

AFD Ep 411 Links and Notes - Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Feb 6, 2022

- [Bill] Intro
 - On Feb 6, 1922, one hundred years ago today: As part of a series of multilateral agreements on Pacific and Mediterranean security affairs [negotiated between November 1921 and February 1922 in the US capital](#), the Washington Naval Treaty was signed between five of the recently victorious Allied Powers of World War I – the US, the British Empire (on behalf of itself and Australia), France, Japan, and Italy. It sought to halt a brewing naval arms race among friendly nations that had just disarmed the competition for about a decade. (And Russia was still embroiled in a Civil War without much of a fleet left to speak of.)
 - For our show's focus on the American perspective and motivations on the 1922 treaty, and worth underscoring because it was signed in Washington not Europe, we can say that this arms race was extremely unpopular with the American public and unwanted by the Harding Administration (which had assumed office after the arms buildup policy was started in the late Wilson Administration). Britannica notes that the Naval Treaty specifically emerged from *"the opening proposal at the conference by U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to scrap almost 1.9 million tons of warships belonging to the great powers. This bold disarmament proposal astonished the assembled delegates, but it was indeed enacted in a modified form."* (Ironically, Hughes had nearly been elected US President over Woodrow Wilson in 1916 but lost apparently in part because of his public support for the US to build up its defense capabilities.) The Republican administration was supported on the Congressional side [in these diplomatic efforts](#) by "Senator William E. Borah (R–Idaho) [who] led a congressional effort to demand that the United States engage its two principal competitors in the naval arms race, Japan and the United Kingdom, in negotiations for disarmament."
 - The 1922 treaty was primarily aimed at curbing a post-WWI naval arms race in the Pacific between the British Empire and Japan, which had [just wound down](#) a 20 year defense pact, as well as the newly pre-eminent United States. While it didn't completely succeed, it probably rates as more of a success story than most of the other interwar diplomatic peace initiatives, even if we all know how things ultimately culminated between the three Pacific naval powers in December 1941.
 - And as we'll see today, the specific terms of the 1922 agreement did end up having some fairly profound directional effects on the course of naval capacity, doctrine, and outcomes in the Pacific theater, in no small part due to what was emphasized and what was de-emphasized in the limitations set back in 1922. The Washington Naval Treaty is not merely of interest to us because of today's centennial of this agreement, but also because it is sometimes still brought up in discussions of what might be done to de-escalate mounting tensions between the United States and China in the Pacific Ocean, as well as for now secondarily India and Japan. (For example, in the past several years you can find articles in publications such as [National Interest](#) and [The Diplomat](#) debating the present-day relevance of this comparison.)
- [Bill] Overall [restrictions](#): *The Five-Power Naval Limitation Treaty and Four-Power Treaty of 1922 effectively divided the Pacific area into three spheres of influence: Britain was supreme in the South, Japan in the West and the United States in the East. [...As a side note, naval fortifications were limited, which we'll come back to later this episode...] The Five-Power Treaty limited the capital ships (battleships and [cruisers]) of the main naval powers by declaring a ten-year naval holiday on new battleship construction, which limited the tonnage and main-gun armament on any subsequent capital ships*

constructed. The treaty limited the total ship tonnage by a ratio of 5:5:3:1.67:1.67; [which is to say, it] granted parity to the United States with Britain, while Japan was tied to a 60 percent ceiling and France and Italy were granted parity at the bottom.

- These ratios didn't end up being fulfilled in practice, because some of them were more interested in continuing to build than others. The US for example did not max out its allowable capacity of ships in this period.
- [TONNAGE RESTRICTIONS](#) (Britannica): Capital ships were "defined as vessels of war exceeding 20,000 tons standard displacement or carrying guns with a calibre exceeding 8 inches." There were limits on total fleet tonnage of all capital ships put together. Setting aside the reality that the powers ended up lying about how much displacement tonnage specific ships had, to avoid hitting their fleet-wide cap, the treaty tended to encourage looking into other non-capital ship development, as we'll circle back to in a moment. Capital ships that were under construction at the time of the treaty, with very few exceptions, had to be scrapped or turned into something else, and dozens of existing capital ships older than six years had to be scrapped or converted, although that mostly got rid of outdated pre-WWI models. If the treaty had survived beyond its planned timeframe without further revisions, new treaties, or withdrawals, it anticipated a scenario by the mid-1930s of the US and UK each having 15 capital ships and Japan having 9. We're mentioning this more for context on what they had in mind, since we're not really getting into the demise of the treaty during the rearmament era of the 1930s.
- Non-capital ships excluding aircraft carriers were limited to 10,000 tons of displacement but there was no aggregate limit, which encouraged building smaller cruisers, destroyers, and submarines instead of big cruisers and battleships. And as we keep hinting at, aircraft carriers were in a totally separate third category...
<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/photography/wwi/wwi-armistice/washington-naval-treaty.html>
- [Rachel] Let's talk about aircraft carriers now, because that was the most visible development in 1922 and the most immediate result of the specific limitations and allowances of the 1922 treaty terms.
 - *Restrictions were likewise placed upon aircraft carriers as follows: total tonnage was not to exceed 135,000 for either the United States or the United Kingdom, 60,000 for either France or Italy, and 81,000 for Japan. No carrier was to exceed 27,000 tons displacement or to carry a gun with a calibre in excess of 8 inches (203 mm).* <https://www.britannica.com/event/Five-Power-Naval-Limitation-Treaty>
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Naval_Treaty So, as we've just noted, the Washington Naval Treaty, primarily focusing on battleships and heavy cruisers, included some unusual carve-outs on limits for aircraft carriers. At the time of signing, unless you count ships that shuttled around seaplanes but didn't have planes both taking off and landing on the ship itself, this only included a few [primitive British](#) and [Japanese](#) ships converted from other ships (basically purely to test the physics and aerodynamics involved in designing flight decks), and a few others under construction or conversion around the world. These carve-outs in February 1922 may have helped push Pacific naval activity in the naval air direction. Both the US and Japan had aircraft carriers within the year, up from a global total of zero when the treaty was negotiated and signed:
 - The USS Langley, a recently retrofitted naval coal supply ship, was officially recommissioned on March 20, 1922 as an aircraft carrier for "conducting experiments in seaborne aviation" under the terms of the

Washington Naval Treaty, which made generous allowances for so-called experimental carriers. The USS Langley was the first US aircraft carrier, although not the first warship with plane launching capabilities, since some of the largest warships had already added [tiny recon plane catapult launch capacities to support their primary missions](#) with things like submarine spotting. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Langley_\(CV-1\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Langley_(CV-1))

- PIGEONS! *An unusual feature of Langley was provision for a [carrier pigeon house on the stern between the 5" guns.](#)^[11] Pigeons had been carried aboard [seaplanes](#) for message transport since World War I, and were to be carried on aircraft operated from Langley.^[11] The pigeons were trained at the [Norfolk Naval Shipyard](#) while Langley was undergoing conversion.^[12] As long as the pigeons were released a few at a time for exercise, they returned to the ship; but when the whole flock was released while Langley was anchored off [Tangier Island](#), the pigeons flew south and roosted in the cranes of the Norfolk shipyard.^[12] The pigeons never went to sea again and the former pigeon house became the executive officer's quarters;^[11] but the early plans for conversion of Lexington and Saratoga included a compartment for pigeons.^[12]*
- Also under the terms of the treaty, the US and Japan each immediately halted production of two capital ships and began converting the hulls into aircraft carriers, but that could only be done over the course of several years. Other capital ships in production had to be scrapped, at significant losses, because there was a limit on conversions. But it was still cheaper than finishing them.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amagi-class_battlecruiser
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tosa-class_battleship
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lexington-class_aircraft_carrier
- The USS Lexington would serve until it was sunk in the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942, the first carrier fleet vs carrier fleet naval battle. Its sister ship the USS Saratoga survived WWII and was sunk in the Operation Crossroads nuclear tests in 1946 in the Marshall Islands, withstanding the first blast in the air and sinking after the second underwater blast. The Saratoga carrier had been put to sea less than two decades after the invention of the seaplane brought aircraft and navies together, and it reached its end less than two decades later at the dawn of the nuclear age.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Saratoga_\(CV-3\)#Postwar_years](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Saratoga_(CV-3)#Postwar_years)
- Following the 1922 treaty, the French decided to convert one of five stalled-in-construction pre-WWI battleship hulls, which was not completed as a carrier until 1928:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_aircraft_carrier_B%C3%A9arn
- The US, however, was not the only signatory to manage to put an aircraft carrier to sea the same year as the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, and conversions weren't the only kind of carrier. Japan had long been very interested in building up its naval capacities, and they had been playing around with using ships to [shuttle](#) the recently invented seaplane into position for aerial attacks on ports and ships since the innovative [1914](#)

