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The Revolt against the Washington Treaty The Imperial Japanese Navy and Naval Limitation, 1921–1927

Sadao Asada

THE DECADE OF THE 1920s SEEMED a tranquil era of arms limitation defined by the three naval conferences: at Washington in 1921–1922, Geneva in 1927, and London in 1930. Within the Imperial Japanese Navy, however, there was strong and growing opposition among officers, particularly those on the Naval General Staff, to the policy of arms limitation pursued by the leadership of the Navy Ministry. This essay examines, on the basis of hitherto unused Japanese naval records, the hidden moves and countermoves in the years after the Washington Conference that climaxed in the early 1930s in a violent collision within Japanese naval circles over the London Naval Treaty.¹ In short, it examines the Japanese side of the “Prelude to Pearl Harbor.”²

Japanese Naval Traditions

The Five-Power Treaty of the Washington Conference, signed on 6 February 1922, met with a chilly, often hostile reception among professional navy men of all the signatories, but none harbored as great an antipathy and indignation as those in the Japanese navy. For them the Washington Treaty, “imposing” on Japan an “inferior ratio” of sixty percent in capital ships (battleships) vis-à-vis the United States and Great Britain, was nothing short of a total negation of their naval traditions that went back to 1907, the year an “Imperial National Defense Policy” was sanctioned by the highest council of the state.

By 1907 the navy’s views had been distilled into the following basic guidelines: (1) the need for a seventy-percent naval ratio, as a strategic imperative; (2) its corollary, a building plan for an “eight-eight fleet” (consisting of eight battleships

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and eight battle cruisers); and (3), the conception of the United States as the Japanese navy's "hypothetical enemy." These doctrines were of course interrelated, and the abandonment of the first guideline at the Washington Conference jeopardized the other two. Therefore, a brief discussion of these doctrines will be in order here as background for understanding Japanese naval policy during the 1920s.

The idea of a seventy-percent ratio as Japan's minimum defense requirement vis-à-vis the United States rested on the premise that the approaching enemy armada would need a margin of at least fifty-percent superiority over the defending fleet, assuming that the United States would move its entire fleet to the Pacific.³ To the Japanese navy, therefore, the seemingly minor difference between sixty and seventy percent made the difference between victory and defeat. The great importance it attached to this issue explains the tenacity with which Japan demanded a seventy-percent ratio at the three naval conferences during the 1920s. This ratio, which assured Japan "a strength insufficient to attack and adequate for defense," was believed to be imperative as a deterrent to the United States. The idea of a seventy-percent ratio, reinforced by the "object lessons" of World War I, war games, and maneuvers in the Pacific, crystallized in time into a firmly held consensus—even an obsession—within the Japanese navy.

The conception of the United States as the IJN's "hypothetical enemy" had first appeared in the Imperial National Defense Policy of 1907. At that time, however, the U.S. amounted to little more than a "budgetary enemy," a convenient pretext for demanding greater building appropriations. This choice of a "hypothetical enemy" reflected the dictum of Alfred T. Mahan, who once wrote that the standard of naval preparedness should be "not the most probable of dangers, but the most formidable."⁴ Similarly, Japanese naval strategists defined their "hypothetical enemy" as "any one power, whether friendly or hostile, that can confront Japan with the greatest force of arms."⁵

By the time the Imperial National Defense Policy was revised in June 1918, an increasing number of Japanese naval officers had come to regard the United States as more than a mere "standard for armaments." Japanese-American relations had seriously deteriorated as Japan took advantage of World War I to pursue a frankly expansionist policy in China and Siberia, and as the United States attempted to contain Japan. More fuel was added by the revival of the anti-Japanese movement in California.⁶ Against this backdrop the conviction grew in the Naval General Staff that "the rival nation with which a clash of interests is most probable—in other words, the potential enemy—is the United States."⁷

However, Navy Minister Kato Tomosaburo⁸ declared at a cabinet meeting on 26 July 1917 that it was "*from the view-point of naval armaments that America is regarded as hypothetical enemy number one.*"⁹ Kato's statement, in line with

84 Naval War College Review

the traditional conception of a “budgetary enemy,” is to be understood as an expression of Japan’s effort to maintain a naval balance with a United States that had embarked on an ambitious plan for a navy “second to none.” And the “eight-eight fleet” was Japan’s attempt to cope with the American building program.

As early as 1917, the Japanese navy seems to have acquired fairly accurate information about the emerging war plan (Plan Orange) of the United States Navy. In October 1920, Tokyo obtained a copy of a confidential war plan jointly drafted by brilliant young planners—Harry E. Yarnell, Holloway H. Frost, and William S. Pye—outlining the operations for a transpacific offensive. From such intelligence reports the Japanese Naval General Staff gathered that the American navy required at least a three-to-two superiority over Japan in order to advance its main fleet to the Western Pacific and cut off Japan’s vital seaborne traffic for an economic blockade that should lead to the final victory.¹⁰

“On the day Japan accepted [the sixty-percent ratio], Kato Kanji was seen shouting, with tears of chagrin in his eyes, ‘As far as I am concerned, war with America starts now. We’ll get our revenge over this, by God!’”

