

CHAPTER 6: US REATLIATION: WASHINGTON NAVAL CONFERENCE

2. RESULTS OF THE WASHINGTON CONFERENCE

Freezing of the Pacific

First, we have the Washington Naval Treaty (also known as the Five-Power Treaty and Treaty Between the Five Powers Concerning the Limitation of Naval Armament). Its three essential points are listed below.

(1) Respective ratios of capital ships to be held by each of the signatories was set as follows:

Britain	5
United States	5
Japan	3
France	1.75
Italy	1.75

(2) Capital ships under construction were to be scrapped; no capital ships were to be built for the next 10 years.

(3) Capital ships were limited to 35,000 tons standard displacement and guns with a caliber no larger than 16 inches (406 millimeters); aircraft carriers were limited to 27,000 tons standard displacement and guns with a caliber no larger than 8 inches.

(4) Cruisers were limited to 10,000 tons standard displacement and guns with a caliber no larger than 8 inches; no limits were placed on their construction.

(5) The status quo, with regard to fortifications and naval bases, would be maintained; no new fortifications, naval bases, or coastal defenses would be constructed in the territories listed below:

(A) The insular possessions which the United States now holds or may hereafter acquire in the Pacific Ocean, except those adjacent to the coast of the United States, Alaska and the Panama Canal Zone, and the Hawaiian Islands;¹

(B) Hong Kong and the insular possessions which the British Empire now holds or may hereafter acquire in the Pacific Ocean, east of the meridian of 110° east longitude, except those adjacent to the coast of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia and its Territories, and New Zealand;

¹ Consequently, the US abandoned the idea of fortifying Guam, Pago Pago, the Philippines, and the Aleutians.

(C) The Chishima (Kurile) Islands, the Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands, the Ryūkyū Islands, Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands and any insular territories or possessions in the Pacific Ocean which Japan may hereafter acquire.

The US had succeeded in limiting the number of Japanese capital ships to 60% of those possessed by Britain and the US. In exchange, it was agreed that the status quo in the Pacific (referred to as the “freezing of the Pacific”) would be preserved. The treaty prohibited the Japanese, British, and Americans from building new fortifications on the Pacific islands in their possession. But exceptions were made for the US (Hawaii) and Britain (Singapore). Both nations were permitted to fortify those territories at their discretion. The Americans reinforced Hawaii, which would serve as an important advance base for the US military, and Britain made Singapore its major citadel in the Far East.

Because of this historical background, no sooner had the Greater East Asian War broken out than the Japanese attacked both Hawaii and Singapore. These naval construction limitations enabled the US to pursue its aspiration: the construction of a navy second to none.

Trading whiskey for water: termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance

Next, we have the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The Americans looked askance at the notion of renewing the alliance (the third Anglo-Japanese Alliance was scheduled to expire in July 1921) and hoped it would be abrogated. As already stated, they suspected that with the threat from Imperial Russia now gone, it was possible that the US might be forced into a war against Britain and Japan. Of greater concern to the Americans, however, was the likelihood that the alliance would further encourage Japanese inroads into China. Japan and Britain were in favor of continuing with the alliance, but since neither could ignore the US, the Four-Power Treaty (signed by Japan, Britain, US, and France) was concluded in its stead. The announcement of the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance appears in Article IV of that treaty.

Thus the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the pillar of Japanese diplomacy for 21 long years, came to an end in August 1923.

This was a cause for rejoicing for the US. President Harding described the obtaining of an agreement whereby the Anglo-Japanese Alliance would be immediately terminated as “a matter of the greatest gratification.”^{2 3}

² In fact, these words were not those of President Harding, but of the American Delegation in a report presented to Harding. See Office of the Historian, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1922, Volume I: Report of the American Delegation, February 9, 1922.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1922v01/d88>.

³ Kohsaku Tamura, “Genesis of the Pacific War (I),” *CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: A Review of East Asiatic Affairs* Vol. XII, No. 2 (1943), 182.

Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge revealed his unwavering opposition to the alliance as follows: “The chief and most important point in the [Four-Power] treaty is the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. That was the main object of the treaty. It is sufficient to say that in my judgment the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was the most dangerous element in our relations with the Far East and with the Pacific.”⁴

On the other hand, Sir Edward Grey, the former British foreign secretary, expressed appreciation for Japan’s never having taken unfair advantage of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Though he did mention that the Japanese had used it to strengthen their position in China during World War I (Grey was referring to the Twenty-One Demands), he wondered whether any Western nation burdened with overpopulation, as Japan was, would have taken advantage with such self-restraint. He clearly regretted the demise of the alliance.