[operations](#) against the German fleets and ports in East Asia. But capital ships were still presumably going to be the future core of any naval strategy. The Imperial Japanese Navy had proven so successful in the war with Russia in 1904 and 1905 but was still small and unlikely to endure a longer Pacific war; it needed to be bigger and better supported. On the flip side, however, in 1922, Japan was short on funds and [in the middle of its Taishō period](#) of democratic parliamentary government and interest in international engagement over warfare. In fact one Japanese negotiator dispatched to the US in 1921 and 1922 was [Prince Tokugawa Iwano](#), the foremost advocate for liberal democracy and internationalism in Japan during the Taishō period. The lead negotiator was Navy Minister and Admiral Katō Tomosaburō, who shared the view that Japan couldn't sustain the naval arms race. These various conflicting impulses in Japanese policy were neatly resolved for a while with the 1922 treaty in Washington by conforming on the one hand to the expectations of the international community, with the benefit of perhaps saving some money, but on the other hand forging ahead into new arenas, such as aircraft carrier development – or perhaps we should say “experimentation.” And as previously mentioned, Japan had indeed been experimenting with both seaplane carrier tactics and since 1920 with a retrofitted flight deck for conventional takeoff and landing on the [Wakamiya-kan](#). So, in the final week of 1922, Japan finished their (and the world's) first purpose-built aircraft carrier, the Hōshō, which was not a retrofit, unlike the British experiments of 1918 to 1921 and unlike the USS Langley. It was also classified as an experimental ship for the purposes of the Washington Naval Treaty. Hōshō went into action 10 years later against China and remained in various uses until after World War II, including being deployed in 1942 in the Battle of Midway, the stunning and decisive carrier fleet battle between the US and Japan, just 20 years after the Washington Naval Treaty.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_aircraft_carrier_H%C5%8Dsh%C5%8D

- The next purpose-built carrier was Britain's HMS Hermes, which had actually been ordered back in April 1917 (a few years after the sinking of [an earlier HMS Hermes](#) that had been testing recon plane catapults) but which took forever to finish. It wasn't completed until February 1924, two years after the Washington Naval Treaty and nearly a year after Japan finished Hōshō. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hermes_\(95\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hermes_(95)) Hermes had an extensive and very much not experimental career of service in the interwar period and World War II until it was sunk in the Indian Ocean by Japanese planes during the Japanese Indian Ocean raid of April 1942 while attempting to make a run for safety without any aircraft on board to defend itself. This battle was a bitter defeat for the Royal Navy in the eastern theater of the war and confirmed something we're going to discuss later in the episode which is the extremely overextended strategic position of the British Navy after the 1922 treaties, which those treaties reflected rather than caused. The incident is also the inverse of the decisive success of the US carrier fleet at Midway a couple months later, again painting a symbolic picture of the trajectory of the US vs the UK from 1922 to 1942.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Ocean_raid#Loss_of_Hermes

- Obviously it's worth acknowledging here that both the US and Japan had an immense theoretical interest in testing and developing aircraft carrier capacity for the Pacific theater specifically because of the vast open ocean distances without enough places to put air bases in range of anything useful, but it was already obvious that aircraft were a game changer for warfare broadly and needed to be incorporated.
- For comparison today, a century after 1922, the US has 11 aircraft carriers with two more under construction, China has two, and India has one. These latter two countries have more coming on line this year and still more under construction or planned. The UK has two. Among these four countries, including the US, a lot of these carriers are new in just the last few years or the last decade. Russia has one out of commission in prolonged repairs in the Arctic and two under construction. Interestingly, France still has eight and Italy still has two, with one under construction. Japan has a little one for helicopters, and so do Australia, South Korea, and Thailand. There are others but these are the relevant ones for global power projection and Pacific or Indian Ocean action.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_aircraft_carriers_in_service
- So, it's clear why some people would draw modern comparisons to the early 1920s naval arms race, albeit with aircraft carriers instead of battleships and battlecruisers as the main focus. However, there's also a fair amount of criticism these days about the practicality of carrier fleets in any actual war scenario now that so-called "carrier killer" anti-ship ballistic missiles are relatively easy to obtain and Russia, China, India, and Iran all definitely have them. Thus far, no convincing missile defense technology exists to block them. So, in a state versus state war, what's going to keep the carriers from all being sunk immediately...? This was obviously not the situation in the years 1922 to 1945 or even a few decades after. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-ship_ballistic_missile
- [Bill] Anyway the big upshot of the February 1922 Washington Naval treaty, which was relatively simply written, was that it more or less had its intended effect on limiting the size of individual heavy cruisers and battleships and their total numbers, but it spurred a somewhat unanticipated flurry of activity in building sub-capital ships and aircraft carriers because of the loopholes explicitly or implicitly left in the treaty. One thing none of the sources we read mentioned (with the exception of one article that only mentioned it in relation to France), but which we must imagine would have had a profound effect on deciding this course, contrary to all protestations about the need to cut back fiscally ruinous and provocative arms races, was the number of jobs involved in the naval shipyards of these five countries. (Or apparently not in France, due to wartime production choices that had de-emphasized shipyards.) However, capital ships represented significant multi-year commitments to build and enormous sunk costs per ship once started, whereas non-capital ships would have been more flexible little projects and likely involving far more economies of scale with mass production of interchangeable parts. Notably the decision to allow the conversion of partially finished capital ships already in the works into aircraft carriers was not just a strategic decision to test naval air warfare tactics and techniques but also to preserve some of the jobs and sunk costs already associated with these major projects. For example, the two Lexington-class US aircraft carriers that were conversions from battlecruisers under construction were not finished until 1927 and had been started in 1920:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lexington-class_aircraft_carrier
- You can see photos on the US Navy website of various American and Japanese ships being scrapped to comply with the terms of the 1922 treaty:

