ROBERT GORDON KAUFMAN

ARMS CONTROL DURING THE PRE-NUCLEAR ERA

THE UNITED STATES AND NAVAL LIMITATION BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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Dedicated to Molly, Rebecca, my mother, my father, and the memory of William T. R. Fox—a great scholar and a great man—who gave me the strength and encouragement to persevere with this book when I seemed about to lose my way.

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INTRODUCTION

"People need to be reminded more often than they need to be reintroduced." Dr. Johnson.

Arms control remains something of a national paradox. Virtually everyone supports arms control in principle. Yet the negotiations and their outcomes have evoked passionate criticism from all sides of the political spectrum. Where conservatives blame the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) for anesthetizing the democracies to the realities and ramifications of the Soviet Union's relentless military buildup,[1] liberals consider the negotiations too slow and the results disappointingly modest.[2]

It is important, therefore, to reappraise the theory and practice of arms control. This book attempts to take a useful step in that direction. It analyzes, systematically and from the American point of view, the first extended effort to limit arms in the history of the United States: the naval arms control process of the interwar years, which culminated in the Washington Treaties of 1922, the London Naval Treaty of 1930, and the London Naval Treaty of 1936.

The Washington Conference of 1921–1922 produced a series of agreements intended to end the naval competition among the United States, Great Britain, and Japan and to stabilize the political situation in the Far East. The Washington Naval Treaty established ratios in tonnage for battleships and carriers among the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy. Although the treaty failed to limit the number of auxiliary craft and submarines, it did impose qualitative limitations and set maximum displacements for all categories of surface vessels. The United States, Great Britain, and Japan also agreed to build no more fortifications on certain of their possessions in the Western Pacific.

The negotiators linked the naval settlement with the political settlement reached at Washington. The Nine Power Treaty committed the signatories to uphold the Open Door and the territorial integrity of China, but contained no enforcement mechanism. The Four Power Treaty replaced the Anglo-Japanese Alliance with a consultative pact among the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and France that imposed no military obligation. Under the Mandates Treaty, the United States recognized Japan's mandatory authority over former German colonies in the Northwestern Pacific.

The London Treaty of 1930 extended the ratio system to include cruisers, destroyers, and submarines, but only among the United States, Great Britain, and Japan. France and Italy refused to sign, because France would not accept either parity with Italy or allotments in auxiliaries as low as the British and the Americans proposed.

The Second London Naval Conference (1935) ended in failure when Japan refused to accept anything less than numerical parity in tonnage for all categories of warships with Great Britain and the United States, which the British and the Americans refused to concede. All the London Naval Treaty of 1936 could do was establish qualitative limitations on and set maximum displacements for all categories of surface vessels. The treaty also contained an escape clause in the event that Japan refused to abide informally by its provisions. When, in the spring of 1938, the Japanese still declined to assure the Americans and the British that their new battleships complied with the qualitative limitations of the naval treaties, efforts to limit naval armaments collapsed entirely.

Why study the history of naval limitations? What is the rationale for yet another work on arms control? The answer is, in the first place, to expand arms control theory's shallow empirical base. Having as their first principle the idea that the advent of nuclear weapons marks a great divide in international politics, most arms controllers have focused mainly on the single episode of the Soviet-American, or relied purely on deductive reasoning.[3] Doubtless, nuclear weapons have changed strategy and politics significantly. But what strikes the author and others as equally important are the continuities in international politics, pre- and post-1945.[4] The contents and arguments of this book rest, then, on the premise that a disciplined study of prenuclear ideas and events can yield valuable theoretical and practical lessons for arms control in any age.

A study of the interwar naval treaties also serves as a useful point of departure to address two heretofore neglected areas in the literature on

arms control: the effect of domestic politics on the negotiations, and the politics of breakdown of and the breakout from an arms control process. Specifically, it allows us to test and reappraise the hypothesis of Steven Miller, one of the few scholars who has analyzed the domestic politics of arms control systematically: that the American political system inclines American negotiators to intransigence and "thus constitutes in a large part the explanation of why the harvest of arms control has been disappointing."[5]

In the third place, there are surprisingly few comprehensive studies of the interwar process of naval limitation.[6] Diplomatic historians have covered various aspects of the treaties episodically.[7] Some have drawn preliminary though largely flawed parallels between the Anglo-American dimension of arms control and Soviet-American arms control in the nuclear age.[8] What few comprehensive studies exist address different questions and give different answers from this one, which focuses on the following from the vantage point of American decisionmakers:

- The interplay of ideas and events which motivated American statesmen to pursue naval limitation[9]
- American decisionmakers' hopes and expectations for the treaties
- How, why, and to what effect the principles of parity and ratio emerged as the underpinnings of the treaty system.
- The politics of verification
- The impact of naval limitation on naval doctrine and deployment
- The affinity between democracy and naval arms control[10]
- The effect of structural differences between the American and Japanese political systems on the course and outcome of the negotiations[11]
- How and why the process of naval arms control broke down

