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Captain Mahan, Admiral Fisher and Arms Control at The Hague, 1899

William R. Hawkins

On 3 September 1898, the Russian Foreign Minister Count Mikhail Muraviev issued a call in the name of the young Tsar Nicholas II for a conference to exchange “ideas in furtherance of national economy and international peace in the interests of humanity.” In popular perception it was to be a conference to promote disarmament, but the Russians had a more modest aim. The conference was only “to put an end to the constantly increasing development of armaments.” It was not to disturb the current level of armaments or upset the balance of power. Still, it was a landmark act. Though there had been various schemes and even some treaties limiting armaments in the past (usually imposed at the end of wars by the winners on the losers), there had never been a conference of all the great powers to place arms control at the center of negotiations.

“The first arms control conference set a pattern for subsequent efforts to limit weaponry—a pattern of *failure*. Diplomatic efforts which attempt to treat symptoms independent of causes are not likely to produce meaningful results.”

The Russian call was viewed with suspicion by most governments. Russia had just completed a buildup of forces in Asia and had recently reequipped its army with a new rifle. An arms race involving all of the major European powers was in progress. All the major Continental nations had adopted conscription, and were fielding peacetime armies large even by today’s standards from a population half the size. These standing armies were backed up by extensive reserve organizations. Military service was universal with three years of active duty and 10-12 years reserve duty average. Russia massed the largest peacetime establishment with 896,000 soldiers with some four million reservists. Germany mustered 545,000 in peacetime with 6,213,000

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reservists, half of whom were earmarked for offensive use. France counted 544,000 normal establishment with 4,660,000 on reserve; Austria had 350,000 active duty and about three million in reserve; and Italy kept 222,000 in its standing forces with 3,325,000 ready for mobilization. Even England, which was still a volunteer service, could count 236,000 British Regulars, a 198,000 Indian Army, 288,000 other Imperial Forces and a 486,000 reserve.¹

Arms races in the industrial age concentrate more on machines than men. Germany had just developed a new field gun with a rate of fire of six rounds per minute. Russian guns could only manage one round per minute. Germany's ally, Austria, was planning to obtain the new gun. However, the cost for Russia to acquire similar artillery from France would be more than Finance Minister Sergei Witte could spare for new military programs. Russia needed a "freeze" to keep from falling behind.²

The Russian Minister of War, General Alexei Kuropatkin had originally proposed to the tsar a bilateral agreement with Austria for a 10-year moratorium on the acquisition of new artillery. This would maintain the current balance. Witte proposed that an international conference be sought instead of the more traditional diplomacy in an attempt to arrest the arms race across the board; an arms race Witte was convinced was driving all of Europe toward bankruptcy. A conference might also disguise Russia's particular financial weakness behind a cloud of idealism and mutual concern, whereas opening talks with Austria alone would draw attention to it.

Russia's motives were well-known in diplomatic circles and were not confused with idealism. However, the pressure of the peace movement was such that no major government could openly reject an invitation to negotiate. The peace movement had been growing in both America and Europe. It was composed of a diffuse and often contradictory coalition of factions: religious pacifists, socialists who rejected nationalism in favor of the international solidarity of the working class, conservative lawyers and businessmen seeking world order under a system of universal law, and classical liberals advocating individual self-interest and free trade as alternatives to governmental authority and power politics. During the eight months between the calling of the conference and its convening, all the major capitals were bombarded with petitions, deputations and demonstrations by peace and disarmament advocates. Newspapers in both America and Europe exaggerated both the scope and the chance for success of the conference. When the conference opened, thousands of antiwar activists flocked to it. As one journalist reported at the time "Young Turks, old Armenians, emancipated and enthusiastic women, ancient revolutionaries from the 'forties, buzzed around The Hague like bees."³

Yet, the peace movement did not have a monopoly on public opinion. National feelings were running high in all lands as was distrust for the motives and ambitions of other countries. Russia was perhaps the least trusted of all.

Thus Rudyard Kipling found a ready audience for his poem "The Truce of the Bear" written in response to the tsar's proposal for arms limitation. The poem tells of "the Bear that walks like a Man" and the hunter who held his fire when "touched by pity and wonder" when he saw the "paws like hands in prayer." The bear used the hunter's hesitation to attack, blinding and maiming the hunter. Kipling concludes:

When he stands up as pleading, in wavering man-brute guise,
When he veils the hate and cunning of his little swinish eyes;
When he shows as seeking quarter, with paws in hands of prayer,
That is the time of peril—the time of the Truce of the Bear!

