NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 539 November 15, 2022

Five Arms Control Lessons for the 100th Anniversary of the 1922 Washington Naval Conference

Matthew R. Costlow
Matthew R. Costlow is Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. He was formerly Special Assistant in the Office of Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy at the Pentagon.

The 100th anniversary of the conclusion of the 1921-1922 Washington Naval Conference has nearly passed with hardly any substantive discussion, and not even a passing mention from non-government organizations devoted to arms control.[1] This lack of reflection is all the more curious considering some of the striking parallels between 1922 and 2022: a growing revisionist power in Asia, a struggling Great Britain, and a United States weary of war and riven by isolationist sentiments. The prospect of arms control seemed slight then, much as today, but a confluence of factors drove the great naval powers to an agreement limiting what were considered the ultimate symbols of military power in the day: capital ships, namely, battleships and battle cruisers. Could similar geopolitical conditions today lead to a concerted push for arms control? Might the prospect, or even the act, of Russian nuclear weapons employment in Ukraine prompt urgent calls for further constraints on today's ultimate symbols of national power, nuclear weapons? Even if the current crisis should pass without nuclear weapons employment, what should policymakers learn from a century-old treaty?

A close review of the Washington Naval Conference, and its potential lessons for arms control, may be useful in navigating current and future arms control proposals because some elements of arms control (e.g., negotiating incentives, national interests, etc.) endure in relevance even as technology and the international context changes. While the rich history of the Washington Naval Conference presents a number of lessons to learn for the modern strategist, including

© National Institute Press, 2022

those beyond arms control, this article will focus on five that are perhaps most relevant and fundamental to the study of arms control. First, arms control typically reflects, rather than creates a state's willingness to adjust its armaments. Second, a state's weapon production capacity matters greatly, not only its forces in being. Third, arms control does not necessarily cause improved political relations. Fourth, arms control agreements typically do not end state competition, but merely shift that competition into other uncontrolled areas. Fifth and finally, existing arms control agreements can prevent or discourage military and political decisions that may be necessary to sustain or strengthen deterrence. Before examining each lesson in detail, however, it is useful to explain briefly the political and military areas the Washington Naval Conference encompassed and the resulting agreements.

What was the Washington Naval Conference?

The Washington Naval Conference arose out of the general post-World War I desire to lower political tensions, including (politicians hoped) through the limitation and reduction of armaments. Pre-dating World War I, Japan had decided to pursue an "eight-eight" plan for its Navy, eight battleships and eight armored cruisers, all less than eight years old.[2] Later, Japan emerged in a better strategic position vis-à-vis Germany post-WWI as the League of Nations stripped Germany of its island possessions in the Pacific and gave them to Japan to administer, incentivizing an ongoing Japanese naval expansion. In the wake of World War I, the United States decided to pursue a "Navy Second to None," half of which was placed in the Pacific – partly in response to Japan's nearly fivefold naval budget increase between 1917 and 1921.[3] A global economic downturn in the early 1920s, however, threatened the finances necessary for naval modernization programs among the three largest naval powers in the world, the United States, Great Britain, and Japan.

In this context, the United States invited nine nations to discuss political issues in the Pacific, with four invited to specifically negotiate naval reductions or limitations with the United States, including Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. While political alliance issues and military issues were inherently connected throughout the negotiations, the delegates decided to produce three separate treaties, each of which pertained to some aspect of naval relations. The Five-Power Treaty among the states listed above "set a ratio of warship tonnage" for capital ships, with the United States and Great Britain allowed 500,000 tons each, Japan 300,000 tons (the "5:5:3 ratio"), and France and Italy allowed 175,000 tons each.[4] Smaller ships, below battleship and aircraft carrier size, were allowed to be built up to 10,000 tons with 8-inch guns, but without limit on their number.[5] Additionally, the treaty instituted a capital ship building "holiday" where capital ships under construction were scrapped and building plans for more were discarded. The Five-Power Treaty also forbade the expansion of fortifications on particular Pacific islands (such as Guam, the Philippines, the Kurile Islands, etc.), and, combined with the Four-Power Treaty (agreement to consult in case of a crisis) and the Nine-

Power Treaty (affirming the importance of trade relations and respecting for the territorial integrity of China), appeared to settle many of the simmering tensions in the Pacific.