To counter such a Pacific strategy, the Japanese navy spelled out its war plans in more detail in the Outline of Strategy that accompanied the 1918 Imperial National Defense Policy. It stipulated that after having captured the American naval base in Luzon in the initial phase of hostilities, the Japanese fleet must “intercept” the approaching American fleet in the Western Pacific and annihilate it in an all-out “decisive encounter” à la the Battle of Tsushima.¹¹

Offensive operations, early engagement of the enemy in a main encounter, and a quick and decisive showdown—these were to remain the precepts of Japanese naval strategy throughout the 1920s (and beyond), and they had a definite Mahanian stamp. Indeed, Admiral Kato Kanji,¹² one of the key naval figures during the decade and a dogged opponent of the Washington Treaty, may well have had Mahan in mind when he took special note of the fact that “the Japanese navy’s studies on strategy tallied exactly with their American counterparts.” It was only natural, he explained, that “strategic planning in any nation, even that bearing on the most secret aspects of national defense, should lead to identical conclusions if based on the same premises and reliable data. . . . This is precisely the reason why the United States tries to impose a 60 percent ratio on us and we consistently demand a 70 percent ratio.” The universality of Mahan’s doctrines was acknowledged by Fleet Admiral Togo Heihachiro, the hero of the Battle of Tsushima and the venerated naval *genro* (or “elder statesman”). In 1918 he wrote, “I express my deep and cordial reverence for his [Mahan’s] far-reaching knowledge and judgment.”¹³

Japan's apparent success in adopting Mahan's teachings caused an alarmed reaction in American naval circles. For example, William Howard Gardiner of the Navy League wrote to Admiral William S. Sims in 1920–21: "I'll warrant every Japanese flag officer knows them [Mahan's sea power series]. . . . Mahan is a perfect guide book to the imperial policy of Japan." What particularly worried Gardiner was that Japan was systematically applying Mahan's "principles of overseas expansion" to conditions in the Pacific.¹⁴

It was precisely because of these shared naval doctrines that a fundamental conflict arose and intensified between the two navies over the formula of naval limitation. What follows in this essay, then, is predicated on two general assumptions: first, that the technical-professional precepts of Japan's naval planners did not exhibit any peculiarities owing to its national psychology or culture;¹⁵ and second, that the political process of formulating naval policy—particularly with respect to arms limitation—was heavily influenced by the Japanese mode of decision making, organization, and factionalism.

The Washington Conference

Taking account of World War I, the Imperial National Defense Policy, revised in 1918, stipulated that "determination and preparations for enduring a long drawn-out war will be required."¹⁶ What kind of armaments would Japan need in this new age of total war? The fundamental conflict of views over this question was at the heart of the dissension within the Japanese navy over arms limitation.

The "battle of the two Katos" at the Washington Conference, with all its drama and human poignancy, has been narrated elsewhere; a summary account of the respective positions of the two principals should suffice here.¹⁷ Cognizant of the new realities of total war, Navy Minister Kato Tomosaburo held that no amount of armament would be adequate unless it was backed up by overall national strength, whose essence comprised industrial and commercial power. Squarely facing Japan's limitations in this respect, he concluded that the nation would have to be content with "a peacetime armament commensurate with its national strength."¹⁸ Kato Tomosaburo had arrived at this broad view of national defense as a cabinet member participating in the formulation of national policy since 1915.

In sharp contrast, Vice Admiral Kato Kanji, representing staff and line officers, gave the highest priority to military-strategic considerations, and the particular "lessons" that he drew from World War I were markedly different. He held that the United States, with its "huge wealth, resources, and gigantic industrial power," could speedily turn its war potential into actual fighting forces once hostilities broke out. Hence it could meet its security needs with peacetime preparations on a par with the capacity of a "have-not" nation like Japan.

86 Naval War College Review

Conversely, Japan required a large peacetime armament, being unable to generate such forces on short notice. Another "important lesson" of World War I, he held, was the need to bring about a decisive encounter early in the war; failure to do so would turn the conflict into a drawn-out war of economic attrition, to Japan's disadvantage.¹⁹ Thus the Japanese navy faced the dilemma of "expecting" any future war to be a prolonged one while at the same time realizing that its chance of victory rested on a quick showdown. This predicament prompted Japan to accelerate its naval buildup, and this in turn aggravated the vicious circle of the arms race in the Pacific.

It was Navy Minister Kato Tomosaburo—the architect of the "eight-eight fleet" plan—who was the first to recognize that this program was destined to be only a paper plan. In 1919–1921, Japan was chafing under a postwar recession. At the budget subcommittee of the Diet (legislature) in February 1919, Kato frankly admitted, "Even if we should try to compete with the United States, it is a foregone conclusion that we are simply not up to it."²⁰ He knew well that a continued naval race with the United States spelled financial ruin for Japan. For Kato, hoping for a convenient occasion to halt the dangerous armaments race, the invitation to the Washington conference must have seemed a god-send.²¹

As was to be expected, however, violent objections came from the navy men in charge of operational matters. An important "resolution" of the special committee on arms limitation, submitted to Navy Minister Kato in late July 1921, categorically stated that Japan "absolutely requires a naval ratio of 70 percent or above vis-à-vis the American navy," thus reconfirming the navy's longstanding consensus about its security requirement.²² Kato simply ignored this position paper, because he was determined to maintain a completely free hand in his negotiations at Washington. He had been appointed as chief of the Japanese delegation because Prime Minister Hara Kei believed that this powerful naval leader was the only individual capable of restraining the navy's demands; civilian delegates would simply be unequal to the task.²³ Paradoxically, Kato—navy minister and an admiral on active duty—was expected to exercise what might be called "civilian control by proxy."

In Washington, Kato was prepared to take a flexible position. He felt that the question of America's advance bases in the Philippines and Guam was more crucial to Pacific strategy than hairsplitting bargains over fleet ratios.