Unsurprisingly, the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance pushed Japan further toward isolation from the international community. The aforementioned Thomas A. Bailey quotes a Japanese diplomat, commenting about the Four-Power Treaty that replaced the alliance, lamenting, “We have discarded whiskey and accepted water.”⁵ To the Japanese, the new treaty had neither significance nor utility. From then on, they had no choice but to contend with the chaotic situation in the Far East on their own. At a time when they most needed an alliance, they had none. Japan was forced into isolation against its will. When I recollect the next 20 years, which culminated in the Greater East Asian War, years plagued with isolation and distress, I too lament the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

Nine-Power Treaty: codification of the Open Door Policy

Third was the Nine-Power Treaty Concerning China, the conclusion of which may have been the most historically significant achievement of the Washington Conference.

It was signed by nine nations on February 6, 1922, the final day of the conference. Signatories agreed to respect the sovereignty, independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China. They also promised to help establish and maintain the Open Door Policy and equal opportunity for the commerce and industry of all nations (see below).

ARTICLE I⁶

The Contracting Powers, other than China, agree:

⁴ Westel Woodbury Willoughby, *China at the Conference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1922), 347.

⁵ Bailey, *op. cit.*, 696.

⁶ This article, composed by Elihu Root, is referred to as the “Root resolutions.” Alfred Sao-ke Sze, minister plenipotentiary, a member of the Chinese delegation to the Washington Conference, submitted a list of 10 principles relating to China at a meeting of the Far Eastern Committee; Elihu Root, former US secretary of state, wrote the counterproposal.

- (1) To respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China;
- (2) To provide the fullest and most unembarrassed opportunity to China to develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable government;
- (3) To use their influence for the purpose of effectually establishing and maintaining the principle of equal opportunity for the commerce and industry of all nations throughout the territory of China;
- (4) To refrain from taking advantage of conditions in China in order to seek special rights or privileges which would abridge the rights of subjects or citizens of friendly States, and from countenancing action inimical to the security of such States.

ARTICLE III

With a view to applying more effectually the principles of the Open Door or equality of opportunity in China for the trade and industry of all nations, the Contracting Powers, other than China, agree that they will not seek any arrangement which might purport to establish in favour of their interests any general superiority of rights with respect to commercial or economic development in China ... or any such monopoly or preference as would deprive the nationals of any other Power of the right of undertaking any legitimate trade or industry in China.

ARTICLE V

China agrees that, throughout the whole of the railways in China, she will not exercise or permit unfair discrimination of any kind. In particular there shall be no discrimination whatever, direct or indirect, in respect of charges or of facilities on the ground of the nationality of passengers or the countries from which or to which they are proceeding.

ARTICLE VII

The Contracting Powers agree that, whenever a situation arises which in the opinion of any one of them involves the application of the stipulations of the present Treaty, and renders desirable discussion of such application, there shall be full and frank communication between the Contracting Powers concerned.⁷

(I have intentionally omitted any discussion of Articles II, IV, VI, VIII, or IX.)

In the late 19th century the Open Door Policy, as championed by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, was little more than an aspiration. But with the Nine-Power Treaty, the US incorporated this principle of US Far Eastern policy into an international treaty, thus making it binding. Since the US had succeeded in having it recognized by all the Powers, the Nine-Power Treaty came to be called the “Chinese Magna Carta.”

But since the Nine-Power Treaty effectively rejected Japan’s China policy, which emphasized the special relationship between Japan and China, it constrained Japan to an excessive extent, and

⁷ http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/pre-war/9_power.html.

became the primary point of contention between Japan and the US, ultimately leading up to the Greater East Asian War.

Until that war commenced the US used the treaty uninhibitedly to condemn Japan's China policy, and alleged Japanese violations of that treaty as a basis for denouncing Japan, beginning with the Manchurian Incident, through the Shanghai incidents, to the 2nd Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese tolerated such criticism until November 1938, during the 2nd Sino-Japanese War, when they formally repudiated the Open Door Policy and equal opportunity for commerce and industry, the main principles of the Nine-Power Treaty (I shall discuss this later). Then, at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo Trials), Japan was adjudged to have violated international treaties. One of those cited was the Nine-Power Treaty. Indeed, that treaty continued to hound Japan relentlessly for a quarter century, from the Washington Conference to the postwar era.