Lesson One: Arms Control Typically Ratifies Decisions States Already Made

One important lesson for arms control, as illustrated by the Washington Naval Conference, is that while arms control agreements often result in limitations or reductions in weapons, the arms control process itself is not the cause for those limitations or reductions; instead, arms control essentially reflects existing political realities and decisions to limit or reduce weapons. In other words, arms control is the formal external process that endorses previous internal political decisions. Politics drives arms control and not generally vice versa; so if there is little political appetite to limit or reduce weapons, then the arms control process typically cannot create that appetite. This dynamic is clear in the history of the Washington Naval Conference in that the Five Power Treaty, which imposed size and number restrictions on capital ships, was in line with already existing political direction in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan.

In 1919, the United Kingdom instituted the infamous "Ten Year Rule" which directed the military to revise its budget requests on the assumption that "the British Empire would not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years."[6] Based on this annually renewed assessment, the U.K. Parliament and other financially-minded government organizations imposed severe budget cuts on the British Navy, both to its shipbuilding and its personnel programs. The U.S. Congress, acting similarly, hoped to placate powerful domestic peace organizations while adhering to the prevailing political virtue of budget balancing.[7] Even Japanese Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō, the architect of the "eight-eight" fleet plan, was forced to scrap the plan due to the government's financial difficulties. Once he was informed about the U.S. invitation to participate in naval arms control, he stated, "There was no chance of building an eight-eight fleet, so I want to scrap it when given a chance."[8] Thus, the arms control process generally did not cause political leaders to greatly modify their naval plans, but rather locked in perceived advantages or prevented further disadvantage.

Lesson Two: Weapon Production Capability and Capacity are Fundamental

While forces in being often are the currency of arms control, the capability and capacity to produce weapons often plays an important role in whether states seek arms control negotiations in the first place. The Washington Naval Conference is a prime example of how a state's ability to produce weapons at scale, namely the U.S. ability, helped drive Japan and the United Kingdom to the negotiating table. In other words, it is not simply the fear of competing in an arms race that drives the urge to negotiate, it is the fear that a state will lose the arms race and be stuck in an inferior position in the future with little hope for negotiated limits then. Or, as summarized by then-President Warren G. Harding, "We'll talk sweetly and patiently to

them [the other major naval powers] at first; but if they don't agree then we'll say '[expletive] you, if it's a race, then the United States is going to go to it.'"[9]

Indeed, during the Washington Naval Conference negotiations, it is evident from historical sources that the Japanese and British political and military leaderships recognized that even if they had superiority in one naval arms area at the time (in Japan's case), they knew they would eventually not be able to compete with the ship-building capacity of the United States – thus incentivizing reaching an agreement. Japanese Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō, for instance, sought the opinion of the highest-ranking Navy officials back in Japan during the negotiations regarding America's position that a 10:10:6 ratio was unalterable, a position that conflicted with Japan's own unalterable decision that the lowest ratio it could accept was 10:10:7 – which, if adhered to, American officials implied could scuttle the entire conference. The Japanese Navy officials responded to Katō with clear logic:

> While the Navy considers the ratio of 10:7 as absolutely mandatory, it also deems the successful conclusion of the conference absolutely imperative. If the conference should break up as a result of Japan's absolute insistence, naval building competition, far keener than at present, will inevitably ensure. It is obvious that the Empire cannot compete with the United States numerically. Taking a large view of the future of our nation and trusting our delegate, we accept as unavoidable a decision to lower our ratio below 70 percent.[10]

Britain's political leaders, similarly, also assessed that they simply could not compete with the United States in naval construction, at least without unacceptable expenditures during a global economic downturn.[11] Over the objections of significant factions in each of the Japanese and British Navies, both states' political leaders decided that the U.S. shipbuilding capacity – despite its diminished use due to Congress – could not be overcome, making agreement the least bad option.

Lesson Three: Arms Control Typically Does Not Improve Political Relations Among Hostile Powers

Even though it appears intuitive that arms control would cause or improve political relations, the Washington Naval Conference demonstrates that is not always the case. Indeed, as stated in "lesson one" above, for arms control to move forward, there must be some level of political support domestically – but examples from the Washington Naval Conference show that agreements are not always sought to improve relations internationally and may even sow the seeds of domestic political instability.

