CHAPTER 6: US RETALIATION: WASHINGTON NAVAL CONFERENCE

1. CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING UP TO WASHINGTON NAVAL CONFERENCE

Japan's proposals to the Washington Conference

The Armistice of November 11 was signed in 1918, bringing the European war, which had persisted for four years and four months, to an end. As one of the five powers, Japan participated in the peace conference that commenced in January 1919, along with Britain, the US, France, and Italy. There were 23 other nations represented, for a total of 28.

Japan's agenda for the conference included three main items: (1) continued control of former German interests in Shandong province, (2) conveyance to Japan of former German possessions north of the equator in the Pacific, and (3) a proposal for the abolition of racial discrimination (the Racial Equality Proposal).

The Chinese were pleading for recovery of Shandong province, in spite of the fact that they had made no investment in whatsoever toward that end. It was the Japanese who had made the sacrifices and borne the costs. Chinese justified their appeal by claiming that when they declared war against Germany, in August 1917, all treaties concluded between China and Germany had been terminated. Therefore, all former German interests, including Shandong province, should revert directly to China.

Japanese and Chinese claims were in direct conflict, but China's demands were rejected. The transfer of German interests in Shandong to Japan was recognized in Articles 156-58 of the Treaty of Versailles. The Chinese expressed their dissatisfaction by refusing to sign the treaty. The US Senate, too, refused to ratify the treaty because of opposition to the League of Nations. Incidentally, the May Fourth Movement, an anti-Japanese campaign that erupted in China in 1919, was triggered in part by the Shandong problem.

Japan's request for transfer of former German possessions in the South Pacific was easily approved because Japan had signed an agreement with Britain, France, and Italy during the war. Japan was awarded a League of Nations Mandate for the Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Caroline Islands, and other islands north of the equator.

The Japanese submitted the Racial Equality Proposal as a matter of principle, not a demand for practical rewards. Behind it was, of course, the Japanese immigration problem. But Japan's proposal met with unyielding intransigence from the "white" nations.

The final version of the proposal suggested inserting the text shown below in italics into the preamble of the covenant, which begins.

> THE HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES,
> In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security
> by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war,

> by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,
> by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and
> by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another,
>
> *by the endorsement of the principle of equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals,*
>
> Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.

The Japanese wished to make part of Japan's stance on racial equality explicit by adding the proposed text. Eleven of the 17 delegates of the League of Nations Commission members voted in favor of the Racial Equality Proposal. However, Japan's proposal was not adopted because Woodrow Wilson, the Commission's chairman, insisted that the vote be unanimous. If it had been adopted in 1919, the Immigration Act of 1924 would surely not come into being, and one of the causes of conflict between Japan and the US might have been eliminated. The realization that this occurrence was a crossroads between war and peace, fills me with disappointment.

Still, it is true that the European war provided Japan with ample opportunities. Japan took over German interests in Shandong province, and problems relating to the Twenty-One Demands were settled with treaties between Japan and China in 1915. The Lansing-Ishii Agreement, signed in 1917, won American recognition for Japanese special interests in Manchuria. Moreover, the Japanese sphere of influence in the Pacific region expanded with the South Seas Mandate (the League of Nations mandate for former German possessions in the Pacific Ocean). All of these were the fruit of Japanese military and diplomatic endeavors. They were also, without exaggeration, the rewards for the sacrifice of Japanese blood, tears, and sweat, beginning in the Meiji era.

New conflict between Japan and US

Unfortunately, there was no rejoicing in the US over Japan's achievements. At the Paris Peace Conference, China was defeated by Japan, and the US was unable to block rapid Japanese progress. The opportunity for the US to retaliate against Japan in earnest did not arrive for about two more years. The stage this time was the Washington Naval Conference, held in Washington, D.C. between November 1921 and February 1922. The US issued the invitations for this international conference involving nine nations: the US, Britain, Japan, France, Italy, China, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Belgium. On the schedule were naval disarmament and questions involving the Pacific and the Far East. The gathering became known as the Washington Conference, and it has great historical importance in that it determined the framework and direction of the Japan-US relationship from 1922 to the outbreak of the Greater East Asian War.

After World War I, Germany no longer had a Far Eastern or Pacific presence. The Russians needed to concern themselves with the civil war that followed the revolution, and thus had no surplus energy. Although France had colonized Indochina and retained concessions in China, French influence in the region had significantly decreased. However, since the war, the US had demonstrated its strength by becoming the world's creditor nation. It refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, having shifted its focus from Europe to the Far East. And it was at that point that the

US began to confront Japan head on, after Japan had made great inroads into Manchuria, Mongolia, China, and the Pacific during the war.

The new rivalry between Japan and the US was one of the primary reasons for convening the Washington Conference. I will now discuss some of the factors at work.

Anglo-Japanese Alliance

The 10-year term of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which was revised in July of 1911, was scheduled to expire in November 1921. However, the world had changed greatly during those 10 years: Russia had been brought to her knees by the revolution, and Germany had retreated from the Far East. Consequently, there was little reason to keep the alliance alive.