Even so, he was "dumbfounded" by the dramatic proposal of Charles Evan Hughes, the U.S. secretary of state, at the opening session of the conference: an itemized plan for the drastic reduction of capital ship strength according to the ratio of 10:10:6 for the United States, Britain, and Japan. But Kato at once decided that Japan had no choice but to accept it. His was an "intuitive decision," aimed first and foremost at improving Japanese-American relations. Defining security in broad terms, he held that avoidance of war with America through

diplomatic means is the essence of national defense." The prudent course, then, was to accept the American proposal and stop the risky naval competition.²⁴ Kato thus subordinated military-strategic needs, however imperative, to higher political considerations. In return for the status quo regarding fortifications in the Philippines and Guam, he accepted the sixty-percent ratio in capital ships.

This decision was vehemently resisted by Vice Admiral Kato Kanji, the chief naval expert in the Japanese delegation. Being a typical "sea warrior" of the blue-water school, he adamantly opposed any compromise and pressed, from a strategic standpoint, for a seventy-percent ratio. His argument was reinforced by the doctrine of "the equality of armament" and "points of national honor." He held that Japan, as a sovereign nation, was inherently entitled to parity, a "ratio of 10:10." Thus viewed, the seventy-percent proportion already meant Japan's maximum concession.²⁵

Further, Kato Kanji saw in America's proposal an "outrageous" demand to freeze the status quo and to "deprive the Imperial Navy of its supremacy in the Far East," substituting America's own "hegemony." The United States, he felt, was "dictating" an "unequal treaty" to Japan. Embittered to see the British delegates aligning with the Americans, Kato Kanji warned that submission to "Anglo-American oppression" would not only be an "unbearable humiliation" but would also result in "the most serious threat" to Japan's security.²⁶

These views were, of course, contrary to those held by Kato Tomosaburo, who wired to Tokyo that "Anglo-American coercion is a fantasy which has never even occurred to us delegates in Washington."²⁷ The senior Kato, a commanding figure who exercised charismatic leadership, simply defied any challenge from his subordinates. He did meet Kanji's violent opposition with cogent arguments, but when these proved unavailing, he forcefully overruled and silenced the junior Kato.

The relentless Kanji, however, attempted to subvert his chief's decision; going behind Tomosaburo's back, he disregarded regular procedure and directly ordered the telegraph officer to wire the Naval General Staff his dissenting views, drafted by his confidant, Captain Suetsugu Nobumasa.²⁸ Such backstairs machinations did not confuse or mislead the naval authorities in Tokyo. With his usual foresight, the senior Kato had already communicated with them through a direct channel to his vice minister, Ide Kenji, and obtained the approval of the government and the naval *genro*, especially Fleet Admiral Togo, for his decision to accept the sixty-percent ratio. At the Washington end, the only officer permitted to handle these top secret dispatches was Captain Nomura Kichisaburo, the senior Kato's devoted aide.²⁹

The most notable feature of Kato's decision-making style was the extent to which he ignored or dictated to his unruly subordinates in Washington. Such a mode of policy making—quite atypical in Japan, where consensus-building is the norm—was especially effective in coping with a crisis situation, which Kato

88 Naval War College Review

saw the ongoing naval race to be. In short, it was triumph of rational decision making over bureaucratic politics.

On the other hand, there was the drawback of overburdening an individual leader. Already suffering from colon cancer, Kato had to endure enormous strains that were to shorten his life. Another disadvantage was that no matter how powerful a leader he was, his individualized decision making went against the strongly held bureaucratic norms of the naval establishment and was therefore destined sooner or later to fail. As "the battle of the two Katos" showed, the senior Kato did squelch the junior Kato's spirited opposition, but the latter remained unreconciled to the sixty-percent ratio. On the day Japan accepted it, Kato Kanji was seen shouting, with tears of chagrin in his eyes, "As far as I am concerned, war with America starts now. We'll get our revenge over this, by

"These purges set the stage for Japan's unilateral abrogation of the Washington Treaty in 1935 and withdrawal from the second London Conference in 1936, signaling resumption and escalation of the naval race—which one American historian has felicitously called 'the race to Pearl Harbor.'"

God!"³⁰ Thus the *political* decision to accept the compromise settlement failed to take root in Japan's subsequent naval policy; on the contrary, the reaction by naval men, if anything, reinforced their obsession with the seventy-percent ratio and their notion of the United States as the hypothetical, even inevitable, enemy.

Foreseeing some such development, Kato Tomosaburo had already begun during the Washington Conference to contemplate drastic institutional reforms, including "a system of civilian navy ministers." Apparently he had been contrasting the Anglo-American type of civilian control with Japan's anomalous system, which imposed on him, a full admiral and navy minister, the onerous task of going against the organizational mission of the service that he himself headed. The second institutional reform Kato had in mind was to subordinate firmly the Naval General Staff to the navy minister.³¹ Did Kato already foresee a collision between the navy and the government as well as an intestine conflict between the Navy Ministry and the Naval General Staff?³² That was, in fact, precisely what happened over the London Naval Treaty of 1930.