In all, 26 states sent delegations to the conference which opened at the Huis ten Bosch (the House in the Woods), the royal summer palace of the House of Orange in The Hague on 18 May 1899.⁴ It was the largest diplomatic gathering of the powers since the Congress of Vienna.

Most of the delegates were sent by governments with severe reservations about the goals of the conference. Some were openly hostile to the very idea of such a conference. France was afraid that a "freeze" would perpetuate its inferiority to Germany and was upset with their entente ally for initiating the idea, especially since St. Petersburg did not consult with Paris before issuing its call. Italy and Austria wished to avoid any interference with their arms buildup. Japan would only listen to proposals for naval limitations after she had reached parity with the major maritime powers. England would have liked to "freeze" the naval balance in her favor, but without concrete measures to insure against cheating (including on-site inspection which no major power would allow as an intrusion on sovereignty), could not risk her first line of defense. Serbia was opposed to any arms limitations on the grounds that only by military means could the Serbian people be united in a single nation.⁵

Germany was well aware of Russia's financial weakness and did not care to help St. Petersburg out of its predicament. Berlin wanted the strategic advantages that a strong, industrial economy afforded. Germany since unification in 1871 had prospered. National income had doubled, coal and steel production had increased by a factor of four, surpassing England. Population had increased by 50 percent. Germany the most heavily armed nation on the Continent was also the wealthiest, a point its delegates never ceased to point out whenever anyone denounced "the crushing burden of armaments" as a factor impeding economic growth. The Germans were expected to be the main obstacle to any successful agreement at The Hague. Kaiser Wilhelm II's first reaction on hearing of the conference and fearing that its goal was disarmament was to send a note to Tsar Nicholas. In it he reproached the Russian ruler and reiterated his central identification of the military with the state. Imagine, "a Monarch holding personal command of his Army, dissolving his regiments, sacred with a hundred years of

history . . . and handing over his towns to Anarchists and Democracy.”⁶ Wilhelm wanted no part in such a scene.

The international environment was not favorable to such a novel diplomatic effort. Even the decision to hold the meeting at The Hague was a reflection of this. The first choice had been Geneva, but the Swiss city had become a haven for radicals of all persuasions and nationalities and was considered too dangerous because of terrorist activity. The Empress Elizabeth of Austria had been assassinated there only the year before.⁷

The American attitude toward the talks was mixed. The United States had been the first nation to accept the Russian invitation, an indication of the more active role in the world that the new Secretary of State, John Hay, wished the United States to play in the wake of the Spanish-American War. The head of the delegation was Andrew D. White, the Ambassador to Germany. White was a cofounder of Cornell University and a moderate Republican committed to the furtherance of international law. He worked hard for the establishment of an international court of arbitration. He had less faith in the ability of the Great Powers to negotiate arms limitations and, as a former ambassador to Russia, had misgivings as to St. Petersburg’s motives. In his *Autobiography* he summed up his instructions from Secretary Hay on the arms control issue. “As regards the articles relating to the non-employment of new firearms, explosives and other destructive agencies, the restricted use of the existing instruments of destruction, and the prohibition of certain contrivances employed in naval warfare, it seems to the department that they are lacking in practicality and that the discussion of these articles would provoke divergency rather than unanimity of view The expediency of restraining the inventive genius of our people in the direction of devising means of defense is by no means clear, and considering the temptations to which men and nations may be exposed in time of conflict, it is doubtful if an international agreement of this nature would prove effective.”⁸

Among the other members of the US delegation was Alfred Thayer Mahan whose 1890 classic *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* easily made him among the best known delegates. Mahan had no delusions about arms control. Only two years earlier he had written: “Time and staying power must be secured for ourselves by that rude and imperfect, but not ignoble arbiter, force—force potential and force organized—which so far has won, and still secures, the greatest triumphs of good in the checkered story of mankind.”⁹

Nor did his views change. Writing about The Hague conference afterwards, he said “Step by step in the past, man has ascended by means of the sword, and his more recent gains, as well as present conditions, show that the time has not yet come to kick down the ladder.”¹⁰ White noted of Mahan that “his views are an excellent tonic, they have effectively prevented any lapse into sentimentality. When he speaks, the millennium fades and this stern, severe actual world appears.”¹¹

