an impending naval arms race, and the construction of capital ships was halted until the 1930s. The signing of the treaty also manifested fundamental shifts in the relationships between U.S., Britain, and Japan across 20th century. As Britain began to share more ideological similarities with United States, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was replaced by a loose multilateral alliance involving all major powers in which there existed few mutual responsibilities. As a result, U.S. strategists increasingly considered war with Britain merely hypothetical, and focused on War Plan Orange (in which U.S. engage in war with Japan) and the building of its Pacific naval presence.

A Second Arms Race of "Treaty Cruisers"

As the total tonnage of capital ships was strictly limited by the Washington Naval Treaty, the navies of major powers diverted their resources to building auxiliary vessels including cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. The treaty specified the maximum cruiser size being 10,000 tons armed with 8-inch guns. Ironically, suspicion and fear of rival's build-up of such treaty-type cruisers resulted in a second round of arms race.

Almost immediately after the treaty, Royal Navy adopted an ambitious construction plan of 70 cruisers, both the treaty-type heavy cruisers and light cruisers armed with 6-inch guns. By 1926, Britain had nine treaty-type cruiser laid down, Japan had eight laid down, and France and Italy had two under construction. However, until that point the U.S. Congress failed to fund such building programs, causing considerable disputes within the navy. It was not until failed negotiations to restrict cruisers at Geneva in 1927 that U.S. navy received authorization to build 15 cruisers from 1929-1931.[21]

The race on cruiser construction was halted by the 1930 London Naval Treaty. British Prime Minister MacDonald predicted that the treaty would have secured world peace and permanent disarmament. He was soon disproved when Japan withdrew from the treaty in 1936, making the treaty effectively meaningless. Such misconception came from the unique worldview of dominant liberal powers such as Britain and U.S. that envisioned a somewhat idealistic *status quo* of events. Similar unawareness of reality regarding Japan led the two powers to ignore the importance of backing their ideals with naval presence in the Far East, and thus left Japanese aggression unchecked in China.

CONCLUSION

During late 19th century, development of fast, efficient steamships increased global trade and accelerated advancements of western imperialism into the Far East. China, with its vast market and abundant resources, became the coveted treasure for every imperialist power. Along with the carving up of more and more “spheres of influence”, the competition for opportunities in China intensified, and unavoidable conflicts of interests resulted. Prior to the 20th century, foreign relations in China were largely maintained through a network of bilateral agreements and alliances among the imperialist powers. Beginning with increased U.S. involvement in China, however, the situation was changed by the Open Door Policy. The original network, consisted of imperialist powers with similar diplomatic philosophy and intention, was thus replaced by a vague consensus to protect foreign economic interests and uphold territorial integrity in China.

The rather hollow rhetoric of the Open Door Notes failed to resonate with the interests with other imperialist powers, who already had significant footings in China. Thus, the policy was poorly enforced and remained on paper. Moreover, it represented a fundamental ideological difference between U.S. and Japan, the later wishing to extend its territorial empire and become the master of Asia. Such difference persisted throughout the decades after WWI and served as the basis of Japanese hostility towards the U.S.

The Washington Naval Treaty of 1921 was a successful U.S. initiative that halted a round of domestically unwelcome and economically unwise naval arms race. Nevertheless, the treaty failed to resolve the underlying mutual suspicion among the naval powers, and ironically set off another round of arms race of “treaty cruisers”. In the meantime, the treaty limited U.S. and Britain naval presence in the Far East, and further increased the difficulty to uphold the Open Door Policy.

In the 1930s, the onset of Great Depression, surging militarism and ultranationalism in Japan, and Germany's aggressive gestures in Europe marked seismic changes in the global diplomatic relations. Japanese leaders increasingly saw the 5:5:3 ratio of the Washing Naval Treaty as another humiliation by western nations, and they believed the future of Japan lie in Asian domination. As Britain and U.S. attention was absorbed by developments Europe, Japan adopted its “Strike South” plan — the island nation was ready to cast all of its chips in the fateful gamble.

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