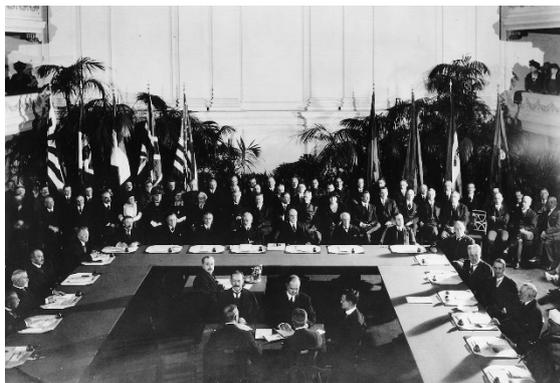




THE WASHINGTON NAVAL CONFERENCE AND AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY

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12 November 2021 will mark one-hundred years since the opening of the 1921–22 Washington Naval Conference. The Washington Conference was significant not only as the first arms control conference in world history, but also as a decisive moment in the fomenting of US and Japanese naval power, and the effect this had on British hegemony and Australia's regional security.



Delegates at the Washington Naval Conference, Washington DC, 1921. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

The Washington Conference was convened in an attempt to address mounting Japanese-US competition. As two rising powers bordering the Pacific Ocean with possessions in the region, Japanese-US relations had become increasingly tense in the post-war years. Both in response to, and further fuelling this tension, the naval expenditure of the two nations continued to rise.¹ Australian Prime Minister William Hughes

¹ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of The British World System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 366–7.

² 7 April 1921, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives* Vol. 94 1921 (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1921), 7267.

³ Erik Goldstein, "The Evolution of British Diplomatic Strategy for the Washington Conference," *The Washington Conference, 1921–22: Naval Rivalry,*

remarked on this militarisation in an April 1921 statement made to the House of Representatives:

"We read almost every day of disturbing rumours of great navies, the world longing for peace resounds with the clanging of hammers, nations fervently building more and more war ships, and there is rivalry openly expressed between those two great nations, the United States of America and Japan."²

There was a serious risk that a naval arms race would develop. For Britain, financially stricken in the wake of the war and seeking to economise wherever possible, there was concern that this arms race would see Japan or, more likely, the US outstrip the Royal Navy.³

Japanese-US relations were further complicated by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. In 1902, Britain and Japan signed the alliance in response to Russia's expanding power in the Asia-Pacific region. The alliance was renewed in 1905 and again in 1911. The US government feared that as the Anglo-Japanese Alliance did not explicitly exclude conflict with the US, Japan may take this to mean that aggression towards the US was viable, impelling Britain into such a conflict.⁴ The future of the alliance came under question in 1919, as it was due to expire in 1921. With the League of Nations in place to manage international peace, arrangements such as the Anglo-Japanese Alliance were seen as no longer necessary, indeed, counterproductive to peace.⁵

The first post-war Imperial Conference was held in August 1921, and the question of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance dominated discussion. Although the Australian government had initially been wary of the alliance – the result of longstanding racial and security fears of Japan –

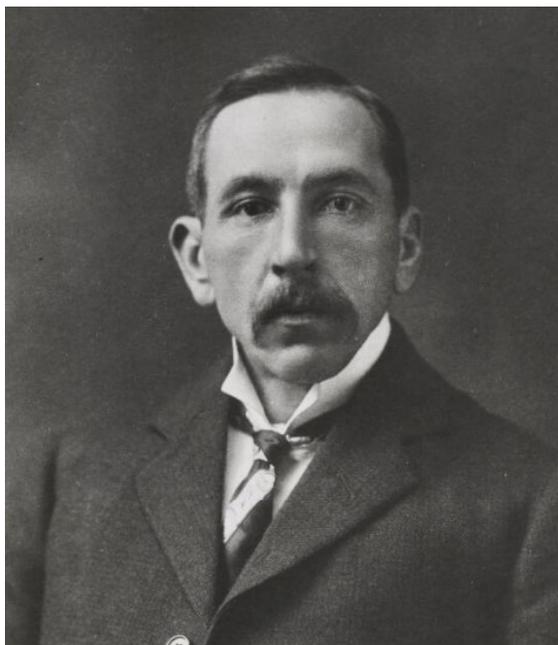
East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbour, eds. Erik Goldstein, John Maurer and Ernest R. May, (Essex: Frank Cass, 1994), 14–15.

⁴ J.C. Vinson, *The Parchment Peace: The United States Senate and the Washington Conference, 1921–1922* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1955), 44–5, 47, 99–101.