At the time of the Washington Conference, no clear pattern of internal conflict had yet emerged between the Navy Ministry and the Naval General Staff. Yet it is significant that the "intractable" rebels against the Washington Treaty centered in the Naval General Staff; these "hot-blooded" younger officers were the disciples of Vice Admiral Kato Kanji and Captain Suetsugu. The latter now occupied a key post as chief of the Operations Section of the Naval General

Turning to the naval ministry, officers who had faithfully supported Kato Tomosaburo—Captain Nomura, Captain Yamanashi Katsunoshin, Commander Hori Teikichi—all occupied Navy Ministry posts. These men, as self-conscious “heirs” of Kato Tomosaburo, remained firmly committed during the 1920s and beyond to what has come to be called “the Washington Treaty system.”³³

The conventional interpretation (to which the present writer contributed in the past) holds that the senior Kato’s views of national security and naval limitation were handed down through these “heirs” as naval orthodoxy into the 1920s and the early 1930s.³⁴ In the context of the foregoing, however, quite a different picture emerges. After all, was it not Kato Tomosaburo himself who abandoned what had been the three basic guidelines of the Imperial Japanese Navy since 1907—a seventy-percent ratio, the “eight-eight fleet,” and the notion of the United States as the “hypothetical enemy”? Rather, it was Kato Kanji and his followers in the Naval General Staff and the fleets who would soon claim the mainstream of the Japanese naval establishment, by denouncing the Washington Treaty.

Aftermath of the Washington Conference

Appointed prime minister in June 1922, Kato Tomosaburo served concurrently as navy minister for nearly a year. His immediate task was to implement the Washington treaties, but more difficult problems were the navy’s institutional reforms related to civilian navy ministers and the revision of the Imperial National Defense Policy to accord with the new course he had set in Washington. But alas, his health, so severely taxed at Washington, failed him at this critical juncture, and his premature death was to doom all but the first of these tasks—putting the agreements into effect—to failure.

Drastic personnel retrenchment resulting from naval reductions caused even greater discontent among naval men than the scrapping of ships already built and under construction. Still greater was the shock administered by the sharp cut in enrollment at the Naval Academy: the entering class of 1922 numbered less than a fifth of the previous one. The demoralizing effects were profound. (It was no accident that three of the young officers later to be involved in the “May 15 [assassination] Incident” of 1932 came from the classes that had acutely felt this impact.)

The second task, of institutional reform, had little chance of success. Kato Kanji, who had been promoted to vice chief of the Naval General Staff in May 1922, was of course absolutely opposed to any system of civilian navy ministers. In the end, Kato Tomosaburo’s reform plan backfired: it simply provoked the Naval General Staff into taking preemptive action.

90 Naval War College Review

The same occurred in the third and most important task, revision of the Imperial National Defense Policy. It was only after the navy and army general staffs had reached an agreement on the new national defense policy that they "consulted" the ailing Kato Tomosaburo, who had no choice but give his reluctant consent.³⁵

Officially sanctioned in February 1923, the revised national defense policy negated the senior Kato's basic principle of "avoidance of war with America" and instead adopted the junior Kato's notion of inevitable war. This document singled out the United States as the primary "hypothetical enemy" for both the navy *and* the army (which had hitherto placed priority on Russia). Its underlying perception of the international situation went directly against the views of the senior Kato and the liberal diplomat Shidehara Kijuro, soon to become foreign minister, who envisaged an era of peaceful cooperation under the Washington Treaty system. The new national defense policy of 1923 saw the East Asian scene as still riddled with "sources of conflict": "The United States, following a policy of economic invasion in China, menaces the position of our Empire and threatens to exceed the limits of our endurance. . . . The longstanding embroilments, rooted in economic problems and racial prejudice [discrimination against Japanese immigrants], are extremely difficult to solve. . . . Such being the Asiatic policy of the United States, sooner or later a clash with our Empire will become inevitable."³⁶

The main motifs of economic determinism and a fatalistic belief in the coming of war with America unmistakably bore Kato Kanji's stamp, with his peculiarly narrow and ethnocentric perspective on the external world. For him the United States was the arch-antagonist, with whom hostilities "in the near future" were unavoidable. It is an irony of history that such an idea was officially adopted in a top-level policy document just when the Washington Treaty made it strategically infeasible for either navy to wage offensive warfare across the Pacific.

The background of these developments was the remarkable ascendancy of Kato Kanji in the Naval General Staff. Outweighing his mild-mannered chief, Admiral Yamashita Gentaro, he wielded such great power that he "often tended to overwhelm the administrative branch [the Navy Ministry]."³⁷ Kato Tomosaburo's untimely death in August 1923, removing effective control over the insurgent elements, caused a crack in the Washington Treaty system as far as the Japanese navy was concerned.

Significantly, the profound effects of Kato Tomosaburo's death on Japanese-American relations were seen most clearly by an American, Admiral William V. Pratt, whose exertions on behalf of naval limitation at the Washington Conference had placed him "outside the mainstream of navy opinion."³⁸ Upon hearing about Kato's death, a "greatly shocked" Pratt hastened to send his old friend, Rear Admiral Nomura, a long and moving letter of condolence: "I feel that not only Japan lost one of the greatest broad-minded men but that we in

the United States have lost a sincere friend and a man who understands us far better than the average man can. . . ." Pratt continued, "During the course of the conference in Washington I watched Baron Kato very closely; I wanted, if possible, to find out the kind of a man he was. . . . I became thoroughly convinced in my mind at that time that Baron Kato was one of the finest, biggest, and most courteous gentlemen that I ever had the honor of meeting. I felt that so long as he had the direction of affairs in his hands no misunderstanding could arise between your country and mine which could not be settled through amicable arrangements."³⁹

The succeeding navy minister, Takarabe Takeshi, who served from 1923 to 1927 (excepting a short interval) and again in 1929 and 1930, simply did not possess the charismatic leadership, broad internationalist outlook, and powerful personality that distinguished Kato Tomosaburo. Nor would Takarabe pursue Kato's policies. With Kato's towering presence gone, the vagaries of bureaucratic politics and competition among mediocrities came to the fore.

