

# *Institutional Dynamics, Civil-Military Relations and Japan's 1936 Withdrawal from the Washington System*<sup>1</sup>

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The Imperial Japanese Navy asked in 1934 for a drastic revision of the Washington system of naval arms control, eventually leading Japan to withdraw from the system in late 1936. Given the arms race and the tensions that ensued with the United States, the rejection of arms control was a decisive step on Japan's road to the Pacific War. Why did the Japanese government embrace the navy's strategic requirements and take such a risky decision? The present article first shows that to disengage from arms control was strategically rational for the navy as an institution. It was its duty to oppose arms control if the latter jeopardized national security, which was the case in the mid-1930s. If the navy perfectly played its role, it should not have been able to impose its view about arms control on the government. Japanese leaders should have prioritized diplomacy, not power politics. This undue political influence of the navy came from dysfunctions in civil-military relations dating back to the early Meiji era.

In June 1934, the Imperial Japanese Navy asked for parity with the US Navy and for a drastic revision of the Washington system of naval arms control, eventually leading Japan to withdraw from the system in late 1936. This destroyed the last institutionalized cooperative structure Japan maintained with the United States, triggered a costly arms race, and heightened tensions and mutual suspicion between the two countries. The rejection of arms control by Japan was a decisive step in a chain of events that led to the attack on Pearl Harbor and to the ruin of the country. The dramatic consequences of Japan's withdrawal raise a meaningful question: Why did the Japanese government embrace the navy's strategic requirements and prioritize power politics over diplomacy?

This question is important for two reasons. First, studies about Japan's road to the Pacific War have often emphasized the key role played by the two military services, the navy and the army. They were the source of Japan's dangerously provocative behavior on the international scene. To explain why the navy opposed the Washington system is essential to understand the Japanese foreign policy in the 1930s. Second, addressing this question sheds light on the centrality of civil-military relations when it comes to arms control. It also highlights the shortcomings of a tendency to blame certain persons or entities for tragic historical events. It is simpler, and sometimes more convenient, to name culprits than to dissect a decision-making process.

The present article first shows that to disengage from arms control was strategically rational for the Japanese navy as an institution. It was its duty to oppose arms control if the latter jeopardized national security. By making Japan's participation in the Washington

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system conditional on naval parity with the United States, the navy sought to escape from a situation where it was gradually losing the ability to protect the country against a transpacific offensive of the US Pacific Fleet. In this perspective, the growing influence of a group of naval officers opposed to arms control was the symptom, and not the cause, of an institutional dynamics triggered by strategic considerations.

This does not explain why the Japanese government embraced the navy's strategic requirements despite the foreseeable diplomatic, financial, and economic consequences of leaving the Washington system. The navy should not have been able to impose its view about arms control on the government. The source of the navy's undue political influence was dysfunctions in civil-military relations dating back to the early Meiji era. If one had to name and shame in the Japanese case, the culprit would be a defective decision-making process rather than a particular institution.

The article is divided into five parts. The first provides a theoretical discussion on civil-military relations. It argues among other things that the stance of the military institution toward arms control is determined primarily by strategic considerations. The second part analyses the position of the Imperial Navy on the arms control policy of the Japanese government during the 1920s and 1930s. It explains why the stance of the navy evolved from support to outright opposition in about a decade. The third part demonstrates that the decision to withdraw from the Washington system was strategically rational for the navy. The fourth part examines the structure of Japanese civil-military relations and argues that its defects were the root of Japan's withdrawal from the naval arms control framework. The fifth part concludes by extracting lessons from the Japanese case study.

## I

This part contains a theoretical discussion on civil-military relations. It explains how the military institution positions itself toward arms control, guided by strategic considerations. It also shows that it is the duty of the military to warn and even oppose the government when arms control policy jeopardizes national security.

The military institution is different from other domestic entities because of its specific functions inside the state apparatus. The military is the only entity tasked with defending the country and its national interests through the use of armed forces.<sup>2</sup> This functional approach highlights the more limited sphere of responsibility of the military compared to the government. At the individual level, Risa Brooks notes that people 'who occupy the chief executive office in the state ( ... ) are in charge of the broad panoply of economic, social, and foreign policies. Military leaders are the individuals who run the military on a daily basis'.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the comprehensive needs of the government and the specialized expertise of the military, their relationship is structured by an agreed-upon distribution of responsibilities. The shape of the military and government spheres of responsibility differs between countries and over time, depending on domestic and international circumstances. Douglas Bland argues that this division of responsibilities constitutes a regime in the sense Stephen Krasner defines it at the international level. The concept of 'national defense

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Siebold defines the military as 'a formally organized entity or set of entities responsive to the governmental leaders heading a national state (or equivalent government) and whose functions concern the use of arms to defend that national state or to further its policies in its relations with other nation states or large collective entities'. Siebold, 'Core issues and theory', p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, *Shaping strategy*, p. 3.

regime' implies that 'the relationship and arrangement of responsibilities are conditioned by a nationally evolved regime of "principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge" in matters of civil-military relations'.<sup>4</sup> The regime enables the government and the military to cooperate efficiently on issues related to national security and to preserve a certain degree of autonomy from each other.

