

THE NAVAL ISSUE BETWEEN CONFERENCES

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THE opening of 1929 found Anglo-American friendship at its lowest ebb since the War; the close of the year finds it at the crest. The advent of Mr. Hoover and of Mr. MacDonald to office within three months of each other offered opportunities unparalleled since the naval issue has arisen. It brought to the problem on both sides of the Atlantic fresh minds and a renewed resolve to reach a solution. Negotiations begun (even before the British elections) by Mr. Hoover bore fruit in agreement in August on the fundamentals of the problem, and the way was paved for Mr. MacDonald's visit to the President in October.

Rarely does the hour find the man as it did in the case of Mr. MacDonald. It was expected that whoever was Prime Minister after the British elections would visit the President to discuss the naval issue. But could Mr. Lloyd George, or even Mr. Baldwin, have disarmed alike American suspicions of propaganda on behalf of the British navy and French fears of an Anglo-American entente? The crowds would have thronged to see the "Welsh Wizard," as they would to see a hero of the baseball diamond, but Mr. Lloyd George's past would have been remembered on both sides of the Atlantic. Mr. Baldwin would, no doubt, have received a hearing and a friendly personal welcome, but who could forget that behind that kindly personage lurked the Amerys, Churchills, Birkenheads, and Chamberlains? Mr. MacDonald had no past to explain, and no friends for whom an apology was necessary. What is more, the humble origin of the man, his idealism, his almost evangelical fervour, his Puritan-like seriousness of mind, struck notes familiar to American audiences. Here was a man whom the American public could understand and trust, in whom they saw the British people, not the British Admiralty. The agreement reached already between Governments was thus sealed in the hearts of their peoples.

The agreement has been possible only after great concessions on both sides. Great Britain has reduced her minimum for cruisers from seventy, the number demanded at the Geneva Conference in 1927, to fifty with a total of 339,000 tons. Of these, fifteen cruisers are to be of the new 10,000-ton type mounted with eight-

inch guns, while the remaining thirty-five are to be of smaller size mounted with not more than six-inch guns. The United States, on its side, has given over its demand for mathematical parity in all classes of ships, and has admitted that the problems of naval defence for Great Britain entitle her to a larger number of small cruisers than the United States. The American limit has been placed at about 315,000 tons, distributed among eighteen or twenty-one 10,000-ton cruisers and smaller cruisers mounted with six-inch guns. Thus Great Britain will have from ten to twelve more cruisers, while the United States with its greater number of large cruisers will have relatively greater battle strength. The agreement will involve the scrapping of some 70,000 tons of old cruisers by Great Britain, while it will entitle the United States to construct more than she has already, built, building, or authorized. Since agreement as to equality in other classes of ships has already been reached, the problem of "parity" between the two fleets, hitherto unsolved, has now been answered.

It is, however, a fair question whether the agreement promises a complete cessation of naval rivalry. Experience since the Washington Conference indicates that a mere limitation of tonnage and ships is not a complete bar to rivalry in other forms. Chemical discoveries, new inventions in arms, or improvements in marine engineering might at any time easily upset the balance of naval power set up by treaty. For example, the limitation in "capital" ships at Washington did not prevent the development of new powerful cruisers scarcely foreseen then. Again, the new cruiser recently laid down by Germany, although technically within the limits of the Treaty of Versailles, outranks in cruising range, gun power and gun range any other ship of similar tonnage afloat. Thus limitation in the size of ships and gun power still leaves open the door to rivalry in technical improvement. To have closed one door is, however, of great importance.

A more serious criticism of the agreement is that it does not touch the root of the whole problem, the question, so-called, of "freedom of the seas". It was this which brought Great Britain and the United States to blows in 1812, and to the verge of war again in the Civil War, and which caused such strained relations in the early days of the Great War. The traditional British policy has been command of the seas in time of war, which enabled her to blockade enemy ports and insured her virtually a free hand in establishing rules of contraband against neutral shipping going to unblockaded enemy territory. The traditional American policy has been "freedom of the seas", or the right of a neutral to trade with

both belligerents, except as such trade may be precluded by blockade. Since the Civil War the United States has assented to the idea of contraband, but, except when it was participating in the Great War, it has demanded rigid rules protecting neutral trade, rather than elastic rules favouring the belligerent. Americans fear that if the British doctrine were adopted, the United States would find itself the neutral victim in the next European war, as it was in the first three years of the last. On the other hand, if the American doctrine were adopted, Great Britain in the future would be unable to use the weapon which brought Napoleon and the German war lords to their knees.

The question is further complicated by the possible obligations of Great Britain as a member of the League of Nations. The Covenant of the League provides that in the event of a member breaking its obligations under the Covenant, other members of the League shall take action against the offender by severing all trade relations with it themselves and preventing other states from trading with it. If the offender were a maritime state, a naval force would obviously be required to enforce a trade boycott, and naval action would almost inevitably mean action by the British fleet. The vital question, not alone for the League of Nations but also for Great Britain, is, Would the United States in such circumstances insist on its traditional views as to the rights of neutral trade? To such a question the United States refuses to commit itself in advance, and so long as it remains outside the League it is scarcely likely to do so.

A solution is possible from another point of view. The Kellogg Pact, the proud contribution of the United States to the problem of international security, forbids aggressive war in all its forms. If the aggressor under the Covenant of the League also broke its obligations under the Kellogg Pact, the United States could scarcely with decency insist on its rights as a neutral to trade with, and thus to aid, the offender. Conviction has been growing in this direction in the United States, and, indeed, several proposals will come before the next session of Congress to "implement" the Pact by closing off, partially or entirely, American trade with the offender. It is noteworthy also that President Hoover has recently called attention to the necessity of strengthening the Pact, though he has refrained from specifying the means. It is thus very probable that in the near future the United States will take some stand defining its position as regards offenders against the Kellogg Pact. Since virtually all members of the League of Nations are signatories to the Pact, an offender against the League Covenant

would almost certainly be an offender against the Pact as well. Should the United States take a definite stand as regards trade with such an offender, it would go far towards defining indirectly its position as regards offenders against the Covenant of the League. The juridical difficulty, which might otherwise involve Great Britain and the United States in the result of a "public" blockade by the League against a state which violates its Covenant, should thereby be cleared up, partially at least. Thus, the problem of the "freedom of the seas" may eventually be solved by indirection.

A suggestion in the opposite direction was made by Mr. Hoover in his recent Armistice Day address. He proposes that in time of war food ships should go free, and that they should be put on the same plane as hospital ships. "The time has come", said Mr. Hoover, "when we should remove starvation of women and children from the weapons of warfare". Was this Hoover the humanitarian, or Hoover the diplomat, or Hoover the Republican politician speaking? While the President was careful to state that it was not a "governmental proposition", and that it was not to be broached at the London Conference, there is reason to believe that it was, after all, a "trial balloon" for the coming Conference. If so, it is unfortunate that it has met with a poor reception in Europe. The British press has been lukewarm, and the French press has belittled the suggestion, and pointed out that it was opposed to the principle of economic blockade as provided in the Covenant of the League. But Mr. Hoover's suggestion is not without merit. If accepted, it would obviously be a partial solution of the difficulty about contraband. Further, it would relieve the British people of the prospect of starvation in time of war, and with the possible exception of Japan, no other country faces speedy starvation if its food supplies by sea are cut off. Therefore, both these powers would obviously gain from the change proposed much more than they would lose. The criticism that any such rule would not be kept in time of war has, of course, been made, but it overlooks the important fact that the food-exporting nations as well as the food-importing nations would immediately be involved in case of a violation, and that among the food-exporting nations the United States is still a very important power. Violation would, therefore, almost inevitably involve the offender with the United States, and to-day the United States is one of the two first-class naval powers. The strongest opponent to the adoption of such a rule of sea law is, however, not likely to be Great Britain, but France. Is France prepared to throw over one of her most effective weapons against Great Britain? There is no evidence that she is.

We have been concerned thus far with the agreement only in its Anglo-American aspects. It must be remembered that it is only tentative, depending for its validity on the acceptance of the principle of limitation of naval arms also by Japan, France and Italy. To understand the situation we must go back to the Washington Conference of 1921-2. At Washington it was agreed to limit "capital" ships, that is, ships over 10,000 tons, on the ratio of 5: 5: 3: 1.67: 1.67, for Great Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy, respectively. It was originally hoped that this or a similar ratio could be extended to ships below the capital class, but this was prevented by various obstacles, particularly the refusal of France to limit or abolish the submarine. The Hoover-MacDonald agreement is a flexible application to other ships, notably cruisers, of the principle of equality agreed upon at Washington as respects battleships. It now remains to be seen whether similar principles of limitation are likely to be adopted by the other powers. When the drama re-opens in London in January, the scenes will, therefore, be the Pacific and the Mediterranean, rather than the Atlantic.

Let us first examine the Pacific situation. The limitation of capital ships, and the additional agreement to retain the *status quo* as regards fortifications in the colonial possessions in the danger zone, lying roughly between Hawaii and Japan, removed the American and Japanese fleets beyond effective striking distance of one another. The development since 1921 of the 10,000-ton cruiser, with much greater gun-power and cruising range than the smaller cruiser, has altered this situation to some extent. The demand of the United States for a large number of 10,000-ton cruisers has, therefore, Japan argues, made it relatively stronger as against Japan than the agreement of 1921 intended. Japan, therefore, will probably not be satisfied with the 3 to 5 ratio in cruisers. Indeed, her present building programme will bring her, when completed, nearer 3.5 to 5, and she is very likely to demand some such ratio at London, including several 10,000-ton cruisers. The Japanese demands concern the United States primarily, and whether the United States is prepared to agree to such an increase, and how far Japan is prepared to go in standing by her demands, time will reveal.

The Mediterranean situation is more complicated. Here three powers, Great Britain, France and Italy, are involved. The Washington Agreement assured the traditional British policy of naval supremacy in the Mediterranean by permitting Great Britain a fifty per cent. margin in battleships over the combined fleets of

France and Italy, a margin which at the moment is greatly exceeded, since neither France nor Italy has built up to the limit in capital ships as permitted them at Washington. The battle supremacy of the British fleet in the Mediterranean is, therefore, not in question. On the other hand, as the last war showed, mere battle strength may not be decisive; the more difficult problem may be to keep the trade lanes open. For a commerce war of this sort, superiority in the lesser arms—cruisers, destroyers, submarines—may be the deciding issue, not superiority in battleships. This is precisely the situation in the Mediterranean. Italy has not the coal, or iron, or oil, or foodstuffs, for a first-class war, and must import them; France wants to be sure of her black troops from Africa, and Great Britain wants to keep open the road to India and the Antipodes. Cruiser and submarine ratios, rather than battleships, especially concern all three powers.

Difficulties are quite likely to arise over the respective ratios of France and Italy, particularly in the matter of cruisers. France has never been satisfied with the Washington Agreement, because it relegated her to the position of a third-class naval power, and put her in the same category as Italy, which had formerly little claim to naval equality with France. France contends, and with reason, that in addition to the loss in prestige, this arrangement actually places her in a position of inferiority to Italy, since France has an extended colonial empire to defend and must, in addition, distribute her fleet so as to protect her Atlantic coastline as well as the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Italy is almost entirely a Mediterranean power. As might have been expected, the Washington Agreement has generally pleased Italy because it raised her to the same rank as France. Since the Conference the declared policy of Italy has been, therefore, to maintain naval equality with any other continental power, which is, of course, mere polite language meaning France. The vital question is, then, Will France agree to equality with Italy in cruisers and submarines, as she did to equality in capital ships? At Washington she had little choice, since she had no fleet to speak of and, therefore, nothing to barter. In both cruisers and submarines she is now well ahead of Italy, and it is extremely doubtful whether she will agree to abandon the lead.

The vital problem for Great Britain, however, is not the respective ratios of France and Italy, but the total tonnage they may demand in the various classes. The French thesis has long been that naval arms should be limited by "global" or total tonnage rather than by categories, and it is not at all improbable that

France will demand compensation for the capital ships she was permitted by the Washington Agreement, but has not built; that is to say, she may demand an increase in her tonnage of cruisers and lesser craft in lieu of the capital ship tonnage she has dropped. In any case, she has already some 200,000 cruiser tonnage, built or building, or close to sixty per cent. of the British tonnage proposed by the Hoover-Macdonald negotiations. Should France demand a limit anywhere near her present tonnage, Great Britain would very likely feel obliged to raise the limit agreed to with the United States.

As regards submarines, France is in an even stronger position. Her submarine tonnage already exceeds Great Britain's by some 8,000 tons, or 83,467 to 75,425 tons. While Great Britain and the United States are prepared to abolish the submarine, France considers it a necessary defensive weapon. Her long coast-line, both home and territorial, and her many harbours entail a wide distribution of her naval forces; for such purposes the submarine appears to France at once a cheap and an effective weapon. In view of this position, and her present lead in submarines, France will certainly not agree to any such ratio with Great Britain as was proposed at Washington. What ratio or what minimum she will demand, is obviously worrying the British Admiralty. If she demands a large submarine tonnage, Great Britain will certainly be compelled to meet it by expansion in her destroyer, and perhaps her cruiser tonnage.

Unlike her position at Washington in 1921, France has a strong hand for the coming Conference, perhaps the strongest, since the trumps are now cruisers and submarines rather than battleships. She is in a position virtually to make or break the Conference. And, indeed, many Frenchmen would not be averse to a failure, particularly because of its probable reaction on British domestic politics. It is a far cry from the Francophile policies of the late British Government to the sturdy independence of Labour. Mr. Snowden's blunt stand at the Hague, Mr. MacDonald's visit to Washington, Lord Robert Cecil's repudiation at the Disarmament Commission in Geneva of the Chamberlain agreement to forget French reserves in calculating French military strength, the beginning of British withdrawal from the Rhine, have produced uneasiness in France, and distrust of the Labour Government. These events have already tumbled Mr. Briand's Ministry from power, and no Ministry which would take a diplomatic defeat at London could last forty-eight hours. The domestic situation in France is, therefore, not particularly favorable to

securing the compromises by France necessary before any agreement can be reached.

The Italian reaction to French demands is, moreover, of paramount importance to Great Britain. If Italy insists on equality with France in each arm, and France insists on high tonnage limits, the whole British programme in destroyers and cruisers would almost certainly need revision upward. On the other hand, Italy is obviously not in a financial position to embark on a very ambitious naval programme; hence it might be induced to declare its intention not to build up to the limits permitted by a treaty. An agreement of this sort would, by preserving the fiction of naval equality, thus preserve national prestige, while robbing it of its dangerous aspects. It is significant that the proposed Anglo-French naval agreement of 1928 provided precisely this arrangement as regards French cruiser tonnage.

In view of the obstacles pointed out above, the British or American tax-payer has little hope for any relief from the burden of armaments as a result of the coming Conference. One possibility still remains to be canvassed. In the invitation to the Conference issued by the British Government the proposal was made to reconsider the replacement programmes for battleships as provided by the Washington Agreement of 1921, "with a view to diminishing the amount of replacement construction implied under that treaty". The battleship is unquestionably the most expensive of naval arms both in original cost and in upkeep. A single American battleship now costs in the neighbourhood of \$50,000,000 and the upkeep of a single ship, aside from replacement costs, has been estimated to be over \$6,000 per day. In addition to its great cost, the battleship has been criticised in recent years on the ground that it is becoming obsolete as a weapon of naval warfare. Critics point to its relative inactivity in the last war, as compared with the lesser arms of the service. It is practically useless in protecting trade routes, except as against other battleships. As the Gallipoli campaign showed, it is not particularly serviceable against land defences. Under conditions of modern warfare it can scarcely venture out of the harbour without a strong protective force of cruisers and destroyers. Tests carried out by the American navy throw doubt also on its ability to stand up against resolute attacks from the air. Indeed, Admiral Sims, Commander of the American fleet in European waters during the Great War, is reputed to have said that the only safe place for American battleships in the event of attack upon the United States by a hostile fleet would be up the Mississippi River. If so, a battleship is a somewhat expensive luxury. On the other hand, expert opinion in general still clings

to the battleship as an indispensable weapon of naval warfare, though it is generally admitted that its principal utility is against other battleships.

In view of these criticisms, and of the commitments of all the naval powers under the Kellogg Pact not to resort to war against one another to settle their disputes, considerable unofficial opinion has been developing on both sides of the Atlantic that the battleship must be further reduced, or better, abolished entirely. It is argued that since the various naval powers are already restricted as regards numbers of battleships, and also as regards the three leading naval powers, so separated by distance that none of the three could risk an attack upon any other without inviting destruction of its fleet, therefore, proportionate reduction or even abolition of the battleship would leave the various powers in exactly the same relative positions as at present. It is extremely doubtful whether any naval power is capable of such an act of faith as agreeing to abolition. Still, there is some hope that the coming Conference will go somewhat farther than was done at Washington in 1921, in the way either of further reduction of existing battleship tonnage or of lessening the speed of replacement. This would seem to be the tax-payer's only hope.

The problems before the Conference are numerous. There is the question of the relative cruiser strength between the United States and Japan; of the ratio between France and Italy; of the ratio between Great Britain and the other Mediterranean powers; of submarine ratios, and their relation to the tonnage of destroyers and other anti-submarine arms; of the possibility of reducing present expenditures on capital ships; and, perhaps, of the "freedom of the seas" thrown in for good measure. In the Conference France promises to be the key power as she was at Washington when it came to the discussion of arms below the capital ship class. France has heretofore shown no great enthusiasm for the Conference; if the goodwill of France is lacking, if it cannot be won over by the other powers, the Conference has little prospect of real success. On the other hand, since the War no previous Conference on the limitation of armaments has found the United States and Great Britain so firmly united in the intention of "getting on with the job" of limiting armaments. The public in both countries demands that something worth while be really accomplished. And the personal prestige of both President and Prime Minister is so bound up with the coming Conference that its failure would be a political disaster of the first magnitude to both. We may depend upon it, no stone will be left unturned by either Government, and therein lies hope.