Given that threats from Russia and Germany had vanished, the US wanted the alliance discarded, since keeping it would place the US in the position of a hypothetical enemy nation. Another reason to oppose it was the Americans' conviction that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, if it continued to exist, would give Japan free rein in China. Japan, of course, was hoping that it would endure. The matter was discussed at the Imperial Conference held between June and August 1921. Britain, Australia, India, and New Zealand had no objections to keeping it, but Canada, the US' next-door neighbor, was vehemently opposed. Thus Britain, searching desperately for a compromise, suggested that a conference be held among Japan, Britain, the US, and China to discuss the matter. Unfortunately, it was just then that the US proposed the naval disarmament conference.

Problems in the Far East and Pacific

The Lansing-Ishii Agreement was essentially an improvised affair intended to appease Japan for the duration of the war. When the conflict came to an end, the US attempted to dispose of it. Moreover, the fact that Japan's claims on Shandong province prevailed at the Paris Peace Conference gave rise to further controversy, both public and private, in the US. Also, as a result of the discrepancy between the two nations' perceptions of their Siberian expeditions, hostility intensified between them. The US was attempting to broaden the boundaries of its Open Door Policy, which it had already been advocating for China, and to include even Maritime province in Russia. There were problems in the South Pacific as well, one of them being the Yap islands in the South Pacific. Japan's occupation of the islands had been recognized at the Paris Peace Conference. But the US wanted them removed from Japanese control because they were situated southeast of Guam, and thus at a key point for submarine cable communication.

Naval arms race

The starting point for the building of American naval strength can be found in the ideas of 19th-century strategist Adm. Alfred Thayer Mahan. When Theodore Roosevelt was Secretary of the Navy, he found that Mahan's "big navy" advocacy resonated with him. In later years, after he had become president, Roosevelt laid the foundation for that big navy, saying that asking Congress to build a Navy that ranks first in the world was his solemn responsibility as president.

When the Russo-Japanese War concluded, the US Navy could not have boasted that it was more powerful than its Japanese counterpart. But later the US began to perceive Japan as its most formidable rival and became acutely aware of how important naval prowess was to its foreign-policy objectives, chiefly the Open Door policy. The US therefore resumed its naval construction

program, aiming for second-best navy in the world. World War I only accelerated that momentum. In August 1916 the US decided upon a three-year project involving the construction of more than 150 ships, aiming to build a navy second to none. Obviously this program was perceived as a threat to Japan. Therefore, in 1917, the year after Congress passed the Naval Expansion Act, Japan came up with a plan for an Eight-Four Fleet (eight battleships and four cruisers), then in 1918, one for an Eight-Six Fleet, and in 1920, another for an Eight-Eight Fleet (eight battleships and eight cruisers).

Journalist and naval enthusiast Hector C. Bywater wrote about those years in *Navies and Nations*:

> For a year or more [Japan] had observed with growing uneasiness the magnitude of American naval preparations, coupled as they were with an avowed intention of obtaining the supremacy of the seas. Her own interests were confined to the Pacific, and it was in that ocean that the United States was massing its forces. In August, 1919, the strongest squadrons of the U.S. Navy had passed through the Panama Canal to form the newly-organized Pacific Fleet. These movements coincided with the publication of plans for developing Pacific fleet bases on a large scale. Extensive naval works were projected in the Philippines, Guam, and Samoa; Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, was to be converted into a "Gibraltar of the Pacific."
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> Japan could not but feel herself to be the objective of these naval activities. She retorted by adopting, in 1920, the famous "eight-eight" programme, designed eventually to give her a fleet at least equal, and probably superior, to that of the United States.[1]

When we look at the naval construction race between Japan and the US, not in terms of monetary strength, but from the standpoint of facilities (docks and harbors) and shipbuilding expertise, we see that Japan clearly had the advantage over the US. The Americans finally came to perceive the difficulties inherent in this rivalry. Moreover, the American naval program ended up stimulating British, as well as Japanese, naval expansion. Not only did the naval arms race among three great naval powers and the concomitant sense of urgency become important facets of world politics, but it also produced a crushing financial burden for the nations involved. Therefore, the US, in a move to extricate itself from a predicament it had brought upon itself, decided to convene an international conference to discuss naval disarmament. Its objectives were to keep the navies of Japan and Britain in check, block Japanese expansion into the Pacific region, and pave the way for US expansion into the Far East. The Washington Conference was, actually and essentially, a political duel between Japan and the US.

I have just described the international situation on the eve of the Washington Conference. In March 1921, onto that scene stepped Warren G. Harding, the 29th president of the US, known for his advocacy of a return to normalcy. He reversed Wilson's idealistic policies, choosing "America

[1] Bywater, Hector C., *Navies and Nations: A Review of Naval Developments Since the Great War* (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1927), 113-14.

first" as his motto. Harding shifted his diplomatic focus from Europe to the Far East. Since the Russo-Japanese War, American policies intended to obstruct Japanese inroads into China had, without exception, failed. But now the opportunity to prevent the Japanese from making further advances into China and the Pacific had arrived. In July 1921 Harding proposed an international conference to be held in Washington, D.C, at which discussions of both naval disarmament and Far Eastern affairs would be held, issuing invitations to Japan, Britain, France, Italy, China, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal.