Naval questions were one of the major issues at the heart of Anglo-Japanese relations in the inter-war period. Between 1921 and 1936, from Washington to London, naval limitation conferences, which Admiral Togo reportedly described as ‘wars without actually exchanging shells’, were focal points of this issue. They were one of the most important and time-consuming concerns for the Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN).

For Japanese foreign policy during the inter-war years the naval limitation question had a particular importance since it served as a barometer of the enthusiasm of the Japanese government for international co-operation and its commitment to ‘internationalism’, as opposed to the ‘unilateralism’ which came to characterize its policy in the 1930s. It was also a barometer to gauge the degree of civilian control over the military, which became increasingly difficult as the inter-war years progressed. For the Admiralty, naval limitation conferences were a sort of double-edged sword and, while they had to fight off the pressure from their civilian masters to reduce their strengths for financial or diplomatic reasons, they also saw and tried to use these conferences and international agreements on naval limitation as a means to achieve their objectives: the introduction of advantageous qualitative limitation and leverage to make the British government commit itself to certain building programmes. This essay examines the issues of naval limitation from 1921 to 1936 in the context of Anglo-Japanese relations, though some references will also be made to the Americans, since the issues were rarely bilateral and usually had a tripartite dimension. In the limited space available, it will not be possible to describe the proceedings of the naval limitation conferences nor present a comprehensive overview. It is an essay, focusing on selective aspects of the topic. Finally, there will be a brief analysis of the influence of intercept intelligence on naval conferences.

In 1920, prompted by Article 8 of the League of Nations Covenant (the so-called disarmament clause), the IJN set up a body called ‘The Study Group on the issues concerning the League of Nations’ (Kokusai-renmei kankei jiko...
kenkyu-kai), which examined the issues of naval limitation. Its first report stated that the maximum strength for the IJN should be 24 capital ships (8–8–8 fleet) and the minimum 16 (8–8 fleet).

One of the objectives of the IJN was to make the difference with the Anglo-Americans as small as possible by insisting on the principle of equality among sovereign countries. As for the actual measures of limitation, they expected that it would be unlikely that all countries would agree to a particular principle and that it would be a compromise between each country’s proposals. As the least objectionable means, they recommended fixing the number of capital ships and leaving other ships unlimited.\(^1\) The group produced another report in expectation of an imminent naval limitation conference proposed by the United States.\(^2\) The following two points were added: firstly, there would be no insistence on the 8–8 fleet as long as the balance with Britain and the United States was maintained; and secondly, there was an absolute necessity of having a naval strength greater than 70 per cent of the United States Navy.

In Britain, a strategic review had been going on in the post-First World War world. In June 1921, the decision was made in Cabinet to build a naval base in Singapore.\(^3\) In October, prior to the Washington Conference, a memorandum by the Admiralty was considered at the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), which generally accepted its argument.\(^4\) The memorandum stated that the main concern was ‘to ensure that Japan cannot develop a naval base any further to the southward than Formosa, thereby threatening the communications with Hong Kong, our most advanced naval base in the East, and generally bringing Japan nearer our vital interests in India and the Pacific.’ The safeguards for this purpose would be ‘an international guarantee of the territorial status quo in the Pacific and the reaffirmation of the terms of the Mandates for the ex-German Pacific Islands, whereby Japan is precluded from establishing a naval base in those islands for which she has accepted the Mandate.’ As for naval bases in Asia, Weihaiwei may be returned but Hong Kong is ‘a different matter’ and ‘without it, the whole Chinese coast would be at the mercy of Japan, and we should have no base whence to operate in the event of war with Japan’.\(^5\) As for the possible means of naval limitation, it concluded that limitation on the numbers of capital ships would be the only practical measure. In other words, they reached the same conclusion as their Japanese counterparts. Regarding the question of ratios,

To discount the great Navy which Japan is developing in the Far East we need a total naval strength equal to that of Japan, plus the percentage necessary to give reasonable certainty of success in battle, plus the percentage necessary to compensate us for the disadvantage of operating at a great distance from our main bases with the inadequate docking and repair facilities available in the Far East, plus the percentage necessary to