The national defense regime does not mean that the military and government spheres are strictly separated. In-between stands a key actor in civil-military relations, the *hybrid officer*.<sup>5</sup> These members of the military institution, uniformed or not, possess two particularities that differentiate them from others: their role as a link between the military institution and other domestic entities, and their relative resistance to institutional biases.

The main role of hybrid officers is to act as a bridge between their institution and non-military entities, most importantly the government.<sup>6</sup> They constitute a channel of communication that allows the government to receive advice and demands from the military. On the other hand, hybrid officers represent the authority by which government orders are passed down to military personnel of lower ranks. They are the entry point for government penetration of the military institution. This has important consequences on the way institutional pressure affects the stance of hybrid officers. Standing between the military and the government, they must avoid being partial and resist institutional biases that could lead them to confront the latter. These biases include the military tendency to adopt worst-case analyses, distrust of the present and future intentions of other countries, and an exclusive focus on military assets to guarantee national security.<sup>7</sup> The relative resistance to these biases is the second particularity of hybrid officers.<sup>8</sup>

Arms control is a diplomatic tool used by governments to achieve certain objectives in relation to other countries. Domestically, this implies the imposition of the terms of an international treaty to the military. Depending on the shape of the national defense regime, military perception that the government infringes upon its sphere of responsibility can trigger opposition to arms control.

Moreover, because of its functions and expertise, it is the duty of the military to warn government leaders when the arms control policy jeopardizes national security. It can even be said that it is among its prerogatives to oppose arms control in such circumstances. What can be called *strategic stimulus* refers to the reaction of the military in case its ability to fulfill institutional missions is negatively affected by government policy. These missions vary by country, though the most important and common remains the defense of territorial integrity and political sovereignty. The paradox behind the strategic stimulus is the fact that the government assigns missions to the military, but then impedes the fulfillment of these very missions through arms control measures. Military officers may have great difficulties understanding the rationale behind government decisions and oppose them.

The military and the government hold different perspectives on the way to guarantee national security. While both concur on the necessity to protect their country and its

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<sup>4</sup> Bland, 'A unified theory', pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Other concepts similar to the hybrid officer are the 'officer corps' of Samuel Huntington and the 'first tier' of Sam Sarkesian and Robert Connor. Huntington, *The soldier and the state*, p. 73; Sarkesian and Connor, *The US military profession*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> General Colin Powell said these officers are tasked with 'connecting the military forces to the political system and the political system back to the forces'. Woodward, *The commanders*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> These biases are natural and somehow necessary features of the military. It is its duty to be prepared for all contingencies in case the government fails to peacefully settle international disputes.

<sup>8</sup> The findings of Richard Betts confirm this point. He demonstrates that the closer to the government members of the military institution stand, the least they are influenced by military biases. Betts, *Soldiers*, p. 40.

interests from external threats, they sometimes disagree over the means for doing so. This is because of the different roles they play inside the state apparatus and the different tools they have at their disposal.<sup>9</sup> The military tries to guarantee national security by military means. This is not always the case for the government. The latter has a wider range of instruments at its disposal and the duty to take into account the stance of other domestic entities that may be putting alternatives on the table. The maintenance through arms control of healthy relations with other countries can be one of these alternatives. These differences can put governments and military institutions in direct confrontation over the question of whether a given arms control policy is relevant to guarantee the security of their country.

## II

The Washington system was established during the Washington Conference of 1921-2. The Five-Power Treaty approved at that time set quantitative and qualitative limits on capital ships, namely battleships and aircraft carriers. The United States, Japan, Great Britain, France and Italy joined the treaty. The arms control framework was reinforced by the London Treaty in 1930, with new restrictions enacted on almost all categories of auxiliary vessels.<sup>10</sup> The stance of the Imperial Navy toward the arms control policy of the Japanese government evolved from support to outright opposition in about a decade. Naval opposition eventually pushed Japan out of arms control by the end of 1936. The theoretical discussion pursued above helps understand the navy's institutional dynamics and the evolution of its position.

The main institutional mission of the Imperial Navy during the period covered by this analysis was to retain naval supremacy in the Western Pacific.<sup>11</sup> Based on an adapted version of the argument of American strategist Alfred Mahan, Japanese naval planners asserted that to command the sea in the Western Pacific would provide the highest level of national security. If the navy was able to defeat any other fleets entering the region, the Japanese homeland would be protected upstream against naval threats and invasions.<sup>12</sup> In order to fulfill this mission, a series of strategic assumptions and related considerations were laid down in naval studies.

When discussions about the possibility of holding a naval arms control conference began in diplomatic circles, Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō established a committee to study the question of arms control and its consequences on naval strategy. The committee released an important report in September 1921 on which the naval institution based its position during the Washington Conference of 1921-2.<sup>13</sup> The report called on the delegation to the conference to limit as much as possible the disparity in naval strength between Japan and the United States and to avoid falling below 70 per cent of the American naval power. The 70 per cent ratio was regarded as a minimum for retaining the command of the sea in the Western Pacific. The report also asked for preventing the construction of new military

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<sup>9</sup> Feaver, *Armed servants*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> France and Italy rejected the quantitative limitations of the London Treaty.

<sup>11</sup> Iriye, *Nihon no gaikō*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Tasked with adapting the macro-theory of Mahan to Japan's specificities, naval planner Satō Tetsutarō published in 1908 a book titled *Teikoku kokubō shi ron* (On the History of Imperial Defense) in which he differentiated between passive and proactive defense. The former was land-based and the latter sea-based. He asserted that proactive defense was preferable because to destroy enemies at sea would prevent having to fight in coastal areas and Japanese territory. The command of the sea in the Western Pacific was essential to establish a strong first line of defense.

<sup>13</sup> Gow, *Military intervention*, pp. 83-6.

facilities in the Pacific region, particularly in Guam and the Philippines.

The Japanese delegation to the Washington Conference failed to respect all the strategic requirements of the navy. The Five-Power Treaty of February 1922 provided Japan with 315,000 tons of battleships against 525,000 tons for the United States and Great Britain. This meant a 60 per cent ratio in this key category. A similar ratio was approved in the minor category of aircraft carriers. Japan nonetheless obtained the status quo of military fortifications in most of the Pacific region, including in Guam and the Philippines.

Though Japan had to accept a ratio of 60 per cent in capital ships, the status quo of Pacific fortifications left the Imperial Navy by far dominant in the Western Pacific.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of Pearl Harbor, American naval bases were at that time unfitted to accommodate a large fleet, and the cruising range of warships was limited.<sup>15</sup> This meant that the power of the US Pacific Fleet would decay extensively during its journey from Hawaii.<sup>16</sup> The fleet would encounter important logistic issues for reaching the Western Pacific with enough strength to challenge the Japanese navy. The problem was particularly acute in regard to the refueling and fixing of ships.

The strategic position of the Japanese navy improved as a result of the Five-Power Treaty. Its ability to defeat other fleets in the Western Pacific increased. The strategic benefits of arms control were recognized by a vast majority inside the naval institution.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the strength of the strategic stimulus was insignificant and its influence on the stance of the navy toward the arms control policy of the Japanese government was minimal at best.

A group of officers opposed to arms control nonetheless emerged inside the Imperial Navy. Vice Admiral Katō Kanji, vice chief of general staff and chief naval adviser at the Washington Conference, was a prominent figure of the group. The latter was initially concentrated in the General Staff. Called '*Kantai-ha*' by Asada Sadao, it was opposed by another faction named '*Jōyaku-ha*'.<sup>18</sup> The *Jōyaku-ha* was led by Admiral Katō Tomosaburō, navy minister and plenipotentiary in Washington. His followers, mainly members of the Navy Ministry, backed the arms control policy of the Japanese government.

Katō Kanji and the *Kantai-ha* were upset by the institutional consequences of arms control, regarded as an unfair burden imposed on the navy by politicians eager to satisfy the growing pacifism of the Japanese population.<sup>19</sup> Naval budget shrank by more than 200 million yen between 1921 and 1923, or almost half, from 484 to 275 million yen.<sup>20</sup> The cruisers *Atago* and *Takao* as well as the battleships *Kii* and *Owari* under construction at that time were scrapped. The cruiser *Akagi* and the battleship *Kaga* were converted into aircraft

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<sup>14</sup> Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> Most of them still used either coal or a process of mixed firing by which burning coal was sprayed with oil to increase its thermal content. Propulsion systems were primarily made of steam engines, providing a relatively inefficient fuel combustion process.

<sup>16</sup> According to Japanese and American planners, including Mahan, naval power decayed by 10% for each 1,000 nautical miles a fleet had to sail without naval bases on its way. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Even the most contested aspect of the Five-Power Treaty, the 60% ratio in capital ships, was not considered as utterly negative by prominent naval officers. Fleet Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō defended the treaty by saying that 'a margin of 10% or so should not concern us much'. Admiral Abo Kiyokazu, chairman of the navy committee on arms control prior to the Washington Conference, asserted that the 60% ratio was highly advantageous. Accepting the ratio had allowed Japan to neutralize the cornerstone of the American transpacific strategy, namely Guam and the Philippines. *Ibid.*, p. 80; Abo, *Tōgūgo gakumonsho heisho*, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> Asada, 'The Japanese navy', pp. 226-7.

<sup>19</sup> Schencking, *Making waves*, p. 220.

<sup>20</sup> Naval budget continued to fall afterward, reaching 229 million yen in 1925. *Kaigun Rekishi Hozonkai, Nihon kaigun shi*, p. 117.

carriers, then regarded as an inefficient vessel. The construction of four cruisers was cancelled.<sup>21</sup> Close to 10 thousand sailors were discharged in 1922 out of a total of 80 thousand.<sup>22</sup> Nine on 10 admirals were subsequently pushed to retirement. On the other hand, the number of students who entered the Naval Academy in 1922 amounted to less than a fifth of the previous year.<sup>23</sup>

The institutional consequences of arms control pushed the *Kantai-ha* to act. Aware that the government had used the navy minister to interfere into what it considered as the naval sphere of responsibility, it tried to reform internal regulations related to the prerogatives of the General Staff and of the Ministry.<sup>24</sup> The group aimed at closing the entry point through which the government had penetrated the naval institution during and after the Washington Conference. In order to do so, the power of the Ministry as *hybrid institution* had to be undermined. The *Kantai-ha* lacked the necessary support inside the navy, however. Its initiative failed when in February 1924 Navy Minister Murakami Kakuichi rejected the proposal for revision of naval regulations.

This state of facts changed during the 1920s, a strategic stimulus spreading inside the Imperial Navy. Tremendous improvements in naval technology, especially those related to the propulsion of vessels, increased their cruising range and power. Major innovations included the conversion of naval fuel from coal to oil and the development of turbines, which replaced steam engines. The cruising radius of American warships doubled between 1922 and 1934.<sup>25</sup> The strategic distance in the Pacific shrank dramatically. As naval technology evolved, the importance of naval bases for the US Pacific Fleet to arrive with enough strength in the Western Pacific declined. This threatened the strategic position of the Japanese navy. The latter's ability to retain naval supremacy in the Western Pacific was jeopardized and the advantage of the status quo of Pacific fortifications gradually disappeared.<sup>26</sup>

The naval institution had to find a way to prevent the United States from bringing its superiority in capital ships, enshrined in the Five-Power Treaty, to the Western Pacific. The solution for naval planners was a strategy of attrition (*zengen sakusen*) using light ships and submarines and dedicated to wear down the strength of the US Pacific Fleet during its transpacific journey.<sup>27</sup> In 1923 already, the strategy was included in the part of the Imperial Defense Policy dedicated to war operations.<sup>28</sup> Japan's naval expansion programs during the

<sup>21</sup> The cumulated tonnage of ships composing the Japanese fleet fell from more than one million tons in 1922 to 854,085 in 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-51.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Asada, 'The revolt against the Washington treaty', p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Takagi, *Gunreibu reikaisei*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>26</sup> A report released in Dec. 1929 by the Operation Division of the Navy General Staff warned that American heavy cruisers now had the ability to 'sail in all directions' in the Pacific without refueling. A 'chain of encirclement extending to the almost entire Pacific Ocean' could be established by these warships, linking American forward naval bases in the Philippines and Guam to Hawaii in the center, the Aleutians in the north, and Samoa in the south. The Pacific was being reduced to an 'American lake' by technological innovations. Operation Division, *Ichiman ton junyōkan*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, p. 129. The strategy of attrition is sometimes confused with the ambush strategy (*yōgeki sakusen*). The latter included a tactical phase of attrition dedicated to weaken the opponent shortly before the decisive battle. The ambush strategy was first formulated by Akiyama Saneyuki after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, based on the lessons he extracted from the Battle of Tsushima. The evolution of naval technology during the 1920s and the strategic consequences of the Five-Power Treaty led the navy to upgrade the first phase of the battle plan from limited attrition to a full-fledged strategy of attrition extending deep into the Pacific.

The terms 'strategy of attrition' and 'attrition strategy' are widely used in the English literature. 'Operation of interception-attrition' might better reflect the original meaning of *zengen sakusen*, however.

<sup>28</sup> Shimanuki, 'Dai ichi ji sekai taisen igo', p. 69.

1920s consequently focused on building a large number of auxiliary vessels essential for the attrition strategy.

Expansion in auxiliary categories was supported by the entire naval institution. The reinforcement and enlargement of the fleet was a good thing for sailors. This did not mean that all of them saw from the start the auxiliary programs as a necessity for the navy to fulfill its institutional missions and guarantee the security of Japan. During the first half of the 1920s, government funding of naval expansion in auxiliaries was generally regarded as a normal compensation for the limitation of capital ships. Inversely, officers related to the *Kantai-ha* considered very early the auxiliary programs as a vital undertaking to mitigate the adverse consequences the Five-Power Treaty and technological innovations had on Japan's national security.

As the 1920s passed by and the effects of the shrinking strategic distance in the Pacific were increasingly felt, the strategic stimulus spread and a growing number of officers adhered to the *Kantai-ha*. Prominent naval figures such as Fleet Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō and Vice Admiral Ogasawara Naganari joined the group. They provided the latter with prestige and credibility and brought with them a bunch of high-ranking followers that further reinforced it.<sup>29</sup> The expanding influence of the *Kantai-ha* was reflected by tensions between different elements of the Imperial Navy ahead and during the Geneva Conference of 1927, dedicated to extend naval limitations to auxiliary categories. Representatives of the *Kantai-ha*, serving mainly in the General Staff, became more involved in politics and voiced more forcefully their strategic concerns and their opposition to the stance adopted by the Navy Ministry on arms control.<sup>30</sup>

During the conference, Vice Admirals Frederick Field from the United States and Kobayashi Seizō from Japan worked out a compromise that provided each of the two Anglo-Saxon powers with 500,000 tons of surface auxiliaries and Japan with 325,000 tons. All three countries were granted 60,000 tons of submarines. This represented a 65 per cent ratio for Japan in surface auxiliaries and a ratio of almost 69 per cent if submarines were added to the equation. This was below the strategic requirement of 70 per cent but above the 60 per cent ratio in capital ships obtained during the Washington Conference. According to the testimony of Admiral Takarabe Takeshi, who had been navy minister until two months before the opening of the conference, the Field-Kobayashi compromise triggered 'tumultuous controversies' inside the naval institution.<sup>31</sup>

These controversies emerged because the influence of the *Kantai-ha* was growing. The discussions in Geneva worried several naval officers that their strategic requirements might once again fail to be met in international arms control negotiations. Given the evolving naval technology and the deteriorating strategic position of the navy, this would have grave consequences on national security. On the other hand, Navy Minister Okada Keisuke and other members of the *Jōyaku-ha* supported the stance of Admiral Saitō Makoto, the plenipotentiary in Geneva. Saitō backed the compromise and was even willing to go below the 65 per cent ratio in surface auxiliaries in order to reach an agreement.<sup>32</sup> The conference broke down due to disagreements between the United States and Great Britain over the allocation of cruisers. This prevented a serious destabilization of the Japanese navy, and possibly of civil-military relations.

During the second half of the 1920s, the perception spread among naval officers that the

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<sup>29</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Asada, 'From Washington to London', p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 120.

Imperial Navy was losing its ability to defend Japan. In view of the expanding cruising radius of American warships, buildup programs in auxiliaries undertaken to nurture the attrition strategy were the only means by which the Japanese navy could remain capable of defeating the US Pacific Fleet in the Western Pacific. To maintain an adequate amount of auxiliary vessels became perceived as vital. These expansion programs helped mitigate the strength of the strategic stimulus. Consequently, the *Jōyaku-ha* continued to dominate the naval institution until the early 1930s, though it was increasingly challenged by the *Kantai-ha*.

The First London Conference of 1930 marked a turning point in the history of the Imperial Navy. It led to the destruction of the institution's internal unity by bringing the *Kantai-ha* and the *Jōyaku-ha* into direct confrontation. The treaty agreed at that time also crystalized the naval opposition to the arms control policy of the Japanese government. Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi ignored naval advice and approved naval restrictions that triggered a strong strategic stimulus. Auxiliary vessels were the means by which the Japanese navy had managed to mitigate the adverse consequences of the unfavorable ratio in capital ships and the expanding cruising radius of American warships. They were now also limited, and for some of them in a disadvantageous way.

The restrictions imposed by the London Treaty jeopardized the naval strategy developed during the 1920s to face the American threat. The attrition phase of the strategy was particularly affected. First, the 52,700 tons of submarines left the Japanese navy 25,300 tons and 16 boats short of what naval planners considered as the strict minimum.<sup>33</sup> Second, the ratio of heavy cruisers was deemed insufficient for both the attrition strategy and the final battle, during which they were expected to play a key role as quasi-battleships.<sup>34</sup> Though Japan obtained the desired ratio in the light cruiser category, the vessel was considered too small and not powerful enough to efficiently replace the heavy cruiser.<sup>35</sup> Third, and maybe more important, the London Treaty almost completely closed the loophole of the Five-Power Treaty in auxiliaries and destroyed the strategic flexibility of the naval institution. The near totality of the naval assets that could have allowed the navy to modify its strategy against the United States, in order to adapt to new arms control measures and the evolving naval technology, were limited by the treaty.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the strategic consequences of the London Treaty, the attitude of the Japanese government during the closing weeks of the conference upset the *Kantai-ha*. The Hamaguchi cabinet ignored the stance of the General Staff and approved the naval restrictions against the will of Katō Kanji, then chief of staff. In doing so, the *Kantai-ha* argued, the government had violated the right of supreme command (*tōsuiken*) that provided the Staff with a say on decisions related to the level of armament. This also was contrary to past naval practices according to which the navy minister took into account the position of the chief of staff when deciding on the level of armament.<sup>37</sup> This was a clear infringement by the government upon the naval sphere of responsibility.

The First London Conference provoked a frontal clash in civil-military relations. Though

<sup>33</sup> Gow, *Military intervention*, p. 205.

<sup>34</sup> The completion of the last three heavy cruisers allotted to the United States, out of a total of 18 (180,000 tons), was postponed until after 1935. Japan, with 12 vessels (108,400 tons), was de facto provided with a ratio of 72% until 1935, 68% in 1936, 64% in 1937, and 60% from 1938 onward. Japan's Ministry of Defense, *Kaigun gūnsenbi*, pp. 378-9.

<sup>35</sup> Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, p. 237.

<sup>36</sup> Only naval aviation, vessels below 600 tons and, under certain conditions, between 600 and 2,000 tons were free from restrictions.

<sup>37</sup> Ikeda, *Kaigun to Nihon*, pp. 74-5.

the *Kantai-ha* ultimately failed to prevent the ratification of the London Treaty, the strategic stimulus increased its influence. The whole naval institution rapidly turned against the Washington system and the government. The navy's internal discipline was greatly disrupted in the process. This marked the end of the so-called 'controlled navy' (*tōsei aru kaigun*), established during the second half of the nineteenth century based on the British model of predominance of the Navy Ministry.<sup>38</sup> This episode has been considered by contemporary journalist Itō Masanori as 'the greatest tragedy in Japanese naval history'.<sup>39</sup> The lightning ascension of the *Kantai-ha* inside the institution was reflected in two ways.

The first was a profound revision of internal regulations regarding the prerogatives of the General Staff and the Navy Ministry that entered into force in October 1933. Almost similar to the one attempted by the *Kantai-ha* after the Washington Conference, the revision weakened extensively the Ministry.<sup>40</sup> The latter was perceived as having joined hands with the government to impose the London Treaty to the navy. The second way was a purge in 1933 and 1934 of the most moderate elements of the Imperial Navy: the members of the *Jōyaku-ha*, heirs of a tradition of cooperation with the government.<sup>41</sup> Having acquired a strong basis and representativeness inside the naval institution, the *Kantai-ha* removed those who slowed down its ascension and prevented the establishment of its authority.

On the eve of the Second London Conference of 1935-6, the Imperial Navy had become deeply involved in politics and had decisively turned against the arms control policy of the government. In June 1934, naval authorities decided to request nothing less than parity with the United States and Great Britain through a common upper limit settled at a low level of naval power.<sup>42</sup> For this demand to be efficiently made, the Five-Power Treaty needed to be abrogated before the end of the year.<sup>43</sup> The cabinet of Prime Minister Okada Keisuke faced the inflexible stance of the navy and was aware of the danger of another clash in civil-military relations, now that the whole institution was united and that the role of the Navy Ministry as hybrid institution had been destroyed. Because of a chronic lack of control over the navy, the government had few choices other than to abrogate the treaty in late 1934, and to withdraw from the Second London Conference in January 1936 after the demand for naval parity was rejected by the two Anglo-Saxon countries. Japan officially left the Washington system in late 1936.

### III

Other domestic and external factors, related to the sociopolitical environment in Japan and the regional context, entered into the equation of Japan's withdrawal from the Washington system. Nevertheless, the forceful opposition of the Imperial Navy to the maintenance of the system as it stood after the First London Conference was the motor of the Japanese disengagement from the naval arms control framework.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 126.

<sup>40</sup> According to Captain Inoue Shigeyoshi, then head of the First Section of the Ministry's Naval Affairs Bureau, the revision was dedicated to 'reduce the authority of the navy minister to a minimum'. Its most important implication regarding the topic of this article was the transfer from the Ministry to the Staff of the ultimate responsibility for decisions related to the level of armament. Takagi, *Gunreibu reikaisei*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>41</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 173.

<sup>42</sup> The decision was based on a plan drafted by Commander Ishikawa Shingo back in Oct. 1933. Kotani, 'Dai ni ji rondon kaigun gunshuku kaigi', p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> The abrogation of the Five-Power Treaty implied that a notice be issued two years ahead. Gow, *Military intervention*, p. 301.

<sup>44</sup> The fact that the Okada cabinet resisted the abrogation of the Five-Power Treaty shows that the role played

Some scholars attribute the abrogation of the Five-Power Treaty to an irrational attraction for naval expansion and the fact that inferior ratios in naval power were regarded as badges of dishonor by naval officers. Others point out the irrationality of the naval institution regarding the prospect of an arms race with the United States. Given the limited capacities of Japanese shipyards, the lack of access to strategic materials such as steel, and the financial problems of the country, the navy should have sought to avoid a naval competition with the Americans by preserving the Washington system. Lastly, some scholars similarly interpret the trust placed by naval officers in their ability to win a war with the United States in case Japan withdrew from the system.

Such arguments discard important factors by labelling irrational the stance of the Imperial Navy. The naval status quo in 1934 was not considered as advantageous by Japanese officers. The strategic position of the Japanese navy was deteriorating. Its ability to command the sea in the Western Pacific and protect Japan against an American offensive was weakening.<sup>45</sup> The capacity of the US Pacific Fleet to project its superior naval power far into the Pacific was improving. In addition to this growing power projection capacity, the Vinson-Trammell Act adopted by Congress in March 1934 aimed at bringing the American navy to treaty limits within an eight-year period through the construction of 102 vessels and 1,184 airplanes.<sup>46</sup> As the unfavorable ratios imposed by the Washington system came closer to be transposed to the battlefield, the Japanese navy approximated the need for parity in naval strength in order to be able to defeat the Americans in the Western Pacific. It was therefore strategically rational for the institution to abrogate the Five-Power Treaty and seek more favorable ratios in naval power at the Second London Conference. This had less to do with naval officers' feeling of dishonor or enthusiasm for naval expansion than with strategic considerations.

Scholars are correct in arguing that Japan had no chance of winning an arms race if the United States took the exercise seriously. On the other hand, the position of the Imperial Navy was logical from an institutional perspective. It was struggling to make effective its naval strategy against the US Pacific Fleet, not to win an arms race. This strategy had been jeopardized by the restrictions on auxiliaries imposed by the 1930 London Treaty. By recovering the ability to build freely in key categories, the institution regained the strategic flexibility necessary to fulfill its missions. In other words, naval inferiority had never been the real problem for the navy. The true issue was the negative consequences of arms control on the implementation of a naval strategy dedicated to deal with a superior enemy. This strategy, a vital part of which was dedicated to wear down the strength of the American fleet during its transpacific journey, required the right amount of specific vessels to be effective.<sup>47</sup>

Consequently, the assertion that naval officers were overconfident about their chance of victory in a war with the United States must be handled carefully. Even considering the relative decline in Japan's naval power that followed the withdrawal from the Washington system, it remains to be proven that the strategic position of the Imperial Navy was, on the eve of the Pacific War, worse than a decade earlier after the imposition of new limitations by the 1930 London Treaty. By the early 1940s, the recovered flexibility in naval expansion

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by the navy in Japan's withdrawal was central. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Kaigun gunshuku*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 187.