For his part, Kato Kanji had been building up a cohesive faction. He and Suetsugu cultivated a strong following among "hot-blooded young officers" in the Naval General Staff. In the Navy Ministry, Vice Minister Abo Kiyokazu (in office 1924–1925) and Osumi Mineo (1925–1928) were among Kato's close allies and opponents of the Washington Treaty.⁴⁰ It was against the background of such a factional alignment that policy regarding naval limitation unfolded in the mid-1920s.

Preparing for the Next Naval Conference

As early as 1923 the Japanese navy had come to expect that sooner or later the United States would propose a second naval conference, this time to halt the incipient race in what the Japanese navy called "auxiliary vessels" (actually non-capital combatants, such as cruisers, destroyers, and submarines), which were not restricted under the Washington Treaty. To prepare for it, the navy's committee on arms limitation drafted a careful policy study. Appropriately enough, this report began with a discussion of the "Lessons of the Washington Conference," and it clearly reflected Kato Kanji's views.⁴¹

The major "lesson" was that Japan's "failure" at Washington was due largely to inadequate preparation. In anticipation of a second conference, therefore, Japan must establish "a firm, concrete, and clear-cut policy" well in advance and demand preliminary negotiations with the other participating powers so as to obtain prior recognition of Japan's demands.

The second lesson was that its position must be publicized at home in order to "educate, unify, and firm up" domestic public opinion behind the delegates. This was a point particularly stressed by Kato Kanji; he bitterly recalled how he had been handicapped by the lack of domestic support at the time of the

92 Naval War College Review

Washington Conference. The third lesson was that “the utmost caution must be taken never again to be confronted by joint Anglo-American coercion.”

The Japanese navy took it for granted, correctly enough, that the American aim in calling a second conference would be to extend the Washington ratios of 10:10:6 to smaller combatants as well. Of course, the Japanese navy was “absolutely opposed” to such a formula. As to the all-important ratio question, the report stated that Japan would be justified in first proposing the “principle of parity” (10:10), but, anticipating Anglo-American opposition, it would be prepared to “compromise” with an eighty-percent ratio. Such a conference strategy again reflected the thinking of Kato Kanji, an advocate of “the right of equality.” This line of argument was considered to be particularly applicable to cruisers and the like, which the United States with its huge industrial power could build rapidly and in large numbers once hostilities started. However, the recommendation for an eighty-percent ratio was rejected by those committed to the longstanding policy of seventy percent, and the latter “orthodox policy” was to be steadfastly pursued by the Japanese navy thereafter.⁴²

The final point raised by the committee’s report was the timing of the presumed next conference. It would be to Japan’s advantage if the conference could synchronize with the completion of its current “auxiliary replacement plan” in fiscal 1928. Anxious to secure advantageous ground at the next conference, the Naval General Staff urged a speed-up in the current building program.⁴³

Strategy in the Pacific

What was most noteworthy about this building plan was the great stress placed on the number of large submarines. The effort to break the strategic deadlock in the Pacific under the Washington Treaty had resulted in major innovations in Japan’s naval technology and strategic planning. A new feature added to the Outline of Strategy (accompanying the 1923 version of the Imperial National Defense Policy) was an “attrition strategy” that was to precede the “interceptive operations.” This strategy assigned to large, high-speed submarines the important mission of wearing down the enemy’s main fleet on its transpacific passage, in addition to patrolling and defending the Western Pacific. It was Rear Admiral Suetsugu who worked out this strategy, as commander of the First Submarine Squadron in 1923–1924.⁴⁴

As the radius of action had extended and naval defensive frontiers had moved outward for both navies on account of rapid advances in technology and weaponry, war plans began to take more concrete shape on both sides of the Pacific in the mid-1920s. The Japanese navy estimated, correctly, that America’s main fleet would in all probability advance by the central route extending from Pearl Harbor through the Gilbert Islands, Guam, and then to Manila Bay. On

this transoceanic passage the American forces would try first to seize the intervening islands under Japanese mandate—the Marshall and Caroline Islands—and then carry their offensive into Japan's home waters.⁴⁵ It was on such a scenario that Japan's "interceptive operations" were predicated.

But there was considerable speculation among Japanese planners as to American timing in sending its main fleet to the Western Pacific. The dominant view in the Naval General Staff held that the Japanese capture of the Philippines would so provoke the American people as to compel immediate dispatch of their main fleet to relieve Manila.⁴⁶ Unaware of the ambivalence in American naval thinking, Kato Kanji observed, "The fundamental guideline of American strategy is the principle of the quick-and-decisive battle. It is bent on promptly forcing an encounter with the Japanese fleet and deciding the issue in one stroke."⁴⁷

However, there were those in the Japanese navy who questioned whether the American navy would begin "a quick westward dash without full preparations." What if the United States chose to hold back its main fleet until it had secured overwhelming strength and the essential logistic support? In that case, Japanese efforts to keep up the naval ratio vis-à-vis the United States would all come to naught.

