The years 1920/21 marked a major shift in Admiralty perspectives on the IJN. Pressures to retrench plus the possible non-renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance compromised Britain’s ability to constrain an expansionist Japan. In 1919 RN planners felt Japan could be disregarded as a threat ‘whether as an individual power or as a partner in any combination’ and the USN was the only navy that concerned them. However, in 1920 a shift occurred with the appointment of Beatty as First Sea Lord. He highlighted the enormous disparity in naval spending between the USA and Japan and later told the Prime Minister: ‘Japan’s naval power is almost as great a menace as that of the United States’. He then pointed out that Japan and the USA, having established a construction lead, would ‘thus relegate Great Britain to the third Naval Power’. This growing concern was underlined by the Admiralty’s refusal in 1920 to allow an IJN visit to the carrier Eagle or to provide a naval aviation mission. In January 1921, war plans drawn up against Japan suggested that long-range operations against Australia were unlikely, but that they might take Hong Kong either to keep or to bargain with and that seizing Singapore was possible but unlikely. The plans recommended a fleet larger than the Japanese main fleet to move to Singapore, provided fuelling arrangements were in place. The British Fleet was then to seek out and defeat it at the first opportunity and then, from Hong Kong or further north if captured, to implement a blockade and anti-submarine warfare strategy in order to bring Japan to its knees. In July, Beatty addressed the Imperial Conference on the need to plan for a war with Japan. He stated Japan would strike quickly once hostilities were declared, hitting Hong Kong first and then possibly Singapore and Borneo. Everything depended on the speed with which the British Fleet could reach the Far East, engage in a decisive battle, destroy the main Japanese Fleet, gain control of sea communications and then blockade Japan. Beatty stated that holding Singapore would eliminate all danger to Australia and New Zealand, noting Singapore was an important base for offensive operations against the IJN. Beatty felt a Singapore-based fleet merely to contain the IJN too risky, it had to destroy
their fleet. Beatty courted the Dominions, using Singapore as a means of easing their fears whilst attempting to obtain a greater contribution to Imperial naval defence. The official decision in 1921 to establish a major naval base at Singapore was costly, made necessary by the revolutionary shift from coal- to oil-burning ships, and required an expensive supply route. The bulging of ships also made existing docking facilities in the Far East obsolete. There were debates about where to site an appropriate harbour and fuel and repair base for the Fleet. Hong Kong was unsuitable and Sydney too distant to support offensive strategies. The Singapore concept emerged whilst the Alliance was still extant and renewal still possible. A Penang conference of the C-in-C of the China, East Indies and Australian Squadrons even suggested that a higher command be located at Singapore. The Singapore threat was not lost on Japanese policymakers and attaché reports from Japan suggested an orchestrated campaign against the base.

Before the Imperial Conference could agree on this, a call for a naval limitation conference came from Washington, necessitating a rethink in terms of the USN, the IJN and the Alliance. There seems to have been little naval preparation for Washington and preliminary meetings were discouraged by the Americans. With specific regard to Japan, they were to press for a ratio of 3:2 for GB (and the USA) and Japan based on equality of fleet plus a percentage to guarantee victory, a percentage because of the long distances involved and a percentage to leave some ships in European waters. They recommended the abolition of submarines, something Japan would not accept. The RN was prepared to give up Weihaiwei but needed to secure Hong Kong. They also hoped that Japan would accept no naval base further south than Formosa. Naturally the most important objective was to exclude Singapore from any discussion on fortifications. Chatfield feared upsetting either US or Japanese colleagues commenting ‘the Japs at any rate will try & claim us as their ally and friend’. The most important issue of all was, of course, the capital ship ratio. The RN required a ratio of 15:15:9:5:5, believing that by limiting Japan to nine and slowing her replacement rate would require a much smaller British naval force in the Pacific in the event of war, ‘cripple her [Japan’s] power of building navies in time of war’ and make the Singapore problem easier. Britain went along with American pressure to limit Japan to a 5:5:3 ratio whilst suggesting this ratio made Japan impregnable given the vast distances involved. Admiral Chatfield added that he would offer not to place a force in the Pacific equal to Japan, with this ratio. The British were sympathetic to Japan retaining the Mutsu. Britain also disagreed with Japan over armed merchantmen. Britain did manage to keep Singapore and dominion bases out of the fortification agreement, but the American agreement to non-fortification effectively eliminated their power in the Western Pacific thus contributing further to British concerns over Japanese naval power in the Pacific. The abrogation of the Alliance limited the British ability to constrain Japanese ambitions. The