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/photograph/wwi/wwi-armistice/washington-naval-treaty.html>

- [Rachel] The fleet restrictions were generally popular in the United States at the time of ratification in 1922, but there was some public debate on the associated treaties governing matters such as base and fortification modernizations on Pacific islands held by, colonized by, or supervised by the US, UK, France, and Japan. These restrictions were also intended to ratchet down tensions and reduce pressure to build up arms, but “Many members of the U.S. Navy in particular worried that limiting the expansion of fortifications in the Pacific would endanger U.S. holdings in Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines.” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/naval-conference> (At the time, many of these islands, including some uninhabited ones, [would have been considered](#) critical to civilian trans-Pacific communications infrastructure and shipping, especially for refueling and coal supplies, and not just important for their military power projection value or, in larger cases, their natural resources.)
 - As a side tangent on the US base on the territory of Guam, which did end up being hotly contested between the two naval powers during WWII ... 50 years ago last month, on Jan 14, 1972: *Japanese soldier [Shoichi Yokoi](#) is discovered in Guam [US territory]; he had spent 28 years in the jungle, having failed to surrender after World War II. / October 1972, Private 1st Class Kinshichi Kozuka held out with Lt. Onoda for 28 years until he was killed in a shootout with Philippine police.* (Contextual additional info not from 1972: [Onoda](#), his survival buddy and commanding officer, was the next-to-last Imperial Japanese holdout ever located, surrendering in March 1974, after retired Major Yoshimi Taniguchi personally flew to the island to order him to stand down and finally stop his 30 years of ongoing guerilla attacks. Not long after, Private [Teruo Nakamura](#) was spotted by plane in 1974 in Indonesia and captured by the Indonesian Army in November 1974 and repatriated to his home island of Taiwan, now under ROC control.)
- [Bill] The naval treaty was not very popular in Japan, except among people who had felt it was important to attempt to secure in the first place for the reasons we’ve discussed. To the Japanese negotiators, including Admiral Tomosaburō, a 60% ratio of Japanese capital ships to American capital ships was a fiscally reasonable figure and realistic for Japan’s size and status. [Tomosaburō](#) was appointed Prime Minister a few months after signing the various conference treaties and spent his year as head of government implementing their terms with gusto before succumbing to cancer. By contrast, to Japanese militarists and jingoists, who had been in the minority in the delegation to Washington but had many supporters back home, that ratio was humiliating at best and maybe even dooming Japan to inevitable military defeat against the US, or worse the US and UK together – particularly now that the British were no longer willing to automatically side with Japan if it were attacked in the Pacific, which had been the terms of the 1902 defense pact. <http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch10-japan5a.htm> But you can see why the Imperial Japanese Navy decided for legal, strategic, and doctrinal reasons to go in heavily on carrier fleet development after 1922. By the start of the war between Japan and the US, launched from carrier fleets moved into range of Pearl Harbor and other Allied bases and ports in Asia, Japan actually had 10 carriers to the American 7, of which only 3 were in the Pacific at the time. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_aircraft_carrier#World_War_II
- [Rachel] For its part, Britain was now totally overextended coming out of the 1921 and 1922 negotiations, reflecting its decline and struggle to continue materially supporting a stronger diplomatic position necessary to sustain naval supremacy. They had been arming and training the Japanese Navy for decades and essentially deputizing it to be a