Mounting Discontent in the Fleet

To overcome such strategic weaknesses, Kato Kanji, appointed commander in chief of the Combined Fleet in December 1926, ordered his force to conduct relentless night drills. Such were the risks involved that a collision of four ships occurred one moonless night in August 1927, resulting in 120 casualties. After this disaster Admiral Kato grimly addressed the assembled commanders: "We must devote ourselves more and more to this kind of drill, to which our navy has applied all its energies ever since the acceptance of the 10:10:6 ratio." This was language calculated to inflame antipathy to the Washington Treaty. The mounting indignation with the sixty-percent ratio had crystallized into the conviction that "only through these hard drills can we expect to beat America!"⁴⁸

The United States Navy, however unwittingly, may have added to such antagonism in Japanese naval circles. During the first half of 1925, Admiral Robert E. Coontz, the commander in chief of the United States Fleet, led fifty-six vessels (including twelve battleships of the Battle Fleet) on a spectacular cruise from Hawaii to Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁹ Their maneuvers, on an unprecedented scale, provoked Kato Kanji and his subordinates, who took them to be "a naked demonstration of American naval buildup against Japan" and a full-dress rehearsal for a transpacific offensive.⁵⁰

The discontent building up among fleet officers ever since the Washington Conference found hyperbolic expression in a letter of protest written later by

94 Naval War College Review

Admiral Yamamoto Eisuke, who was to be the commander in chief of the Combined Fleet at the time of the 1930 London Naval Conference (and is not to be confused with Yamamoto Isoroku, better known in the West). As the nation's "first line of defense," he protested, the fleet was engaged day and night in relentless exercises to overcome deficient armaments. But the top leaders of the Navy Ministry were all too ready to make "political compromises" when confronted with budgetary problems, seemingly oblivious to the serious defects in armaments they brought about. These "moderate leaders" in Tokyo had "come to resemble civilian desk officers rather than real sailor-warriors." Venting his "violent resentment," Admiral Yamamoto traced such a "deplorable" condition to the Washington Conference, Kato Tomosaburo's "despotic" rule, and his "emasculat[i]on" of the navy.⁵¹

Such strong sentiments bespoke a deep split that had come to plague the Japanese navy. The late 1920s saw the confluence of two undercurrents that had been building ever since the Washington Conference. First, there was rivalry and antipathy between the "fleet faction" led by Kato Kanji and the "administrative faction" adhering to Kato Tomosaburo's legacy of naval limitation. The latter occupied some of the key posts in the Navy Ministry. Second, there was a growing sense of crisis among fleet officers and the Naval General Staff concerning the "grave defects in national defense" caused by the policy of naval limitation pursued by the "administrative faction."

The revolt against the Washington Treaty reached its culmination at the time of the London Naval conference of 1930. The London Treaty brought into the open a violent internecine split within the navy, and that in turn touched off a major domestic crisis involving a series of political assassinations. In 1933–1934, the "fleet faction" incited the pliable navy minister, Osumi Mineo, a staunch opponent of the Washington Treaty, to send into premature retirement certain brilliant senior officers committed to the Washington Treaty system, who had successfully steered the London Treaty to its signature and ratification.⁵² (Most notable among the victims were Vice Admiral Yamanashi and Rear Admiral Hori, both "heirs" to Kato Tomosaburo.) These purges set the stage for Japan's unilateral abrogation of the Washington Treaty in 1935 and withdrawal from the second London Conference of 1936, signaling resumption and escalation of the naval race—which one American historian has felicitously called "the race to Pearl Harbor."⁵³

In 1933 Prime Minister (former navy minister) Saito Makoto stated succinctly, "The present commotions have their roots in Kato Kanji's antipathy toward [the policy of] Admiral Kato Tomosaburo, the chief delegate at the Washington Conference."⁵⁴ No contemporary Japanese leader was better qualified to make this assessment. In retrospect, Kato Tomosaburo's success in 1921–1922 proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. Heralded at the time as "a new order of sea power,"⁵⁵

the Washington Treaty—or rather the Japanese navy's reaction to it—was an important signpost on the road to the Pacific War.

Notes

1. The single most important record for the purpose of this essay is the splendid collection of the late Enomoto Juji (Professor, Naval Staff College, Imperial Japanese Navy), who attended all the interwar naval conferences as an expert advisor and carefully preserved all the pertinent documents. It is supplemented by the papers of Vice Admiral Hori Teikichi, containing manuscript documents, diaries, and memos. Also important are, of course, the IJN Archives. The above materials are in the custody of the War History Department, National Institute of Defense Studies of the Defense Agency, Tokyo.

2. Cf. Gerald E. Wheeler, *Prelude to Pearl Harbor: The United States Navy and the Far East, 1921–1931* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1963).

3. Boeicho Senshishitsu [War History Office, Defense Agency], ed., *Senshi shosho, Daihon'ei kaigunbu: Rengo kantai* [War history series: Imperial Headquarters: Navy] (Tokyo, 1975), v. 1, pp. 156–159 (Hereafter *Rengo Kantai*); Nomura Minoru, "Tai-Bei-Ei kaisen to kaigun no tai-Bei shichiwari shiso" [The outbreak of war with the United States and Great Britain, and the idea of a seventy-percent ratio], *Gunji shigaku*, v. 9, no. 3 (1973), pp. 26–27.

4. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897), p. 180.

5. Sato Tetsutaro, *Teikoku kokubo shiron* [A historical treatise on the national defense of the Japanese Empire] (Tokyo, 1908), pp. 724, 748, 760.

6. William R. Braistead, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909–1922* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971), chaps. 18–22.

7. Naval General Staff, ed., "Taisho 4 naishi 9-nen sen'eki kaigun senshi furoku dai-6-hen: Kimitsu hoshu" [A history of naval battles in 1915–1920, Appendix 6—confidential addendum], IJN Archives.