Mahan's appointment to the conference took most people by surprise. Mahan had retired from active duty in 1896 and had devoted his time to writing—*The Life of Nelson* and *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Past and Present* were both published in 1897. He had been called back to serve on the Navy War Board during the Spanish-American War. The reasons for his appointment and for his acceptance appear tied to the fact that Britain had announced that its best known naval officer and strategist, Admiral Sir John Fisher, would serve as London's delegate from the Royal Navy. Washington wanted someone with an international reputation to draw attention to the US delegation at its first major conference, while Fisher's presence gave participation in the conference credibility in Mahan's eyes.¹²

Both the American captain and the British admiral were approaching their sixtieth birthdays with over eighty years of combined naval experience. In personality the two men were quite different. Mahan was a scholar, Fisher was a man of action. Mahan had retired to a life of letters while Fisher was on his way to command Britain's Mediterranean Fleet. In thought, however, the two men had much in common. Mahan's history was written in admiration of the British Fleet and Fisher was an admirer of Mahan's history, often quoting passages in his correspondence.¹³ One of the strategic reforms which Fisher pushed was for the reorganization of the units of the Royal Navy, which were scattered across the Empire in local commitments, into concentrated battle fleets as per Mahan's dictates. Though in future years they would disagree on specific issues of weapons and tactics (such as on the utility of the all-big-gun battleship and the submarine), at The Hague Mahan and Fisher shared a common outlook on the utility of military and naval power in world affairs and a profound skepticism towards arms control diplomacy. Their cooperation at the conference reflected in microcosm the "Great Rapprochement" then in progress between the American and British Governments.

Mahan was a strong advocate of cooperation between Washington and London, and had personally experienced the good will which was growing between the two countries. In 1893, Mahan had served on the European station aboard the cruiser *Chicago* and had been enthusiastically received in England. He was the guest of honor at receptions with the Queen, the Admiralty and the Royal Navy Club and was given honorary degrees by Oxford and Cambridge. He was well aware that an Anglo-American alliance based on cultural kinship would guarantee command of the seas.¹⁴ Eventually, of course, such an alliance would save Western Europe in two world wars.

Admiral Fisher's biographer, Richard Hough, believes "It was one of Lord Salisbury's shrewdest moves in his last ministry to show the world the nature of the man they would have to break if they took up arms against England."¹⁵ Fisher was the Tory Prime Minister's personal choice as a man who could be counted on not to compromise the power of the British Fleet. James Stokesbury has described Fisher as the man who "dragged the Royal Navy

kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.”¹⁶ He introduced the destroyer as a warship class and pushed for the conversion from coal to oil. He reformed training with particular emphasis on gunnery and engineering. But he did not limit his pursuit of modernization only to administrative reform and technological progress. He also wanted to bring the way people thought about war and strategy into line with the modern reality of the industrial world. He upset the Victorian complacency. The British admiral, a blunt and colorful individual, described his early deterrence theory as follows: “If you rub it in both at home and abroad, that you are ready for instant war with every unit of your strength in the first line, and intend to be first in, and hit your enemy in the belly, and kick him when he is down, and boil your prisoners in oil (if you take any!), and torture his women and children, then people will keep clear of you.”¹⁷

As First Sea Lord, Fisher made the decision to revolutionize battleship design with the launching of the *Dreadnought* in 1906 and he was among the first to predict the use of unrestricted submarine warfare (Winston Churchill thought this view was extremist in 1913). He served again as First Sea Lord during World War I. He listened to the speeches at The Hague “wondering that they could think that any of their resolutions would be recognized in war.”¹⁸ Fisher hated war and the suffering it caused. He had experienced war firsthand in China and Egypt. But he understood the form it would take in the industrial age and was determined that England would be prepared for the worst. The journalist Harold Begbie wrote of Fisher’s impact on the meeting: “The polite gentlemen at the House in the Woods were debating as to how war might be conducted with as little pain and inconvenience as possible, when Sir John broke in with the way in which he intended to fight his sea battles Men sat listening with blanched faces, with horror in their eyes, and at the end a shudder ran round the circular yellow room. It was said to be the most dreadful and appalling picture of war ever drawn by a human mind.”¹⁹