For example, it is clear from the historical record that Japan primarily sought arms control with the United States not because it hoped to improve its bilateral relations, but to secure military

advantage. As Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō told his colleagues, "Since Japan's national strength in relation to the Anglo-American powers is vastly inferior, *it will be to our advantage to keep them tied down* to the [capital ship] ratio of 10:10:6, even though Japan was assigned an inferior strength."[12] (Emphasis added) Indeed, even as Japan was negotiating naval limitations with the United States, it changed its official position on the United States from the "hypothetical" adversary to the "inevitable" adversary. As the foremost historian of the 20th century Japanese navy, Sadao Asada, has written, "A supreme irony of the Washington treaty was that Japan's National Defense Policy adopted the idea of inevitable war [with the United States] precisely when that treaty had reduced the Japanese and American navies so that neither could conduct offensive operations."[13]

Additionally, even though most historians agree that Japan gained the most militarily and politically from the Washington Naval Conference, the unequal ratio in capital ships infuriated significant elements of the Japanese Navy. In fact, in one enlightening anecdote, "On the day Japan accepted the 60 percent ratio, [high ranking Navy official] Katō Kanji was seen shouting, with tears in his eyes, 'As far as I am concerned, war with America starts now. We'll get our revenge over this…"[14] Indeed, the succession of perceived unequal treaties and agreements with the United States and Great Britain led to political turmoil domestically in Japan, where hardline militarists saw what they believed was loss after loss of Japan's military capability as an affront to the Empire's honor and danger to its security – leading to political assassinations, up to an including the Japanese prime minister in 1936.

As one of the leading naval historians commented on these developments, "That arms control reflects the larger international environment more than it shapes that environment is one of the hard lessons that this important episode teaches."[15]

Lesson Four: Limitations in One Area Shifts Arms Competition to Other Areas

While the Washington Naval Conference, and specifically the Five Power Treaty, succeeded in limiting the size and number of capital ships, this success came at the cost of provoking competition in those areas not covered by the treaty – despite the hopes of U.S. officials. U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes remarked during the Washington Naval Conference that the Five Power Treaty, "…ends, absolutely ends, the race in the competition of naval armaments."[16] This, of course, turned out to be untrue as Japan and Great Britain shifted their production away from treaty-limited battleships and aircraft carriers towards improved auxiliary ships, sometimes referred to as "battle cruisers" or "treaty cruisers" because they were unconstrained by the treaty.[17] According to Asada, "During the treaty era, Japan took the world lead in heavy cruiser design. Its heavy cruisers were faster, had a greater cruising radius, and were more heavily gunned than their American counterparts. The Japanese navy intended these heavy cruisers to be 'substitutes' for battleships…"[18] Or, as Stephen Roskill summarized in his classic work on interwar naval policy, "Thus the conference on naval *limitation* can

reasonably be said to have ensured a substantial *increase* in the size and armament of one important class of ship."[19]

Indeed, Roskill goes on to note that arms control limitations on larger battleships spurred innovation, and expansion, in a number of different areas beyond cruisers, to include destroyers and submarines.[20] Thus, arms control in this instance did control arms, but only among a limited set weapons, which inadvertently incentivized the improvement and expansion of unconstrained sets of weapons. Before agreeing to future arms control proposals, policymakers must consider the potential benefits of limitations on weapons in one area while weighing that against the likelihood and consequences of spurring competition in other areas where the other signatory may have an advantage.

Lesson Five: Arms Control Introduces Restraints Beyond the Agreement that may Weaken Deterrence

In line with the caution against unintended consequences referenced above, the Washington Naval Conference also teaches that arms control agreements can introduce restraints beyond those explicitly spelled out in treaties. That is, an arms control agreement can beget expectations or incentives for further arms control agreements, which in some cases can limit the freedom of action for political and military leaders to adapt to changing international circumstances.

In the case of Japan and the United States, the Washington Naval Conference appears to have inadvertently contributed to deterrence failure by limiting the political and military opportunities to modernize and expand the U.S. Navy in the face of a growing Japanese naval threat. Or, in the words of the great naval historian John H. Mauer, "By trying to perpetuate the Washington arms control system in the radically changed international political environment of the 1930s, rather than using its demise as a tocsin for greater naval rearmament, statesmen and naval leaders in Britain and the United States committed a serious strategic blunder."[21]

In the United Kingdom, the Washington Naval Conference created an atmosphere that made even building up to allowed naval treaty limits nearly impossible. As one study of the time period notes, "… the Treaty did create expectations about further naval arms control which made it inexpedient for the Admiralty to ask for more carriers or aircraft at a time when politicians were enthusiastically thinking about major reductions."[22] In the United States, Congress was reluctant to fund new or modernized warships throughout the 1920s and 1930s because it expected follow-on naval arms control agreements might either limit or reduce those modernized ships, thus wasting money, time, and effort.[23] Instead, U.S. leaders typically believed in the "action-reaction" model of arms racing, sometimes not even building up to allowed treaty limits for fear of provoking an arms race. As one prominent historian of this

period has observed, "Military building by one nation did not necessarily trigger an escalating cycle of specific or immediate reactions by other nations. Specifically, the American naval building program did not keep pace with Japanese naval building between 1921 and 1938. Moreover, America's unilateral restraint in naval building not only failed to induce Japan to reciprocate, but may have tempted the Imperial Navy to engage in an unrestricted naval race, which increased the risk of war."[24]

Indeed, as Mauer has noted, "The slow starts made by Britain and the United States in building up their navies offered Japanese naval leaders the tempting possibility of building a navy to rival the American and British fleets. By appearing at first unwilling and then progressing to rearmament only slowly, Britain and the United States showed little appetite for a competition with Japan."[25] He continues, "The consequences of this tardiness to rearm proved disastrous, in that it undermined the ability of the West to deter Japan from attacking: Japanese naval planners in the autumn of 1941 possessed an incentive to strike before Britain and the United States could make up the ground they had lost."[26]

The historical record supports this assessment. In September 1941, the Japanese government produced a document that detailed why it believed attacking the United States in the very near future was its best option. The document states:

> Meanwhile the naval and air forces of the United States will improve remarkably as time goes on; and defensively, the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands will gradually grow stronger in the South. Hence the passing of time not only means that we will face more difficulties in military operations, but also means that the increasing military preparedness of the United States Navy will surpass the naval power of our Empire after next autumn, and that we will finally be forced to surrender to the United States and Great Britain without a fight.[27]

In short, Japan saw a window of opportunity, first opened by the limits set by the Washington Naval Conference and kept open by reluctant U.S. and U.K. rearmament programs, to strike the United States on militarily advantageous terms. While arms control did not directly cause deterrence failure, it contributed significantly to creating the conditions that potentially made deterrence failure both more likely and perhaps more destructive.

Conclusion

The Washington Naval Conference, regrettably, is little remembered today except among a niche group of naval historians and arms control specialists. This is regrettable not only because the historical time period bears some resemblance to international conditions today, but more so, because the fundamentals of the arms control process typically transcend time and place. That is, arms control specialists have a wider range of relevant historical case studies available

to them than simply those encompassed by the Cold War. This article is an attempt to demonstrate the continuing relevance of a 100-year-old arms control process and treaty – even though the delegates and the international environment the agreement reflected are long gone, the fundamental lessons remain.

Among the five lessons examined in this article, the first is that arms control is a product of a political decision, not necessarily the cause of new political dynamics – arms control reflects rather than creates. Second, although arms control typically is concerned with existing military forces, the Washington Naval Conference demonstrates the important role that U.S. warship production capability and capacity played in encouraging Japan and Great Britain to come to the negotiating table. Third, arms control does not necessarily improve political relations and may be pursued simply to advance national interests. Fourth, an arms control agreement's success in limiting or reducing one area of competition may in fact incentivize competition and innovation in other potentially offsetting areas of weapons production. Fifth and finally, an established arms control agreement can restrain political and military leaders who otherwise would likely adapt their forces to an emerging and dangerous threat environment, thus potentially weakening deterrence by restricting the options for rearmament.

These lessons, of course, cannot rest solely on the case of the Washington Naval Conference, but appear to be borne out by the history of arms control during and after the Cold War. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, for instance, also illustrates lesson one, that arms control typically reflects political reality rather than creates it. The Reagan administration's approach to arms control did not change substantially from 1983-1987, but the political landscape changed dramatically with the rise of Soviet leader Mikhal Gorbachev. The New START Treaty, in addition, illustrates the third, fourth, and potentially the fifth lessons for arms control. Even though the United States and Russia signed the New START Treaty in 2010, only four years later with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S.-Russian diplomatic relations plummeted. It also appears as if New START's caps on long-range nuclear weapons may have inadvertently shifted arms competition for Russia to intermediate-range weapons (which violated and led to the dissolution of the INF Treaty) and non-strategic nuclear weapons. Finally, as Frank Miller has argued, the New START Treaty may be constraining the weapons the United States most needs to adapt to a worsening threat environment, leaving U.S. political and military leaders with a restricted set of options.[28]

It is difficult to improve upon naval historian John H. Mauer's assessment, "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."[29] Given the lack of commentary today on the 100th anniversary of the Washington Naval Conference among groups typically devoted to arms control, it is easy to be pessimistic of the prospect for growing awareness about the lessons for arms control that history teaches. Perhaps

that pessimism is justified. Yet, with the benefit of 100 years of hindsight, now is as good a time as ever to re-introduce the long-lost arms control lessons of the past in the hope that current and future students of strategy can shape arms control proposals based not on naïve hopes, but on the hard-learned lessons of history.

[1] The two notable exceptions are articles from distinguished naval historians who have previously written scholarly treatments of the Washington Naval Conference. See, John H. Mauer, "The Washington Conference 100 Years Later: Averting Great-Power Conflict in Asia," *The National Interest*, November 18, 2021, available at https://nationalinterest.org/feature/washington-conference-100-years-later-averting-great-power-conflict-asia-196386.; and, John T. Kuehn, "A Template for Peace," *Naval History Magazine*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (February 2022), available at https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2022/february/template-peace.

[2] Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), p. 49.

[3] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[4] For more on the political context of the Washington Naval Conference, see, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Washington Naval Conference," *State.gov*, no date, available at https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/naval-conference.

[5] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, op. cit., p. 91.

[6] Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars: I: The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism 1919-1929* (South Yorkshire, Great Britain: Seaforth Publishing, 2016, originally published 1968), p. 215.

[7] See the discussion in Roskill, *The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism*, pp. 215-230.

[8] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, op. cit., p. 58.

[9] President Harding, as quoted in, John H. Mauer, "Arms Control and the Washington Conference," chapter in, Erik Goldstein and John Mauer, eds., *The Washington Conference, 1921-1922: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor* (Essex, UK: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1994), p. 284.

[10] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

[11] Mauer, "The Washington Conference 100 Years Later," op. cit.

[12] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, op. cit. p. 122.

[13] Ibid., p. 102.

[14] Ibid., p. 92.

[15] John H. Mauer, "The London Conference: A Strategic Reassessment," chapter in, John H. Mauer and Christopher M. Bell, eds., *At the Crossroads Between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference of 1930* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), p. 251.

[16] Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, op. cit., p. 105.

[17] Ibid., p. 106.

[18] Loc cit.

[19] Emphasis in original. Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, op. cit., p. 326.

[20] Ibid., p. 330.

[21] Mauer, "Arms Control and the Washington Conference," op. cit., p. 289.

[22] Geoffrey Till, "Adopting the Aircraft Carrier: The British, American, and Japanese Case Studies," chapter in, Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 199.

[23] Robert Gordon Kaufman, *Arms Control During the Pre-Nuclear Era: The United States and Naval Limitations Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 97, 197.

[24] Ibid., p. 195.

[25] Mauer, "The London Conference: A Strategic Reassessment," op. cit., p. 246.

[26] Ibid., p. 251.

[27] *Reference Materials for Answering Questions at the Imperial Conference on September 6 Regarding "The Essentials for Carrying Out the Empire's Policies*, September 6, 1941, document reproduced in Nobutaka Ike, editor and translator, *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 154.

[28] Franklin C. Miller, "Outdated Nuclear Treaties Heighten the Risk of Nuclear War," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2022, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/outdated-nuclear-treaties-new-start-treaty-russia-putin-china-xi-heighten-risk-nuclear-war-missile-test-ukraine-deterrence-11650575490.

[29] Mauer, "Arms Control and the Washington Conference," op. cit., p. 289.

The National Institute for Public Policy's *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security. National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that makes the *Information Series* possible.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author(s) and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 |Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293- 9181 |www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit http://www.nipp.org/national-institutepress/informationseries/.

© National Institute Press, 2022