

NAVAL ARMS CONTROL

by Ron Purver

INTRODUCTION

Although this paper was written in the fall of 1991, before such momentous events as the final dissolution of the USSR, the issues that it covers remain current, in that large standing naval forces continue to exist on both sides of the former East-West divide. In the Soviet case, it appears that the vast bulk of the Soviet Navy will be inherited by Russia, although a dispute continues with Ukraine over the disposition of the Black Sea Fleet. With the continued 'free-fall' of the former Union's economy, of course, the issue of the proliferation beyond its borders of various types of military equipment, including naval vessels, has become all the more urgent.

The world has witnessed truly breathtaking progress in many fields of arms control in recent years, especially between East and West. One area that has remained virtually untouched, however, despite repeated calls by the USSR and some Western analysts, is that of naval arms. Strategic nuclear weapons at sea, it is true, have fallen under the constraints of successive strategic arms limitation agreements. Tactical nuclear weapons at sea have begun to be addressed by the Bush-Gorbachev unilateral initiatives of September-October 1991. However, other categories of naval forces (known as "general-purpose forces") have largely escaped any such constraints. Why is this? What is the record of past attempts at naval arms control, and why has progress been so slow (or non-existent)? What are the prospects for future negotiated measures? Do some areas of naval arms control hold more promise than others?

HISTORICAL EFFORTS

Although often considered a relatively new field, naval arms control in fact has a long (and somewhat controversial) history. One of the world's oldest and most successful examples of arms control is the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817, which helped forestall a naval arms race between Britain and the US on the Great Lakes after the War of 1812. Other, lesser-known bilateral and multilateral agreements were negotiated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Argentine-Chilean Naval Pact of 1902 and the Greco-Turkish Naval Protocol of 1930. Some accords, such as the Montreux Convention of 1936 limiting non-littoral warships in the Black Sea, were relatively successful and long-lasting. Others, notably various restrictions on submarine operations, fared less well.

But the greatest experiment in naval arms control — in what amounted to the strategic weaponry of the time — was inaugurated by the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. Among other things, it set a tonnage ceiling on the capital ships of the US, Britain, Japan, France, and Italy (the five greatest maritime powers of the day), forcing the scrapping of no fewer than sixty-eight ships already built or under construction. It also limited modernization, imposing a ten-year moratorium (later extended to fifteen) on the construction of new capital ships, and stipulated that capital ships and aircraft carriers were to be replaced only after they had reached twenty years of age. Finally, ceilings were placed on the maximum displacement and gun size of classes

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