Yet, he impressed the delegates in other ways as well. His journalist friend, W. T. Stead, who was covering the conference, took pride in recalling that Fisher “danced down everyone else in the ballroom” and was “instantly acclaimed as the heartiest, jolliest and smartest delegate at The Hague.”²⁰

The Hague conference was divided into three committees. Fisher and Mahan served on the First Committee dealing with arms limitation. Several proposals had been placed on the agenda by the Russians. Leading the list were Russian plans limiting army force levels and budgets to their current figures for five years and freezing naval forces for three years. Each nation would be obligated to publish data each year on troop strength, budgets, fortifications, and ship tonnage. Only colonial troops were exempt from the limitation, a loophole which the Russians planned to exploit by counting their forces in Asia as colonial. These proposals were rejected by a subcommittee as

unworkable with only the Russian delegate in favor. Mahan read the official American position stating that since the United States was not engaged in the present arms race (its army numbered only 100,000 men), the issue was purely a European matter.²¹

Most of the attempts to ban specific weapons were also unsuccessful. Russian proposals to limit fleets, naval gun sizes and armor plate were overwhelmingly defeated, with Mahan and Fisher in strong opposition. While the United States was not engaged in the European arms race, Mahan told Fisher that the coming struggle for the China market would require an increase in America's Asian squadron.²² Proposals to limit field artillery as to size and rate of fire also lost. The main issue which had prompted Russia to call the conference never had a chance. A ban on submarines and torpedo boats was opposed by Austria and France, both of whom wanted the relatively inexpensive naval weapons for coastal defense. Mahan made no statement on the value of such weapons even though their concept ran counter to his philosophy of the battle fleet. He merely reserved the right for the United States to build them if Washington so desired. The elimination of rams was endorsed by Russia, England, France and Japan and Mahan said that the United States would agree if everyone else did. Sweden and Austria, however, refused and Germany claimed that its designs could not be changed.²³ Repeatedly, throughout the conference, nations would use the requirement of unanimity to disguise their objections. Thus positions which were opposed in private could be taken in public without the risk that they would become commitments.

Only three concrete measures for restricting weapons were adopted at The Hague: a ban on the use of poison gas in naval warfare, a ban on the "dum-dum" expanding bullet, and a five-year moratorium on the dropping of bombs from balloons or from other similar airborne platforms. Fisher, Mahan, and Mahan's colleague from the Army, Capt. William Crozier, led the opposition to all three restrictions. Indeed, they provided virtually all the open opposition. It was only a slight exaggeration when Fisher informed a Royal Navy colleague, "It's very hard work here. It's a case of *Britannia contra mundum!*"²⁴

Mahan was quite vigorous in his opposition to the ban on chemical projectiles in naval warfare. Since no tests had been run on such weapons, it was impossible to determine whether they could be decisive in combat. If poison gas was a "decisive" weapon, rather than just a "cruel" weapon, it should not be banned. Indeed, it probably could not be successfully banned. Its utility would make its use inevitable. Mahan also doubted that chemical weapons were any more cruel than other weapons (he pointed out the torpedo and the magnetic mine as examples) which were used without scruple. He argued that, "It is illogical to be tender about a weapon that would asphyxiate men when it is allowable to blow the bottom out of an

ironclad at midnight, throwing four or five hundred men into the sea to be choked by water.²⁵

The ban on gas projectiles was passed with only the United States casting a negative vote. However, the British had voted in the affirmative with the stipulation that the measure must be passed unanimously for London to abide by it. Since Fisher knew the US position, he knew that this escape clause would render the vote meaningless.²⁶ Britain did not sign this convention until after a change of government in 1907 when the Liberal Party ended two decades of Conservative rule. Gas weapons at sea proved impractical so it is impossible to say whether The Hague treaty had any restraining effect. Since the major powers made extensive use of poison gas on land in World War I, it is doubtful arms control diplomacy can take much credit for halting the spread of chemical warfare to the oceans.

The ban on expanding bullets was passed to annoy the British who had developed them for use in colonial warfare where the "stopping power" of the outnumbered soldiers of the Queen needed to be augmented. Since the United States was engaged in a guerrilla war in the Philippines, there was a common interest in such munitions. The United States and England cast the only negative votes on banning the "dum-dum." The vote did nothing to impede the advancement of small arms.