Five major themes run through this study, each of which will receive more elaborate analysis in the text itself. One is how thoroughly events confounded the hopes for and assumptions underlying the process of naval arms control and the treaties. The naval treaties failed to achieve their intended result of ending the naval race and freezing the naval balance indefinitely. Similarly, the action-reaction theorem of the arms race that drove the American position on naval arms control failed utterly to account for why Japan kept building warships prodigiously even when the United States slowed down its buildup program considerably. The triumph of Japanese militarists during the 1930s and the policy of relentless expansionism that followed also falsified the optimistic political and strategic assumptions on which the treaty system rested. American naval planners

made their share of miscalculations too. World War II in the Pacific exposed the fallacy of battleship supremacy—the regnant doctrine underpinning not only the treaty system, but naval operations and weapons procurement throughout the interwar years.

The second theme is the primacy of politics in arms control: that arms control will fail without corresponding political détente. No formula, no yardstick sufficed in itself to bring about the naval agreements. Politics, not technologies, caused their breakdown. In the 1920s, political détente made naval arms control possible. In the 1930s, Japan's determination to dominate China made failure inevitable.

The third theme is that arms control can aggravate the difficulty of reconciling ends and means, of meshing defense strategy and foreign policy commitments with the formal limits of arms control treaties and the indirect inhibiting effect of an arms control process on defense spending. The Nine Power Treaty of 1922 codified America's expansive interpretation of the Open Door in China, just as the naval treaties made their enforcement in practice out of the question. Granted, the process of naval arms control largely reflected rather than caused Anglo-American naval weakness. In certain instances, the treaties may actually have stimulated American support for naval building. Overall, though, the process of naval arms control reinforced and prolonged the reluctance of Presidents and Congress to build up even to treaty limits.

The fourth theme is that democracies face major structural disadvantages in negotiating arms agreements with more closed societies, particularly in the critical areas of verification, compliance, defense spending during the treaties' duration, and the politics of breakdown of and breakout from an arms control process. In peacetime, democratic governments regard arms control not only as a virtue, but a necessity—to satisfy public opinion and to relieve pressure on their own defense budgets. Often, their formidable arms control lobbies not only demand unilateral concessions, but have the capacity to enforce such demands. Democratic statesmen tend likewise to place great faith in the ability of arms control negotiations to improve the climate of international relations.

Closed societies operate differently. There, treaties tend not to encourage arms control by example. The leaders of closed societies can and may manipulate democracies' enthusiasm for arms control negotiations to serve expansionist ends. The experience of naval arms control highlights these problems and the possible consequences. Largely because of asymmetries between open and closed societies, the United States failed to detect or

respond effectively to Japan's systematic violations of the naval treaties. In the United States, the treaties strengthened antinaval sentiment; in Japan, they stimulated the Imperial Navy's demand for more building. During the 1930s, Japan used the naval negotiations to conceal its naval buildup and to undermine popular support in the United States for a countervailing buildup. In this way, the Imperial Navy secured a crucial head start in the post-treaty naval race that culminated in the Great Pacific War.

The fifth theme is the importance of a vigorous building program in being for bargaining leverage in arms control negotiations—a paradox democratic statesmen and their electorates often fail to grasp.

Obviously, such a study has some important limitations. Two deserve special mention. First, there is the danger of false analogy.[12] Every historical situation is in some way unique. So are arms control endeavors of the nuclear age. Too often, scholars and statesmen have foundered on flawed parallels and poor historical analysis.[13] Yet to ignore history is even more dangerous. What happened in the past does have some constructive relevance for our own times. It is the task of scholars to identify those lessons carefully and discern flawed historical analysis or inappropriate analogies when applied.

Second, any case study can draw only preliminary and tentative conclusions in relating past to present. Indeed, it should raise more questions than it answers. Even so, the experience of naval arms control is a story worth telling: any generation of arms controllers ought to listen.

The book proceeds chronologically when possible, topically when necessary. Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the strategic and political background to naval arms limitation as a whole and the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922 in particular. Chapter 3 deals with the preliminaries of and the negotiations at the Washington Naval Conference. Chapter 4 discusses the way naval arms limitation may have affected naval doctrine and deployment, then moves on to consider certain problems relating to verification. Chapter 5 deals with the negotiation and ratification of the London Naval Treaty of 1930. Chapter 6 surveys the background to the London Naval Conference of 1935–1936. Chapter 7 analyzes why the conference failed and how naval arms limitation ended. Chapter 8 offers some concluding remarks about naval limitation and its theoretical and practical relevance for arms control of any age.