<sup>46</sup> The fact that naval expansion under the act focused on building a 'balanced fleet' able to cross the Pacific did not fail to raise concerns inside the Japanese navy. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, p. 354.

<sup>47</sup> Thanks to flexibility in naval expansion, the navy thought that building the necessary naval assets would not require an increase in naval expenditure and even that money could be saved. Kotani, 'Dai ni ji rondon kaigun gunshuku kaigi', p. 79.

had allowed Japan to develop key naval assets for the attrition strategy and build super battleships expected to be decisive during the final battle.<sup>48</sup> A report released by the Navy General Staff in mid-1941 noted that the navy had a chance of defeating the United States as long as it retained more than 50 per cent of the latter's naval power, which was the case at the time.<sup>49</sup> Because of the improved efficacy of Japan's naval strategy, the 50 per cent ratio replaced as a strategic minimum the 70 per cent ratio of the Washington system era and the request for parity of the Second London Conference.

Therefore, the decision to abrogate the Five-Power Treaty and risk pulling Japan out of the arms control framework by requesting parity in naval power was strategically rational from the point of view of the Japanese navy. At best, the demand for revision would be accepted by the United States and Great Britain during the Second London Conference. And if Japan had to leave the Washington system, the Imperial Navy would recover the strategic flexibility essential to fulfill its institutional missions. To withdraw was at least preferable to remaining passively constrained by unfavorable arms limitations. Under evolving technological conditions, these limitations were putting the navy in an 'unbearable' strategic situation.<sup>50</sup>

This is not to deny the spiritual dimension of statements made by Katō Kanji and several other officers during this period.<sup>51</sup> It is however important to emphasize that there was no prospect of armed conflict with the United States at that time. What happened in 1941 should not blind scholars to the fact that war across the Pacific was almost unthinkable in the mid-1930s. Naval officers eager to get rid of arms restrictions did not run the risk of being proven wrong by events in claiming that, partly due to superior spirit, the Japanese navy was able to win a war against the United States whatever the circumstances. Spiritualism was actually an effective tool to prevent other domestic actors from attacking the argument of those ready to risk a breakdown of the Washington system.

The strategic stimulus comprehensively explains the institutional dynamics and the evolution of the Imperial Navy's position toward the arms control policy of the Japanese government. The analysis demonstrates that to withdraw from the Washington system in the mid-1930s was strategically rational for the naval institution. Officers like Katō Kanji were not blind warmongers. Maybe shortsighted, but above all naval experts decided to do the job for which they had been trained.

#### IV

This does not explain why the Japanese government embraced the navy's strategic requirements and prioritized power politics over diplomacy. The navy focused on finding a way to defeat the American fleet in the Western Pacific, inside or outside the naval arms control framework. The negative diplomatic, economic, and financial consequences of disengaging from the Washington system were not taken into account by the naval

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<sup>48</sup> The construction of the first two super battleships, *Yamato* and *Musashi*, was approved by naval authorities in 1936.

<sup>49</sup> Nihon Kokusai Seiji Gakkai, *Taiheiyō sensō he no michi*, p. 324.

<sup>50</sup> In the words of Asada Sadao, 'by the spring of 1934 the Japanese navy had concluded that its strategic situation had become unbearable'. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, p. 187.

<sup>51</sup> During a meeting of high-ranking officers in Aug. 1934, when the abrogation of the Five-Power Treaty was approved, Katō Kanji said: 'If it is possible for us to decide our level of military power autonomously and to expand and contract this according to the national economy, then our navy, on the basis of increase of morale and self-confidence, which will be produced by this, can expect victory no matter what percentage of national power our potential enemy possesses'. Gow, *Military intervention*, p. 302.

institution. It was not its role to do so. Inversely, these foreseeable consequences should have been central for the government. They should have convinced Japanese leaders of the necessity to keep cooperating with the United States on arms control. This was particularly true as Japan maintained relatively stable relations with the Americans, and as the latter had no intention to interfere in Asian affairs because focusing on domestic issues amid Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.<sup>52</sup> Dysfunctions in civil-military relations explain why this was not the case.

The defects in the structure of civil-military relations dated back to the early Meiji era and the creation of the modern military services. As the centralization of the military and political apparatus was underway, leaders of the Meiji Restoration feared military intervention in politics led by statesmen and regional lords.<sup>53</sup> They consequently enacted a series of regulations dedicated to forestall such interventions. The path chosen was to make the nascent military apolitical by strictly isolating it from the political world, based on the principle of separation between the military and the government (*hei-sei bunri shugi*).

Meiji leaders first enacted regulations to directly restrain the military. In 1878, the army released the Admonition to Soldiers. Military personnel had to refrain from 'questioning imperial policies, expressing private opinions on important laws, or criticizing the published regulations of the government'.<sup>54</sup> Two years later, the government released the Regulations for Public Meetings and Associations. They prohibited soldiers on active duty and those assigned to the first and second reserves to enter political groupings and to participate in political meetings. Lastly, in 1882, the emperor issued the Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors. The document requested them to 'neither be led astray by current opinions nor meddle in politics'.<sup>55</sup> Interventions in politics by military personnel were also sanctioned by the army and navy penal laws.

In parallel, Meiji leaders extracted the power to command troops from the reach of politicians and military administrators. The General Staff Bureau, operating under the supervision of the Army Ministry, was abolished and replaced in 1878 by an autonomous General Staff Headquarters responsible to the emperor.<sup>56</sup> The chief of staff was appointed by the latter and was independent from the army and prime ministers. His right to bypass the two ministers and report directly to the emperor on matters under his responsibility (*iaku jōsō*) was codified in 1885 at the time of the reorganization of the cabinet system. Finally, article 11 of the Meiji Constitution of 1889 stated that 'the Emperor has the supreme command of the Army and Navy'.<sup>57</sup> The article was interpreted by constitutional scholars as empowering the chief of staff with the right of supreme command (*tōsuiken*): the ability to issue orders about military operations and strategies in the name of the emperor. The prime and service ministers had absolutely no authority on matters related to the command of troops.<sup>58</sup>

Regarding the administration of the military, Meiji leaders established service ministers as the main responsible persons. The reorganization of the cabinet system in 1885 granted them authority on affairs related to budget, personnel, and the acquisition of military assets.

<sup>52</sup> Bix, *Hirohito*, p. 272; Imai, 'Cabinet, emperor, and senior statesmen', p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> The Saga Rebellion of 1874 led by Etō Shinpei and the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 under the leadership of Saigō Takamori were clear illustrations of the danger.

<sup>54</sup> Hackett, 'The military: Japan', p. 344.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The navy did not possess an independent General Staff until 1893. It was lagging behind the army in terms of institutional development. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> Japan's National Diet Library, *The Constitution*.

<sup>58</sup> Ikeda, *Kaigun to Nihon*, p. 74.

The ministers had to report to the prime minister in this regard.<sup>59</sup> Article 12 of the Constitution read: 'The Emperor determines the organization and peace standing of the Army and Navy'.<sup>60</sup> The article was interpreted as providing the army and navy ministers with the duty to assist the emperor in these tasks.<sup>61</sup> The prime minister theoretically had a certain control over administrative affairs as service ministers belonged to his government. However, this control was weakened by the fact that the latter were customarily nominated by their services and chosen from the list of active officers. This implied that if the services were dissatisfied, they could refrain from such nominations to block the establishment of the government or withdraw their ministers to bring it down.<sup>62</sup> This undermined the ability of the prime minister to interfere in military affairs in a way that displeased the services.

Japanese civil-military relations were structured in order to separate strictly the spheres of responsibility between the government and military services. Over the years, the principle of separation between the military and the government resulted in what has been called a dual government (*nijū seifu*). The military sphere was extremely strong against government interference. This was particularly the case for strategic and operational matters, protected by the right of supreme command. On the other hand, military services often penetrated the government sphere to advance their interests. The problem with the system of dual government was that by over depoliticizing the military institution, Meiji leaders ended up counting on its self-restraint regarding interventions in politics. They provided the government with no effective instrument to keep control over the military and discipline it. When the strategic consequences of arms control pushed the Imperial Navy into politics, the government could not but bow under the pressure.

## V

The root of the Japanese government's ill-conceived decision to withdraw from the Washington system was not the navy; it was dysfunctions in civil-military relations. The navy perfectly played its role as a military institution, but it should not have been able to impose its view about arms control on the government. What can be learned from the Japanese case regarding the stability of arms control regimes?

First, the structure of civil-military relations is central to prevent the military institution from acquiring undue political influence. Civilian control must be strong enough to discipline a potentially reluctant military in case the government wants to prioritize diplomacy over power politics. Civilian control of the military provides the government with proper flexibility in the formulation of foreign policy. This means that arms control agreements involving military dictatorships and similar kinds of political regime are particularly vulnerable to destabilizing military intervention in politics.

On the other side of the same coin, the government must beware not to unnecessarily provoke the military in order to mitigate the risk of intervention in politics. This implies, first, that the government must avoid being perceived as forcibly interfering into what the military considers as its sphere of responsibility. As mentioned, arms control entails the imposition by politicians of the terms of an international treaty to the military. The wise use of hybrid officers, like Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō at the time of the Washington Conference, gives the impression that the military shares responsibility for the arms control

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<sup>59</sup> Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> Japan's National Diet Library, *The Constitution*.

<sup>61</sup> Ikeda, *Kaigun to Nihon*, p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> Hackett, 'The military: Japan', p. 346.

policy. The government can also provide the military with financial and other compensations in order to display arms control as a mutually beneficial enterprise.

Second, the government must be careful not to excessively jeopardize the military's ability to fulfill institutional missions. This entails that arms limitations must leave some strategic flexibility to the military. In other words, the government must refrain from closing all loopholes and allow rechanneling in military buildup. Rechanneling acts as a pressure valve on the strategic stimulus. Additionally, the arms control regime must be revised regularly to adapt quantitative and qualitative restrictions to changing geostrategic circumstances, taking into account the evolution of military technology.

The argument developed above points to the limits of arms control as an instrument regulating military affairs. It must be understood, however, that arms control is above all a diplomatic tool that helps countries maintain contact over sensible security issues. Arms control must be used in a realistic manner. It cannot provide countries with perfect security, but it can promote cooperation and trust between member states.

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