8. Throughout this essay I have adopted the normal Japanese practice of giving family names first, except for the two Katos, where given names alone are occasionally used to avoid confusion.

9. Navy Minister's Secretariat, ed., *Kaigun gunbi enkaku* [The development of naval armaments], v.1 (1934, reprinted Tokyo, 1970), pp. 2–6, 220 (emphasis added).

10. Takagi Sokichi, *Shikan Taiheiyō senso* [A personal interpretation of the Pacific War] (Tokyo, 1969), pp. 64–66. My search in the U.S. naval records has failed to pinpoint the document in question, but its contents are very similar to Admiral R.E. Coontz to Secretary of the Navy, 17 February 1920, P.D. 198-2, RG 80, National Archives.

11. Although the text of the 1918 Imperial National Defense Policy has not yet been discovered, it can be reconstructed in outline on the basis of collateral sources. Boeicho Senshishitsu, *Senshi shosho: Kaigun gunseibi* [War history series: Naval armaments and preparations], v. 1 (Tokyo, 1969), pp. 64–67, 146; *Senshi shosho: Daihon'ei rikugunbu* [War history series: Imperial Headquarters, Army], v. 1 (Tokyo, 1967), pp. 217–223, 248, 319; *Rengo kantai*, v. 1 pp. 164–170; Shimanuki Takeharu, "Nichi-Ro senso iko ni okeru kokuho hoshin, shoyō heiryoku, yohei koryō no henshin" [The development of the Imperial National Defense Policy, the Estimate of Requisite Armament; and the Outline of Strategy since the Russo-Japanese War], *Gunji shigaku*, v. 8, no. 4 (1973), pp. 2–11.

12. Named Hiroharu, he went by the alias of Kanji, which will be used throughout this essay.

13. "Gunshuku shoken" [My views on naval limitation], presented by Kato Kanji to Saito Makoto in 1930 [hereafter Kato, "Gunshuku shoken"]; Naval General Staff's memo on American naval armaments since the Washington Conference, 14 December 1929, Papers of Saito Makoto, Kensei Shiryō Shitsu [The Depository for Documents on Political and Constitutional History], Diet Library (hereafter Saito papers); and Charles C. Taylor, *The Life of Mahan* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), p. 115.

14. W.H. Gardiner to W.S. Sims, 17 June 1921, Papers of William Howard Gardiner, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

15. Bernard Brodie convincingly argues that since "the professional lore of naval men is highly internationalized," the Japanese navy received its "tuition as well as its naval designs and ordnance" from Anglo-American sources. *A Guide to Naval Strategy*, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965), pp. 114–115, 160–161.

16. *Rengo kantai*, v. 1, p. 168; *Kaigun gunseibi*, v. 1, p. 146.

17. See Sadao Asada, "Japanese Admirals and the Politics of Naval Limitation: Kato Tomosaburo vs. Kato Kanji," *Naval Warfare in the Twentieth Century, 1909–1945: Essays in Honour of Arthur Marder*, ed. Gerald Jordan (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 141–166 (hereafter Asada's "Japanese Admirals").

96 Naval War College Review

18. Nihon Kokusai Seiji Gakkai [Japan Association of International Relations], ed., *Taiheiyo Senso e no michi: Bekkan shiryohen* [The road to the Pacific war: Supplementary volume of documents] (Tokyo, 1963), pp. 3–7 (hereafter *TSM: Shiryohen*); Terashima Ken Denki Kankokai, ed., *Terashima Ken den* [Biography of Terashima Ken] (Tokyo, 1973), p. 147.

19. Kato Kanji Taisho Denki Kankokai, comp., *Kato Kanji taisho den* [Biography of Admiral Kato Kanji] (Tokyo, 1941), pp. 756–757.

20. Minutes (5 February 1919) of the 4th Subcommittee for Budget, Lower House of the Imperial Diet (41st session); Yamanashi Katsunoshin Sensei Kinen Shuppan linkai, ed., *Yamanashi Katsunoshin sensei ihoroku* [Memoirs of Admiral Yamanashi Katsunoshin] (Tokyo, 1968), pp. 66–67 (hereafter *Yamanashi ihoroku*); Yamanashi, *Kato Tomosaburo gensui o shinobu* [Fleet Admiral Kato Tomosaburo in reminiscence] (Tokyo, 1967), p. 8; Kurihara Hirota, ed., *Gensui Kato Tomosaburo den* [Biography of Fleet Admiral Kato Tomosaburo] (Tokyo, 1928), pp. 87–88.

21. For the naval aspects of the Washington Conference, see Braisted, chaps. 28–41; Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914–1922* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976).

22. Kaigun Kokusai Remmei Kankei Jiko Kenkyukai [Navy Ministry's committee to investigate League of Nations affairs], "Kafu kaigi gunbi seigen mondai ni kansuru kenkyu" [Studies on the arms limitation question at the Washington Conference], 21 July 1921, Enomoto papers.

23. Hara Keiichiro, ed., *Hara Kei nikki* [Diary of Hara Kei] (Tokyo, 1965), v. 5, p. 435.

24. Navy Minister to Navy Vice Minister, 12 November 1921 (strictly confidential), Enomoto papers; *TSM: Shiryohen*, pp. 3–4.

25. Vice Admiral Kato Kanji to Navy Minister and Chief of the Naval General Staff, 24 November 1921, IJN Archives; *Kato Kanji taisho den*, pp. 746–749.