night watchman for British interests in the Pacific, and now they would have to either divide up the capital ship fleet across the Atlantic, North Sea, Mediterranean, Indian, and Pacific Oceans or concentrate it on one side of the world and hope that it wasn't suddenly needed on the other side or everywhere at once. The US was content to agree to parity, not only for prestige reasons, but also because they were content to maintain a large Pacific fleet on the West Coast and in Hawaii and enough of a fleet in the Atlantic to protect the East Coast, Gulf Coast, and Panama Canal, without feeling a need to be everywhere in the world all at once. The 1922 treaty in many ways effectively sealed the fate of Britain to be dependent on the United States and never again hypothetically able to challenge the US or take the opposite side in a conflict. The security of British interests in the Pacific and the Atlantic now depended permanently on US Navy support. But again, the treaty was just the visible manifestation of a material reality because if they had been in a position to get a better deal with more favorable limits and in a position to build to those higher limits, they would have negotiated that, but they were not and could not and thus did not. This was further made obvious as the British struggled to afford to keep up production levels of even sub-capital ships after 1922 at levels necessary to patrol their worldwide empire and its complicated supply lines. Additionally, the British had completely failed in Washington to negotiate not only a total ban on military submarines but actually any restrictions at all really. They saw armed u-boats as an existential threat because of their shipping lane and convoy raiding capabilities, whereas the other powers saw them as a cheap defensive countermeasure to expensive capital ships.

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2020/02/21/washington-naval-treaty-winners-and-losers/>

- [Bill] The French came out vastly worse than the British. Not only did they have many of the same strategic considerations in terms of far-flung colonial possessions stretching all around the world from the North Sea to the North Atlantic to the Riviera to Algeria to West Africa to the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean and on to Southeast Asia and Pacific islands, but during the Great War, they had converted their entire national shipbuilding capacity toward emergency land-based defense materiel production in a frantic effort to prevent the German Army from breaking through the stalemate on the Western Front. They already had a smaller navy to begin with but now it was hopelessly out of date and they were no longer going to be allowed to rebuild it. Again, this negotiated defeat reflects the material inferiority of France relative to the other powers by 1921. They were as surprised as the Italians to end up with parity being set to each other at the bottom, even though Italy only had the Central Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa to worry about. It took a year for French politicians to overcome heated domestic debate and ratify what had been signed in Washington. France claimed it would pursue non-capital fleet construction instead to try to meet their basic colonial security needs, but their shipbuilding capacity and fiscal capacity both fell far short of announced goals after all.

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2020/02/21/washington-naval-treaty-winners-and-losers/>

- Side note: The Feb 1922 treaty was also one of the last major diplomatic efforts of pre-fascist Italy. After the fascist takeover and eventual withdrawal from the treaty, the Italians managed to put together a relatively significant capital ship force despite their comparative shipbuilding capacity and economic base. It wasn't a large enough force for unchallenged Mediterranean supremacy by any stretch but when France got knocked out of the war and Britain had to divide its fleet worldwide, Italy had enough massed capital ships in port to keep the British occupied guarding them and enough of a raiding fleet to create chaos for British supply lines to Malta, the Middle East and North Africa, and eventually Sicily for

three years, despite repeated efforts to destroy the Italian Navy in port or at sea.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Taranto

- [Rachel] Further legacies:

- On July 7, 1930, President Herbert Hoover, who had served under the Harding Administration when the Washington Naval Treaty was signed, delivered a special address to the US Senate defending that agreement's results and urging the ratification of the follow-up London Naval Treaty, amid the general belt-tightening of the Great Depression and in line with a timeline spelled out in the 1922 treaty for periodic review and amendment. Hoover also was pursuing a policy of US [retreat](#) from the Pacific theater back to Alaska and Hawaii and planned independence for the Philippines. We wanted to quote one interesting passage from Hoover's 1930 speech: *"It is folly to think that because we are the richest Nation in the world we can out build all other countries. Other nations will make any sacrifice to maintain their instruments of defense against us, and we shall eventually reap in their hostility and ill will the full measure of the additional burden which we may thus impose upon them. The very entry of the United States into such courses as this would invite the consolidation of the rest of the world against us and bring our peace and independence into jeopardy."*
<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-7-1930-message-regarding-london-naval-treaty>
- Although the 1930 London Naval Treaty was indeed ratified by the original five powers – the US, UK, Japan, France, and Italy – and although it aimed to both loosen some restrictions and add some further tonnage restrictions and vessel counts including among non-capital ships, the agreement was already clearly going against strong headwinds by that point, despite the worldwide Great Depression. Japan and Italy were now in militarist hands, instead of democratic control. Ultimately, Japan and Italy declined to join a Second London Naval Treaty in 1936, which had always been the projected expiration date for the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, and so that was the effective end of that. And by that point, German rearmament was also well under way, which hadn't really been anticipated in 1922, given the other recently signed disarmament treaty requirements imposed on Germany.