⁵ Jaroslav Valkoun, "Great Britain, the Dominions and their Position on Japan in the 1920s and Early 1930s," *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations* 2 (2017): 32–3.



it had come to see the value of having a shared ally with Japan and the alliance's restraining role in the event of Japanese expansion.⁶



Australian Prime Minister William Hughes, circa 1919. Courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA: A1200, L11181A.

Hughes, who represented Australia at the Imperial Conference, cautioned against excluding and offending Japan if the alliance was not renewed, arguing that "to turn our back on the Treaty is certainly to exclude Japan ... she will be isolated, her national pride wounded in its most tender spot." He supported the inclusion of a clause that would "guard against even the suspicion of

hostility or unfriendliness to the United States."⁷ From Australia's vantage point, preserving the alliance and accommodating the US would ensure the rising powers remained contented while still serving Australia's security interests. There is little doubt that Hughes also appreciated that the involvement of the US would strengthen the diplomatic leverage of the alliance should Japan become hostile.⁸

The Dominions of Canada and South Africa did not wish to see the alliance renewed. Both believed that cooperation with the US was more significant than with Japan and fearing that even an amended alliance would damage relations with the US.⁹ The Imperial Conference was set to close with a decision not yet made on the future of the alliance when US President Warren Harding invited the principal naval powers to Washington to discuss naval disarmament.

The Washington Conference, held between 12 November 1921 and 9 February 1922, was the first US-led international gathering, signalling an assertion of the nation's burgeoning influence in the Asia-Pacific region and international affairs moreover. The US's principal goal was to contain Japanese naval expansion in the Asia-Pacific. From the outset, the nation took the lead at the conference to ensure this goal was met. In his opening address, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes flagged that the US was willing to commit to naval tonnage limits and a ten-year shipbuilding moratorium.¹⁰ These proposals set the footing for the two major treaties signed at the conference.¹¹

⁶ Neville Meaney, *Fears and Phobias: E.L. Piesse and the Problem of Japan, 1909–39* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996), 3-4; Tom Frame, *Pacific Partners: A History of Australian-American Naval Relations* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 26.

⁷ *Imperial Conference of Prime Ministers and Representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India held in June, July and August 1921: Summary of Proceedings and Documents* (London: J.J. Keilher and Co. for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1921), 19.

⁸ Michael Graham Fry, "The Pacific Dominions and the Washington Conference, 1921–22," *The Washington Conference, 1921–22*, 63-6.

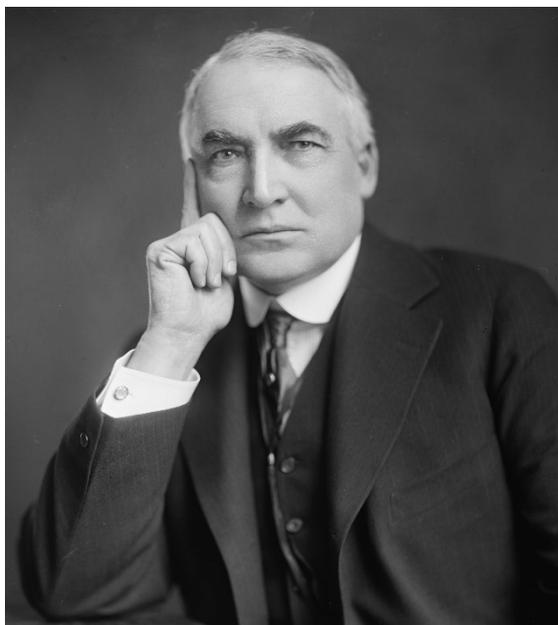
⁹ Goldstein, "The Evolution of British Diplomatic Strategy for the Washington Conference," 11-12.

¹⁰ *Address of Charles E. Hughes, Secretary of State of the United States and American Commissioner to the Conference on Limitation of Armament on Assuming the Duties of the Presiding officer at the Conference* (Washington: US Government Printer, 1922).

¹¹ Minor treaties were also signed pertaining to the use of submarines, chemical (gas) warfare and China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.



The Four Power Treaty – signed on 13 December 1921 by the US, Britain, Japan and France – committed each of the signatories to “respecting the rights of the others in their insular possessions and insular dominions in the region of the Pacific Ocean”. Should a conflict occur, the four nations were not obliged to provide military aid to one another and the treaty would provide a framework for discussion and a resolution.¹² The Four Power Treaty effectively removed the need for a renewed Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the alliance was subsequently terminated.¹³



US President Warren G Harding who invited the principal naval powers to Washington to discuss the issue of naval disarmament.

The second major treaty was the Five Power Treaty, a naval disarmament agreement signed on 6 February 1922 between the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan and the US. The treaty stipulated limits on the tonnage of capital ships,

established a ten year freeze on building capital ship replacements, and required that no new bases were to be constructed or existing bases strengthened. The new tonnage limitations restricted Britain and the US to 525,000 tonnes, Japan to 315,000 tonnes and Italy and France to 175,000 tonnes. Strict limitations were also introduced for individual displacement and gun sizes. No capital ship or aircraft carrier could exceed 35,000 tonnes or 27,000 tonnes respectively. Capital ships were not to carry guns with a calibre in excess of 16 inches and aircraft carriers and other vessels of war were limited to 8 inch guns. In order to meet these new limitations the US, Japan and Britain and its Empire were required to scrap a number of capital ships, both existing and those under construction. This would leave Britain with 22 capital ships, the US 18, and Japan 10.¹⁴

In theory, in formalising the status quo in the Pacific, tension and fear between the US and Japan would ease and, in turn, defence expenditure stabilise. For the US, the Washington treaties secured peace in the Asia-Pacific and, through the new naval ratios, formalised the nation’s position as a leading naval power. For the British, the pressure to increase military spending, lest it be outstripped, had been resolved.

There are those who hold the view that the Washington Conference marked the end of a crisis period for Australia and its sense of regional insecurity. What followed was an apparent era of complacency in the nation’s international outlook.¹⁵ Certainly, Australia was an enthusiastic participant at the conference and was relieved when the risk of a naval arms race had been resolved. Prime Minister Hughes acknowledged that the Washington Conference had “achieved great things” and he hoped the treaties would establish a new and peaceful balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. However, it is a falsehood

¹² Document 15 Treaty between the US, the British Empire, France, and Japan, 13 December 1921, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States 1922* Vol. 1 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1938)

¹³ Fry, “The Pacific Dominions,” 77-8.

¹⁴ Document 77 Treaty between the US, the British Empire, France, Italy, and Japan, 6 February 1922, *Papers 1922*; Conference on the Limitation of

Armament Held at Washington, DC, United States of America, from 12 November 1921 to 6 February 1922, Report of the Australian Delegate Sen. Hon. George Pearce, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A981, DIS 1 PART 3.

¹⁵ Neville Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy 1901–23* Vol. 2: *Australia and World Crisis, 1914–23* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), 492-500, 513-4.



to suggest the nation was ignorant to British naval weakness in the Pacific or that it accepted the decisions made at Washington without apprehension.

The Washington treaties represented sacrifices for Australia and its security standing. Firstly, Australia's single battlecruiser and the proud flagship of the nascent Royal Australian Navy (RAN), HMAS *Australia*, was scuttled as part of the British Empire's contribution to naval disarmament. The decision to sink *Australia* was met with protest from around the country on the grounds of strategic, sentimental and economic logic (the steel hull being readily reusable).¹⁶ On the morning of 12 April 1924, *Australia* was sunk off Sydney Heads. The scuttling was accompanied by large crowds and a heartfelt ceremony – indeed, many wreathes of flowers, sent by RAN personnel and members of the Australian public, were placed in the ship's hull.¹⁷ One RAN veteran later mournfully recounted “strong men were wet-eyed. Many cursed. It was a tragic blunder.”¹⁸ *Australia* was stripped of useful fittings, with each municipality across Australia receiving a framed photograph of the ship framed in the teak of her timber decks.¹⁹

While the loss of *Australia* was no doubt a disappointing and symbolically significant one, there are those who note that it would likely have been a decision made irrespective of the Washington treaties, due to modernisation requirements and the considerable expense that modernisation would have involved.²⁰ In the years following the Washington Conference, at least until rearmament commenced in 1933, the RAN's

priority was maintaining a cruiser force for trade protection and imperial cooperation, rather than a more balanced fleet unit for national defence and deterrence.²¹



“The last plunge” of HMAS *Australia*. The once proud warship being scuttled off the coast of Sydney.

The second, and arguably more pressing, sacrifice related to regional security and naval capability. The Four Power Treaty only offered a vaguely worded guarantee of goodwill and cooperation, lacking any obligatory call to arms in the event of hostility. Hughes pointed out to the House of Representatives that:

“there is no force behind the Treaties ... these Treaties are not in the nature of an alliance. They do not guarantee to us material support if we are attacked. They insure merely moral support and the public opinion of the people of the contracting countries.”²²

¹⁶ “HMAS *Australia*,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 6 March 1924, 4.

¹⁷ “A Complete Ruin,” *The Brisbane Courier*, 12 April 1924, 7.

¹⁸ Henry James Feakes, *White Ensign, Southern Cross: A Story of the King's Ships of Australia's Navy* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1951), 214.