The arguments of the military experts carried more weight in regard to aerial weapons. The committee had originally voted to ban aerial projectiles completely. However, a discussion between Mahan and Crozier the evening after the vote led to a new American proposal the next day. Using the same argument which Mahan had used earlier on gas warfare, Crozier convinced the committee that not enough information was available about aerial weapons to justify an indefinite ban. Thus, he proposed that the ban be limited to only five years. His argument was accepted. It is doubtful that the development of air warfare would ever have been hampered by treaty. The Germans used their zeppelins for bombing raids on London in World War I before they were replaced by more capable aircraft.

When it came time to sign the arms limitation declarations, Andrew White urged that the United States drop its opposition and sign all three declarations. Mahan and Crozier refused to sign the declarations covering "dum-dum" bullets and poison gas in naval warfare, but did allow the United States to sign the 5-year ban on aerial bombs. Actually, the number of dissenters among the powers increased. England, Germany, Japan, Austria, Italy, Serbia, China and Luxembourg refused to sign any of the declarations.

Other topics drew the attention of Mahan and Fisher. Secretary of State Hay had expressed the hope in his instructions to Andrew White that the traditional American concern for freedom of the seas be introduced at the conference even though it was not mentioned in the Russian agenda.²⁷ Mahan as the naval delegate should have been the man to make the proposal to the

First Committee which dealt with ways to make war more humane. However, he was opposed to it in principle. Five years earlier, Mahan had written an essay for *The North American Review* in which he laid out the case for breaking with the traditional American view of neutral rights. The question was one of strategy, not morality. “. . . all maritime nations more or less, depend for their prosperity upon maritime commerce, and probably upon it more than any other factor. Either under their own flag or that of a neutral, either by foreign trade or coasting trade, the sea is the greatest of boons to such a state; and under every form its sea-borne trade is at the mercy of a foe decisively superior.

“Is it then, to be expected that such a foe will forego such advantage—will insist upon spending blood and money in fighting or money in the vain effort of maintaining a fleet which, having nothing to fight, also keeps its hands off such an obvious means of crippling the opponent and forcing him out of his ports? Great Britain’s navy in the French wars, not only protected her own commerce, but also annihilated that of the enemy; and both conditions—not one alone—were essential to her triumph.

“It is because Great Britain’s sea power, though still superior, has declined relatively to that of other states, and is no longer supreme, that she has been induced to concede to neutrals the principle that the flag covers the goods. It is a concession wrung from relative weakness—or possibly from a mistaken humanitarianism; but to whatever due, it is all to the profit of the neutral and to the loss of the stronger belligerent.”²⁸

The United States had been in an inferior naval position during most of its history. Politically isolated but involved in commerce on a global scale, it had thus adopted the claim of neutral rights, “the dream of weaker sea belligerents in all ages.” But conditions had now changed. The 1890s witnessed the birth of an American battle fleet and the acquisition of the Philippines. Now, the United States was on its way to becoming a major world naval power and like England, would both want and need to exercise command of the sea. Mahan believed that an international agreement upholding freedom of the seas would conflict with America’s new strategic interests. The American delegation was thus split.

The proposed American article was not as strong a declaration of neutral rights as the United States had favored in the past. It was to read as follows, “The private property of all citizens or subjects of the signatory powers, with the exception of contraband of war, shall be exempt from capture or seizure on the high seas or elsewhere by the armed vessels or by the military forces of any of the said signatory powers. But nothing herein contained shall extend exemption from seizure to vessels and their cargoes which may attempt to enter a port blockaded by the naval forces of any of the said powers.”²⁹

Still, this was very close to the affirmation of rights made by the Armed Neutrality of 1800 which Mahan had earlier written contesting the “maritime

claims upon which Great Britain conceived her naval power, and consequently her place among the nations, to depend.”³⁰ A new affirmation would do the same to undermine American naval power.

Mahan returned to this theme again in 1904 when President Theodore Roosevelt suggested that a second Hague conference be convened to discuss the protection of private property at sea. In a long letter to Roosevelt, Mahan, now an admiral, argued, “There is no more moral wrong in taking ‘private’ property than in taking ‘private’ lives; and I think my point incontestable, that property employed in commerce is no more private, in uses, than lives employed on the firing lines are private.”³¹

Mahan also argued, in anticipation of an Anglo-American alliance, that the United States had an interest in England exercising its traditional power at sea against trade. “Great Britain and the British Navy lie right across Germany’s trade with the whole world. Exempt it, and you remove the strongest hook in the jaw of Germany that the English-speaking people have—a principal gag for peace.”³²

He enclosed with the letter part of his *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, a work then in progress which was critical of the American commitment to neutral rights and which upheld the logic of the traditional British doctrine of sea control. Theodore Roosevelt had written his own book on *The Naval War of 1812* in 1883 in which he had defended the American position.