26. Kato Kanji to Navy Vice Minister and Vice Chief of the Naval General Staff, 4 December 1921, IJN Archives.

27. Navy Minister to Navy Vice Minister, 16 January 1922, IJN Archives; *TSM: Shiryohen*, p. 7.

28. Hori Teikichi's memo on the Washington Naval Conference, n.d., Hori papers.

29. Navy Minister to Navy Vice Minister, 4 December 1921; Captain Nomura to Navy Vice Minister, 15, 18, 28 November, 1 and 9 December 1921, Enomoto papers and IJN Archives.

30. Mori Shozo, *Senpu nijunen* [Twenty tumultuous years] (Tokyo, 1968), p. 50.

31. *TSM: Shiryohen*, p. 7.

32. For these later developments, see James W. Morley, ed., *Japan Erupts: The London Naval Conference and the Manchurian Incident, 1928–1932* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 3–117.

33. *Yamanashi ihoroku*, passim.

34. Sadao Asada, "The Japanese Navy and the United States," *Pearl Harbor As History: Japanese-American Relations, 1931–1941*, ed. Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 225–259.

35. *Rengo kantai*, v. 1, pp. 196, 202–203, 234; *Kaigun gusenbi*, v. 1, pp. 68–73.

36. Shinanuki, "Daichiji sekai taishen igo no kokubo hoshin, shoyo heiryoku, yohei koryo no henshen" [The development of the Imperial National Defense Policy, the Estimate of Requisite Armament, and the Outline of Strategy since World War I], *Gunji shigaku*, v. 9, no. 1 (1973), pp. 65–74.

37. *Kato Kanji taisho den*, pp. 767–768, 770–772.

38. Gerald E. Wheeler, *Admiral William Veazie Pratt* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of the Navy, Naval History Division, 1974), pp. 182–187.

39. Pratt to Nomura, 25 August 1923, Papers of Admiral William V. Pratt, Naval Historical Foundation, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.

40. *Kato Kanji taisho den*, p. 768; Yamaji Kazuyoshi, *Nihon kaigun no kobo to sekininsha tachi* [The rise and fall of the Japanese navy and its leaders] (Tokyo, 1959), p. 175.

41. Gunbi Seigen Kenkyu Iinkai [Investigatory committee on naval limitation], "A study on a second naval limitation conference," 10 May 1925, Enomoto papers. [Hereafter the titles of Japanese manuscript materials are given in English translation.]

42. Draft instruction to the Japanese naval representative at the League of Nations, 17 November 1924, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter JMFA), Diplomatic Record Office; Hori Teikichi, "Explanations of ratios in auxiliary vessels," n.d., Hori papers; *Kato Kanji taisho den*, pp. 746–760.

43. Navy's revised instructions to the naval representative at the League of Nations, 17 March 1926, JMFA; Gunbi Seigen Kenkyu Iinkai; *Kaigun gusenbi*, v. 1, pp. 332–341.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 148–149, 152–158; Naval General Staff, "Memo for an oral presentation," n.d. (1930), apparently prepared by Kato Kanji; Nagai Sumitaka, "Kokubo hoshin to kaigun yohei shiso no henshen" [The development of the Imperial National Defense Policy and naval strategic thought], May 1962, part 13, pp. 3318–3327, 3335–3338, War History Department, National Institute for Defense Studies; and Ikeda Kinoshirō, *Nihon Kaigun no Reijōshi* [The History of the Japanese Navy] (Tokyo, 1967), v. 2, pp. 137–139.

45. Nagai, pp. 3329–3331; *Kaigun gunsenbi*, v. 1, pp. 150–151; Naval General Staff, "Memo for an oral presentation"; Kato Kanji's memo, "My views on arms limitation"; and memo on American armaments since the Washington Conference, Enomoto papers. Cf. William Reynolds Braisted, "On the United States Navy's Operational Outlook in the Pacific, 1919–1931," unpublished paper presented to the Kauai Island Conference on the history of Japanese-American relations (1918–1931), 5–9 January 1976; and Wheeler, *Prelude to Pearl Harbor*, pp. 77–91.

46. The Annual Operational Plan of 1926 estimated that the main fleet encounter would take place about forty-five days after the outbreak of war; this estimate remained the same until 1930. Nagai, p. 3328.

47. Kato Kanji's memo, "My views on arms limitation"; *Kaigun gunsenbi*, v. 1, p. 150.

48. *Kato Kanji taisho den*, pp. 846–857, 918–919; Kato Kanji, "Secret memoirs of the London Naval Treaty," IJN Archives; Kato to Makino Nobuaki, 29 January 1930, Makino papers.

49. Braisted, "Operational Outlook."

50. Kato Kanji's memo, "My views on arms limitation"; and Naval General Staff, "Memorandum for an oral statement."

51. Kido Nikki Kenkyukai, ed., *Kido Koichi kankei monjo* [Papers relating to Kido Koichi] (Tokyo, 1966), pp. 263–266.

52. For a new analysis of the London Conference of 1930 and its background from the viewpoint of the Japanese Navy, see Sadao Asada, "From Washington to London: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the Politics of Naval Limitation, 1921–1930," forthcoming in *Diplomacy and Statecraft*.

53. Stephen E. Pelz, *Race to Pearl Harbor: The Failure of the Second London Conference and the Onset of World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974).

54. Harada Kumao, ed., *Saionjiho to seikyoku* [Prince Saionji and politics] (Tokyo, 1950), v. 3, p. 147.

55. Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Policy and the World Scene, 1918–1922*, 2nd ed. (N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1943).



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