1

THE STRATEGIC SETTING

I. THE RISE OF AMERICAN SEAPOWER

The Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922 had its origins in a complex of strategic, technological, and political developments. There was, to begin with, the dramatic and unprecedented increase in American naval power and ambitions since the 1890s. Until then, the United States Navy had developed slowly and confined its mission mainly to the defense of the Western hemisphere.[1] Events began to unfold, however, that would recast American naval policy and thought. The writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan inspired a generation of decisionmakers who linked America's destiny with colonies and seapower. Then the Spanish-American War of 1898 seemed to validate Mahan's vision of the United States as a global seapower. By acquiring the Philippines, the United States assumed new responsibilities in the Far East, just as the McKinley administration's support for the Open Door in China seemed to offer new commercial and strategic opportunities. America's growing involvement in the affairs of Asia also began to focus the attention of naval planners on the possibility of war with Japan in the Western Pacific. Meanwhile, the American Navy also had become even more worried about Germany, whose naval building, expansionism, and global commercial aspirations American naval planners considered potentially menacing to the Monroe Doctrine.[2]

President Theodore Roosevelt pressed vigorously to transform the United States into a major naval power. An ardent Mahanian, he initiated a program, beginning in 1903, for laying down two capital ships a year.

When Roosevelt left office in 1909, the American Navy had grown to rank second in capital ships only to Great Britain.[3] The Taft administration failed, however, to keep up with the pace of naval building brought on by the Anglo-German naval race. In 1914, the United States Navy ranked third, with a fleet deficient in cruisers and other auxiliaries.

Then came World War I. During 1914–1915, President Wilson resisted the demands of the General Board and various preparedness groups for a navy second to none.[4] The United States remained adamantly neutral; the President still hoped for peace without victory—a negotiated settlement in Europe brought about by the mediation of United States.[5] By 1916, mounting outrage over the conduct of U-boat warfare, the belligerents' flagrant disregard of neutral rights, the stalemate on the Western Front, and Japan's expansion in Asia at China's expense had changed the minds of President Wilson and the vast majority of Americans on the importance of seapower. Accordingly, the Naval Act of 1916 called for a fleet equal to the most powerful navy in the world and allocated the resources to match. It provided for 156 ships of all classes by 1919, at a cost of approximately 600 million dollars.[6] When the United States entered the war in April 1917, Germany's U-boat campaign directed against the North American trade routes forced the United States to defer the 1916 program and concentrate, instead, on building merchant ships and destroyers. When the war ended, the Wilson administration proposed to resume the 1916 program. In 1919, the Navy asked for even more. The General Board recommended a supplemental three-year program that would give the United States the most powerful navy in the world.[7]

II. BRITISH SEAPOWER

British decisionmakers viewed the American naval program with anxiety if not alarm. When World War I ended, the Royal Navy appeared as dominant as ever: 42 capital ships to 16 for its closest rival, the United States; 1300 combatant ships to the American Navy's 250. Yet these numbers conveyed a misleading impression of Great Britain's naval strength. Thirteen of the Royal Navy's capital ships had become obsolete because of age; the Battle of Jutland had exposed nine more as unfit for the battleline. If the United States completed the naval programs of 1916 and

1919, then it would have a fleet of 50 modern capital ships, many superior in firepower, durability, and design to those of Great Britain.[8]

Indeed, the rise of American naval power symbolized why British naval strength had eroded inexorably since the 1890s. For centuries before, the Royal Naval had withstood any and all challenges to its naval supremacy. Great Britain maintained a fleet capable of dominating European waters, maintaining the lines of communications between its vast network of foreign ports and colonies, and defending its interests throughout the world.[9]

By the turn of the century, the rise of transoceanic naval powers, the United States and Japan, forced the British to abandon the quest for naval supremacy in the Western hemisphere and the Far East. Germany's rapidly growing navy accelerated this trend. If Great Britain intended to maintain a two-power standard relative to the naval powers in Europe (a navy greater than or equal to the combined strength of the second and third largest continental navies), then it would need political arrangements outside of European waters to substitute for British naval power. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 allowed Great Britain to concentrate its navy in home waters to meet the German menace, but conceded de facto Japan's naval supremacy over the Royal Navy in the Western Pacific. Simultaneously, the British sought to improve relations with the United States. During the Spanish-American War, Great Britain encouraged the United States to annex the Philippines. In 1903, it conceded to Washington exclusive control of the Isthmian waterway that would become the Panama Canal. As part of a strategy of concentrating the fleet in home waters, Great Britain began the next year to remove its fleet permanently from Jamaica and thus recognized American naval supremacy in the Caribbean.[10]

Although President Wilson and British leaders disagreed often about neutral rights and freedom of the seas, the United States and Great Britain drew even closer during the First World War. The sympathies of the President and most Americans lay firmly with the Allies. The President also recoiled at the prospects of an authoritarian and militaristic Germany winning the war. When his efforts to mediate failed and the Germans determined to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare, he decided to end the war by bringing victory to the Allies.[11]

After the armistice, however, Anglo-American relations began to deteriorate. Great Britain emerged from the war anxious to retain its naval