Mahan was supported in his revisionist views by most high-ranking naval officers, including Admiral Charles S. Sperry. Sperry was a former president of the Naval War College and future commander of Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet” during most of its global voyage. He was also America’s naval delegate to the Second Hague Conference. Asst. Secretary of State Alvey Adee and State Department Solicitor James Brown Scott also made Mahan’s argument to the President and to the Secretary of State, Elihu Root. In the end, Mahan’s views won the day with Roosevelt and Root concluding that it would not be in the national interest to push neutral rights at The Hague in 1907.³³

White attempted to rebut Mahan with a line with which he knew Mahan agreed. White argued that one of the lessons of the American Civil War was that commerce raiding is not a decisive strategy. That even if Union losses to Confederate cruisers “had been ten times as great, they would still have contributed nothing towards ending the contest . . . the only effective measure for terminating war by the action of a navy is the maintenance of a blockade” which the American proposal did not restrict.³⁴ What White’s argument did not consider was that technological progress had rendered obsolete the sort of close blockade of coasts and harbors as practiced in the days of sail. Mahan was also able to reply that there was a fundamental difference between the raiding strategy of the *guerre de cours* practiced by weak naval powers like the Confederacy and the strategy of total commerce

destroying which could be practiced by a powerful navy exercising comprehensive sea control. While White was correct in concluding that raiding was not a decisive strategy, he had failed to understand the difference between raiding and the total denial of the use of the seas which can be accomplished by naval supremacy.

The official American proposal stood between two eras. As a compromise it was bound to fail, for once the door was open to the realities of naval strategy, the old idealism of neutral rights could no longer be maintained. Mahan and most other American proponents of naval expansion recognized this contradiction and how it must be resolved. So, of course, did Fisher.

Fisher did more than defend the traditional strategy of the Royal Navy in his opposition to White. He continued his argument that in modern war, nations and their commanders will do what they must to win. After one debate over the status of neutral coal-carrying merchantmen, Fisher sketched an example of what he meant. "When I leave The Hague, I go to take command of the Mediterranean Fleet. Suppose that war breaks out, and I am expecting to fight a new Trafalgar on the morrow. Some neutral colliers try to steam past me into the enemy's waters. If the enemy gets their coal into his bunkers, it may make all the difference in the coming fight. I tell you that nothing that you, or any power on earth, can say will stop me from sending them to the bottom, if I can in no other way keep their coal out of the enemy's hands; for to-morrow I am to fight the battle which will save or wreck the Empire. If I win, I shall be far too big a man to be affected by protests about neutral colliers; if I lose it, I shall go down with my ship into the deep and then protests will affect me still less."³⁵

White found some support among the delegates from Sweden and Holland, states with long histories of drawing profits from neutral trade in wartime. The leader of the German delegation, Count Georg Münster, also said he would support the proposal, though White feared this was only a ploy to separate the Americans from the British. By the same token, the British, though opposed to the proposal, said that they would not oppose an open discussion and a vote on its merits in order to smooth over the split with the United States. The Germans, of course, had every strategic reason to favor anything which would limit British naval power. They were aware as were Mahan and Fisher of the Royal Navy's position across their trade routes.

The Russians, however, ruled the proposal out of order because it had not been on the original agenda. The Russians claimed that in principle they had supported the American position since 1823 and that their opposition now was only procedural. Yet, White believed that the real Russian motive was an attempt to keep faith with their French allies who did oppose the American plan.³⁶ In the end, the Russian objection carried the day and no vote was allowed.