Here I would like to add that in connection with the Nine-Power Treaty, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement was cancelled. As already stated, that agreement was reached between special envoy Ishii Kikujirō and Secretary of State Robert Lansing in 1917. The diplomatic note stated that “the governments of the United States and Japan recognize that territorial propinquity creates special relations between countries, and, consequently, the government of the United States recognizes that Japan has special interests in China, particularly in the part to which her possessions are contiguous.” However, after the Nine-Power Treaty, which demands fealty to the Open Door Policy vis à vis China, was concluded, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement was deemed to have lost its *raison d'être*, and was cancelled in 1923 in accordance with the wishes of the US. As the aforementioned Mr. Griswold indicated, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement was simply a “grudging concession”⁸ whose intent was to appease the Japanese during the war with Germany.

In conclusion, as already stated, at the Washington Conference Japan announced the withdrawal of troops from Siberia and returned Shandong province to China, as promised, and withdrew all demands in Group V of the Twenty-One Demands.⁹

The apotheosis of US Far Eastern policy

After the Russo-Japanese War the Japan-US relationship changed. As I have already discussed, in a complete turnaround, what had been until then satisfactory ties veered toward confrontation. US Far Eastern policies, including the attempt to oust Japan from Manchuria through dollar diplomacy,

⁸ Griswold, *op. cit.*, 217.

⁹ Also revealed by the Chinese delegation via Charles Evans Hughes at a meeting of the Far Eastern Committee on January 24, 1922 was a secret treaty between Russia and China concluded in 1896. The reason for revealing it was to establish the fact that such a treaty would enmesh China in an international dispute, and that Japanese aggression was so severe as to necessitate a treaty between Russia and China. This gesture only served to prove that Japan had a just reason to make war with Russia. The attempt to convince world powers to place more trust in China created the opposite impression. See Komatsu Midori, *Washington kaigi no shinsō* (The truth about the Washington Conference) (Tokyo, Chūgai Shinronsha, 1921).

and to control Japan's China policy using the guise of the Open Door Policy, had ended in failure. Even at the Paris Peace Conference, Japanese diplomacy defeated China's claims and extended Japan's sphere of influence from Manchuria and Mongolia to the equator in the distant south, acquiring for Japan the most powerful status in Asia. The opportunity to block Japan's rapid progress presented itself in the form of the Washington Conference. While that conference gave the appearance of serving as a symbol of postwar pacifism and international cooperation. In actuality, because it disregarded the current reality to a great extent, it ultimately gave rise to an unexpected contradiction.

For instance, the US had succeeded in orchestrating the demise of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which it had viewed with unease and suspicion, and replacing it with the Four-Power Treaty, thereby breaking the link between Japan and Britain. But as a result, the Japanese found themselves not only in exile, but also forced to deal with the subsequent chaos and sudden changes in the Far Eastern situation, even though they had absolutely no desire to do so.

Moreover, even a cursory examination of the Nine-Power Treaty Concerning China reveals the treaty's greatest flaw: its basis on the assumption that eventually a solid stable government would appear in China, and that China would unite and form a modern nation. That China would become even more chaotic due to the penetration of communism, and head toward violent exclusionism, did not figure in the Nine-Power-Treaty scenario. The treaty signed at the Washington Conference was premised not on the real China, but on a pie-in-the-sky China. It was impotent in the face of subsequent changes in the situation in China. Instead, it revealed the disconnection from reality and the illusions that pervaded the Washington Conference.

The system formed by the treaties concluded at the conference is referred to as the Washington Treaty System. It is interesting that in the West, the Versailles System, the objective of which is the weakening of Germany, and in the East, the Washington System, intended to constrain Japanese advancement into Asia, appeared at roughly the same time. And it is even more ironic, historically, that those systems gave rise to the Second World War, because over the course of the next 20 years Germany and Japan took it upon themselves to destroy them.

The Washington Conference is commonly thought of as the stage on which the international codification of American Far Eastern Policy took place. It was also a venue where concepts and principles took precedence. Or, if we use Griswold's words, "the Treaties of Washington were the apotheosis of the traditional Far Eastern policy of the United States."¹⁰ Since the Washington Conference prevented further Japanese inroads into China and the Pacific, and smoothed the way for American advancement into East Asia, we can correctly conclude that it was, in essence, a political duel between Japan and the US.

¹⁰ Griswold, *op. cit.*, 331.