

# An Earlier Attempt to Limit Arms

By CHARLES H. FAIRBANKS JR.

As America debates whether to ratify the new SALT agreement, it is useful to recall what happened in the first great period of arms limitation agreements, 1921-1936. A brief look at the details of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, the most successful of the interwar negotiations, sheds some light on current questions.

Unlike SALT I and II, the Washington treaty involved serious arms reduction. Each of the three main naval powers scrapped roughly half their existing battleships and almost all of the enormous tonnage under construction. It was agreed that for a decade no new battleships would be built. The core of the treaty was a ratio freezing approximately the strength in battleships then existing, and extending it to aircraft carriers: The ratio among the United States, Britain and Japan was 5:5:3.

Qualitative limits were imposed as well, limiting battleships to 35,000 tons and cruisers to 10,000 tons (with 8-inch guns). In the London Treaty of 1930 limits were placed on the numbers of other types of ships.

The Washington treaty had real accomplishments. It saved all the countries involved a vast amount of money and stopped for nearly 20 years the increase in battleship size, just then swelling monstrously. The treaty also showed that in circumstances like these, where there was no deep opposition of political interests, stopping an arms race could indeed decrease international tension. Finally, the treaty provided a universal and principled covering which psychologically eased acceptance of shifts in power relationships. Britain's loss of naval superiority for the first time in 200 years and the abandonment of the Anglo-Japanese alliance—that could have been far more disturbing if baldly presented.

At the same time, the treaty turned out not to be, as Lord Balfour, the head of the British delegation, proclaimed, an "absolute unmixed benefit to mankind, which carried no seeds of future misfortune."

To begin with, it soon became apparent that the treaty had actually spurred the arms race in important ways. Stephen Roskill, the naval historian, writes that "all in all, the first effect of the limitation treaty on Britain . . . was to produce greater activity in naval building than at any time since the armistice [of 1918]." No one foresaw this outcome, but it is hardly surprising. To negotiate, a nation needs to carefully compare its forces with those of other countries, highlighting areas of relative weakness. Then, in order to reassure doubters about the treaty, these missing forces must be supplied, as President Carter proposes to do with the MX. It is thus all too easy for the arms limitation process to wind up in incessant arms accumulation to remedy security weaknesses created or brought to light by the original agreements: the equivalent of pouring water into a perforated bucket.

## A New Weapon

As soon as the battleship race was halted in the early twenties, a race began in cruisers, which had been relatively neglected. The United States had only three modern cruisers, the British Empire 60. The cruisers constructed after the treaty displaced 10,000 tons, the treaty limit, while almost all existing cruisers were half this size and armed with 6-inch or 4-inch guns rather than 8-inch. The arms limitation treaty had quickly brought into existence a new and much more powerful weapon, the "Treaty Cruiser."

It is easy to see why this was likely to take place. The pace of technological innovation in weapons is normally limited by the fact that military staffs, like all bureaucracies, are embedded in a mass of routine administrative duties. From these ordinary duties there are most likely to emerge conservative, incremental decisions on weapons: Adding a few, or improving the type slightly, with each budget cycle.

A treaty negotiation, on the other hand, forces far-reaching reassessment of weapons policy. To develop their negotiating positions, the American, British and Japanese governments needed to know from their naval staffs what was the most useful type of cruiser. It is scarcely surprising that the answer turned out to be that the optimum cruiser is a cruiser twice as big as existing cruisers.

By a somewhat similar process the Washington treaty encouraged the emergence of the aircraft carrier, a new weapon neglected by the battleship admirals then dominating every major navy. In ordinary circumstances those admirals would never have chosen to invest in aircraft carriers rather than battleships. Once their cherished battleship force had been cut to the bone in negotiations, however, they developed a sudden but natural awareness of the need for aircraft carriers.

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and discovered that the unfinished hulls of four battleships just stricken under the treaty terms could be converted quite nicely into giant aircraft carriers for the U.S. and Japan.

In two crucial areas, then, the Washington treaty's effort to reduce weapons actually resulted in more weapons and in faster technological development of weapons. The general problem posed by these cases is whether there is any way of preventing such unintended consequences, tied

to the negotiating process, from countering the intended arms control results of an agreement. If not, we may be forced to ask whether the arms control treaty is a bad means of arms control.

There appeared a second problem as well. As Pearl Harbor made clear, the aircraft carrier was a weapon that, as compared with the battleship, encouraged striking first in a crisis, and therefore somewhat increased the chances of war. The aircraft carrier was far better adapted to carry out swift attack from a distance than the lumbering battleship, while at the same time its thin, gasoline-laden hull could not withstand attack like the battleship's thick carapace.

At Midway and other carrier battles there was a strong tendency for the side that struck first to win. If one wants to do everything that would make war less likely—the primary object of all arms limitation agreements—one will not want to encourage the shifting of the weapons mix towards weapons, like the aircraft carrier, that may encourage a first strike. But the Washington treaty had precisely this effect.

Fortifications—a "weapon" that impedes successful war—were prohibited by the treaty in the Western Pacific. This destabilizing concession had to be made to get Japan to accept the politically disagreeable 5:5:3 ratio. The general spirit that dominated arms limitation efforts in the twenties as in SALT II—the opposition to greater quantities of weapons in the abstract—completely blinded negotiators and planners to the particular effects of specific weapons on the preservation of peace.

Looking back at the twenties, it is not clear whether it was the quantity of weapons in the abstract or the character of specific weapons that held out greater danger of war. In the nuclear age, it seems increasingly clear that any danger of the former kind is outweighed by the destabilizing effect of particular weapons, such as big land-based ballistic missiles like the Soviet SS-18, that can annihilate enemy forces when striking first but are vulnerable themselves to attack.

While the treaty worked in some ways to decrease the chances of war and in other ways to increase it, some of its indirect effects weakened U.S. and British security if war did come.

Public opinion in the United States and Britain tended to be lulled by the treaty into ignoring defense. In ten of the 18 years between the treaty and World War II the U.S. Congress did not authorize the building of a single warship, while Japan laid

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down several ships every year. The result was that by the late thirties Japan, entitled by the 1922 and 1930 treaties to 60% of U.S. strength, had actually been allowed to build to 90% of parity. It proved impossible to restore the treaty ratio by December 7, 1941. As with any commodity where there was zero demand for ten years, the armor plate and heavy gun industries withered, factories were abandoned and workers were retrained in other trades.

When freed of the treaty limits by Japanese abrogation (as of 1936) the U.S. and Britain continued to build 35,000-ton battleships with 14-inch or 16-inch guns, while Japan went immediately to 64,000 tons and 18-inch guns.

As this suggests, the signatories had different conceptions of what the treaty meant. The United States and Britain tended to see their commitment to the treaty as commitment to the spirit of the treaty, which might call for more than its formal provisions. Japan quite honorably interpreted the treaty to mean the letter of the treaty. To get around treaty limits, Japan laid down submarine tenders that could be quickly converted into aircraft carriers and cruisers whose 6-inch guns could be quickly exchanged for the 8-inch guns of heavy cruisers.

The United States also exploited the treaty provisions in less startling ways. By a somewhat sophistic interpretation of an apparently unrelated clause in the Washington treaty American officials squeezed out another 3,000 tons displacement for their new aircraft carriers, but then nervously did not list it in official tables.

#### New Uncertainty

These cases bring us to a further unintended consequence which the Washington and London treaties share with other arms limitation agreements: They encourage attempts to extract from the treaty unforeseen advantage for one side, and at the extreme, cheating. Deception is always an attractive possibility in arms races, but the need to work within the definite limits imposed by a formal agreement vastly increases the incentives for deception or for testing the limits of the treaty as the U.S. did. This sort of behavior creates in turn new uncertainty, which it is precisely one of the greatest aims of arms limitation agreements to avoid.

The end of the Washington-London treaty system was clear in 1934 when Japan gave the required two years' warning to abrogate the treaty. It is little reproach to an arms limitation treaty that it could not dam up the volcanic forces that had begun to stir and crackle in the Japan of the thirties. But this case does point out a final problem that all arms limitation agreements must face. Arms limitation agreements, which by their very nature involve precise ratios and numbers of arms permitted to each side, are far more specific and detailed than most treaties.

They thus lack the flexibility that enables most international agreements to bend with change and be infused with a new political content—as the meaning of NATO, for example, has shifted substantially over the years. When the rigid structure of an arms limitation agreement can no longer contain changed political forces, it will snap apart. The cost may be heavy: After an arms limitation treaty not renewed, as after a divorce, one cannot return to the starting point.

In the case of the Washington-London treaty system, by the middle thirties Japan had experienced a vast economic and technological growth relative to Britain and the United States; Japan was on the march, while the United States and Britain had become more passive in foreign policy. The naval ratio 5:5:3 inevitably presented itself to many Japanese as the symbol of an inferior position in the international community that no longer corresponded to realities. At the same time the United States and Britain were understandably unwilling to change a ratio that they felt had been definitely nailed down in 1922. The outcome was the 1936 abrogation of a treaty that had already for several years bred in Japan resentment rather than harmony.

Arms control agreements are a means to bring about one of the loftiest human aims, the preservation of peace. By a natural process we have seen the tool as a thing as noble as its purpose. But over the last 58 years of arms limitations agreements it has appeared that this tool has some inherent tendencies to defeat the purpose for which we are using it. From such treaties there have repeatedly emerged major unintended side effects that did not help or, at worst, directly opposed the preservation of peace.

Some specific arms limitation agreements are good on balance, as the Washington treaty may have been. But the architects of an arms limitation treaty in the 1970s have a duty to explain how they have fashioned its specific provisions to deal with the kinds of unintended consequences that have come to light since the twenties.

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ART BUCHWALD

## SALT 'B.C.' treaty

WASHINGTON — The first SALT treaty talks were held in about 750 B.C. As reported by the Prophet Isaiah, they took place between King Hezekiah of Judea and King Sennacherib of Assyria. The original draft of the agreement read, "All swords will be beaten into plowshares; and all spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation and neither side will learn war any more."

When the wording of the treaty reached Hezekiah, there was an immediate outcry from his hawk advisors.

"We can't give up our swords. How do we know the Assyrians will not turn their

plowshares back into weapons as soon as the treaty is signed?" said one general.

"The throw weight of the Assyrian spears is far superior to ours," another one cried. "This is a trick of the Assyrians so they can launch a first-strike capability against us."

A third advisor to the king said, "I cannot support a SALT B.C. treaty of this kind. If we turn all our swords into plowshares, the Assyrians will have twice as many landbased plowshares as we have. Each plowshare could be mounted with 10 pruning hooks, and be turned into offensive weapons which would bury every man, woman

and child in Judea."

King Hezekiah was impressed with the arguments. He knew there wasn't a chance in Gomorrah of getting the treaty approved by his people, unless there were guarantees that their sword and spear arsenals would remain intact.

He sent word to Sennacherib in Damascus that he wanted a limitation on the number of offensive swords each side could have, and he demanded the dismantling of defensive shields that the Assyrians had developed to deflect Judean steel.

Sennacherib, who had stockpiled thousands of swords and shields and had developed a new SS-18 spear which would be launched from a ditch, met with his advisors and worked out a strategy.

"We will tell Hezekiah," he said, "that as part of detente each side will be able to double the number of swords and spears in their arsenals, and both parties will be permitted to develop one more weapon of its own choosing. Even with this we will still have superiority over them."

"What about the plowshares?"

"We will insist at this time that plowshares not be included in the arms limitation agreement. As you know, our new Backfire plowshare will be ready in six months. It will be an answer to their Minuteman pruning hook."

Hezekiah received the Assyrian proposals which he knew would be rejected by the hardliners in his court. "What about verification?" one of them said. "How do we know the Assyrians will not put six blades on one sword?" another asked. "What would prevent them from turning their pruning hooks back into Mirved lances?"

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