The Third Committee dealt with the establishment of a Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. This was the principal achievement of the conference. Arbitration was the top priority of Ambassador White and he played a major role in working out a proposal the major powers could accept. No nation would allow issues of national honor or vital interest to be settled by arbitration. There was hope, though, that a first step could be taken to settle lesser disputes so that they would not escalate into matters of vital concern. However, the stumbling block was Germany, whose delegates would agree to nothing. White, as ambassador in Berlin, knew well the Kaiser's attitude. As a last effort he persuaded Count Münster to send one of his legal advisers, Phillip Zorn, back to Berlin with the secretary of the American delegation, Frederick Holls, to make a direct plea to Wilhelm II. The argument White used with the conservative German diplomat was that for the conference to fail on the arbitration issue would play into the hands of the socialists and anarchists who claimed that it was impossible for the existing governments of the Great Powers to curb war.³⁷ Though the Kaiser avoided seeing Holls and Zorn, their trip underscored the reports coming out of The Hague that Germany was diplomatically isolated on the issue. The Kaiser relented, though in private he maintained that "In practice, I shall rely on God and my sharp sword!"³⁸

White finally saw the way clear for establishment of an Arbitration Tribunal. But suddenly, once again he was confronted by Captain Mahan. "Diplomacy first, arbitration only in case of diplomacy failing" was the proposition as Mahan saw it, ". . . but diplomacy will fail more readily when one of the parties thinks it will gain substantially by insisting on arbitration . . . maintenance of policies such as the Monroe Doctrine must rest upon diplomacy and its instrument, armament; not upon law."³⁹

The French version of the arbitration convention, which was adopted, called upon the signatories to urge arbitration on other powers which were in dispute. Mahan pointed out that this was an obligation to intervene in the affairs of others which violated the premise of the Monroe Doctrine. Mahan threatened to split the delegation and refuse to sign if the offending article was not amended. Embarrassed at having to present a change in a proposal he had worked so long to hammer out, White nevertheless attempted to persuade the French to accept an amendment which reduced the requirement of third parties to intervene in disputes. He was rebuffed. White had to settle for the reading of a statement to the conference proclaiming that nothing in the convention would be allowed to entangle the United States in purely European questions or to countervene the Monroe Doctrine.

The United States joined 15 other states in signing the arbitration convention at The Hague and it was ratified by the US Senate in February 1900. Mahan continued to oppose arbitration as an alternative to diplomacy and war, writing letters and articles calling for a rejection of the arbitration

convention and publishing a book entitled *Armaments and Arbitration* in 1911. In it he expressed the fear that the growth of arbitration sentiment and international law would cause the civilized states to be reluctant to use force in defense of liberty, that “. . . it may lead men to tamper with equity, to compromise with unrighteousness, soothing their conscience with the belief that war is so utterly wrong that beside it no other tolerated evil is wrong.”⁴⁰

Admiral Fisher did not say much about arbitration during the debates at The Hague, because he felt that it was useless to talk about such matters. However, he expressed his views to the German naval delegate, Capt. S. Siegel between sessions. According to Siegel, “In the event of war in the Mediterranean, he would not hesitate for an instant to brush aside, without orders, any equivocal agreement reached about arbitration and mediation, if he was persuaded that the political and military position of his country called for this.”⁴¹

Arbitration courts and conferences like that of The Hague were “bad jokes” which would not survive the first salvo of war. Fisher also believed, as did the Admiralty, that the superior state of readiness at which the Royal Navy was maintained was a strategic advantage which could be lost during the delays imposed by a lengthy arbitration.⁴² In this, the British Navy’s argument matched the German Army’s argument—that calls for arbitration would be used as delaying tactics to offset its faster mobilization rate. Thus the arbitration issue saw two Anglo-American partnerships confronting each other. The two civilian heads of delegation, White and Sir John Pouncefote, in favor and the two naval delegates, Mahan and Fisher, opposed. The ambassadors won their point at The Hague, but it proved a victory on paper only.

The First Hague Conference accomplished virtually nothing toward the limitation of armaments. This is not surprising given the international environment and rivalries of the time. The conference did nothing to reduce the level of international tension which is the real cause of wars and arms races. The issues which split the major powers into warring camps were not even brought up for discussion. The year following the conference saw the Boer War and the new German Naval Law proposing the construction of 19 battleships and 23 cruisers be built over the next 20 years, further heating up the arms race at sea. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 was just over the horizon as was the series of crises which would eventually lead to World War I. In this sense, the first arms control conference set a pattern for subsequent efforts to limit weaponry—a pattern of *failure*. Diplomatic efforts which attempt to treat symptoms independent of causes are not likely to produce meaningful results.