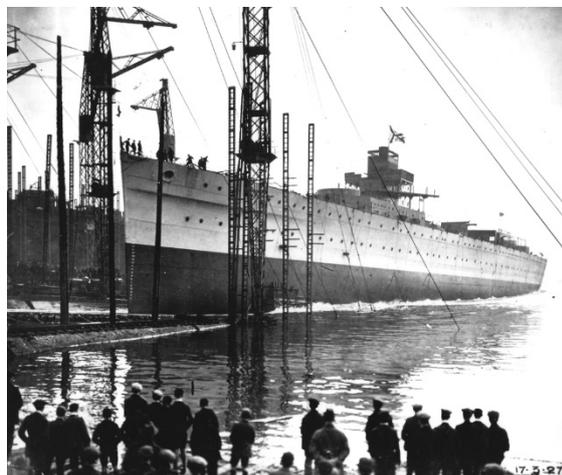
¹⁹ Patsy Adam-Smith, *The ANZACS* (Melbourne: Nelson Publishers, 1978), 351.

²⁰ Lieutenant Commander Glenn Kerr, RAN, “A Loss More Symbolic than Material?” *Sea Power Centre – Australia*, <https://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/loss-more-symbolic-material>; Frame, *Pacific Partners*. 26; Jason Sears, “1919-1929: An

Imperial Service,” *The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, Vol. 3 *The Royal Australian Navy*, Ed. David Stevens (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65.

²¹ Lieutenant Commander Glenn Kerr, RAN, “The Decline of Australian Naval Deterrence, 1919-1939,” *Sea Power Centre – Australia*, <https://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/decline-australian-naval-deterrence-1919-1939>.

²² 26 July 1922, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives* No. 99 1922 (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1922), 789-93.



The launching of County-class HMAS Australia (II), among the first Australian cruisers built in accordance with the Washington Treaty limitations on tonnage and gun size.

For Australia, the most pressing aspect of the new treaties was the naval ratios in relation to Japan. In accepting the new tonnage restrictions Britain had, for the first time since the Napoleonic Wars, accepted naval parity rather than mastery. Britannia no longer ruled the waves. While Britain's upper limit was more than 200,000 tonnes greater than that of Japan, in terms of areas of interest, the ratio was in Japan's favour. The Empire – and the ability to monitor and defend the people, trade and territories within this vast area – was the measure of Britain's global power and standing. The tonnage restriction established at Washington only allowed for the maintenance of these activities. Conversely, Japan's interests were limited to the Pacific Ocean and it could concentrate its resources there. If a new strategic threat developed in the Asia-Pacific, Britain would be unable to respond sufficiently. The protection of British interests in the region would rely on the dispatch of a large expeditionary fleet, transferred from the British Isles or elsewhere in the Empire.

²³ John Jordan, *Warships After Washington: The Development of the Five Major Fleets 1922-1930* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2011), 71.

²⁴ Minutes of Meeting, British Empire Delegation Washington Naval Conference, 13 November 1921, NAA: A4719, 14.

²⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: A Lane, 1976), 275; Minutes of Meeting, British Empire Delegation Washington

This was a shaky assurance, at best, for not only would such an operation be slow, it relied on a stable political situation in Britain and across the Empire.²³

The ten-year moratorium on capital shipbuilding resulted in serious limitations on naval and industrial capabilities. During meetings of the British Empire Delegation to the Washington Conference, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Earl Beatty argued that the moratorium “would result in decay of naval ship construction and armament industries ... these industries would have to be recreated at great expense in order to build ships required for replacement.”²⁴ Moreover, for Britain, aside from the recently completed HMS *Hood* and two *Nelson*-class battleships, there would actually be a gap of fifteen years in the RN's capital shipbuilding program.²⁵ The Admiralty's concerns were overruled, in part the result of Cabinet's more optimistic outlook on international affairs and, more critically, an acknowledgment that Britain was struggling to meet the upkeep costs of a first-rate naval power. These private discussions at Washington were a grim foreshadowing, as the Empire was indeed left with a fleet of unreliable strength and capability when tensions mounted in Europe and the Pacific, and aggressors began to rearm.

Ultimately, the Washington treaties could only deliver temporary regional security. Indeed, within a decade of the Washington Conference, the Japanese army attacked and occupied the Chinese province of Manchuria, contravening the provisions of the League of Nations and the Nine Power Treaty (one of the minor treaties signed at the 1921–22 Washington Conference). This discredited the systems for maintaining Asia-Pacific peace and encouraged Australian decision makers to adopt a more pragmatic approach to matters of regional security.²⁶

Naval Conference, 16 November 1921, NAA: A4719, 14.

²⁶ For an examination of the Manchurian Crisis and its role in Australia's longer term defence planning see, Honae Cuffe, “The Search for and Integrated Policy: Challenges to Australian National Interest in the Asia-Pacific, 1921-57,” (University of Newcastle, PhD, 2019), Chapter 2 and 4.