A Second Hague Conference was held in 1907, the idea of President Roosevelt, though again the Russian Government was allowed to send the formal invitations to maintain continuity with the First Hague Conference. The

meeting was larger than that of 1899 with 44 nations sending 256 delegates. For the first time the nations of Latin America participated at the insistence of the United States. However, arms control was not even on the agenda. As President Roosevelt wrote to Whitelaw Reed, the US ambassador to the Court of St. James, in 1906: "It is eminently wise and proper that we should take real steps in advance toward a policy of minimizing the chances of war among civilized people, of multiplying the methods and chances of honorably avoiding war in the event of controversy, but we must not grow sentimental and commit some Jefferson-Bryan-like piece of idiotic folly such as would be entailed if the free people that have free governments put themselves at a hopeless disadvantage with military despotisms and military barbarians."⁴³

Roosevelt would support the Arbitration Tribunal as established at the 1899 Hague conference, as long as it did not weaken either the Monroe Doctrine or his commitment to American military strength. The first case which went to arbitration at The Hague was an old dispute between the United States and Mexico over church property dredged up by President Roosevelt in 1902 specifically to activate the tribunal. Yet, there were practical limits to what such measures could accomplish. As Roosevelt wrote to Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, "In The Hague, my chief problem will come from fantastic visionaries who are crazy to do the impossible. Just at present, the United States Navy is an infinitely more potent factor for peace than all the peace societies of every kind and sort."⁴⁴

The question of disarmament was brought up at the 1907 conference even though it was not on the agenda, but the discussion lasted less than 30 minutes and nothing was accomplished. The only significant arms limitations were the extension for another five-year period the ban adopted in 1899 on bombs dropped from balloons and some articles on the use of magnetic mines at sea and on naval bombardment of shore targets. None were adhered to once war broke out.

Perhaps the futility of The Hague Conferences can best be demonstrated by the mention of one fact. At the end of the Second Hague Conference a resolution was adopted to hold a Third Hague Conference. The year chosen: 1915!

Notes

1. David Woodward, *Armies of the World 1854-1914* (New York: Putnam, 1978), figures cited are for 1900.

2. Count Sergei Witte, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1921), pp. 96-97; Theodore H. Von Laue, *Sergei Witte and the Industrialization of Russia* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 156; William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1950) pp. 583-586.

3. Richard S. West, Jr. *Admirals of American Empire* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1948), p. 314.

4. The states participating were: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Persia, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Serbia, Siam, Spain, Sweden-Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States.

5. Calvin D. Davis, *The United States and the First Hague Peace Conference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 40-41.
6. Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 241.
7. Andrew D. White, *Autobiography* (New York: Century, 1904), v. II, p. 250.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
9. A. T. Mahan, "A Twentieth Century Outlook," *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897), pp. 177-178.
10. A. T. Mahan, "The Peace Conference and the Moral Aspect of War," *Lessons of the War with Spain and Other Essays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 230.
11. White, p. 346.
12. West, p. 314.
13. Letter to Joseph Chamberlain, 10 November 1900, Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), v. I, p. 165.
14. A. T. Mahan, "Possibilities for an Anglo-American Reunion," *Interest of America in Sea Power*, pp. 107-136.
15. Richard Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet: The Life of John Fisher* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 114.
16. James L. Stokely, *Navy and Empire* (New York: Morrow, 1983), p. 288.
17. Hough, p. 115.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 220.
21. Frederick W. Holls, *The Peace Conference at The Hague* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), p. 91.
22. Charles Carlisle Taylor, *The Life of Admiral Mahan* (New York: Doran, 1920), p. 99.
23. Davis, pp. 120-121.
24. Marder, p. 141. Letter to Capt. Wilmott H. Fawkes, 4 June 1899.
25. Holls, p. 119.
26. Mackay, p. 220.
27. Holls, p. 311.
28. Mahan, "Anglo-American Reunion," pp. 129-130.
29. White, p. 340.
30. A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire* (1892; reprint ed., New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), v. II, p. 37.
31. William E. Livzey, *Mahan on Sea Power* (Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 275.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
33. Davis, pp. 139-140.
34. Holls, p. 312.
35. Hough, p. 117.
36. White, p. 303.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
38. Tuchman, p. 266.
39. Holls, p. 272.
40. A. T. Mahan, *Armaments and Arbitration* (New York: Harper & Row, 1911), pp. 81-83.
41. Mackay, p. 221.
42. White, pp. 267-268; Mackay, p. 218.
43. Letter to Whitelaw Reid, 7 August 1906, Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), v. V, pp. 348-349.
44. Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 293.