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Crisis Committee: The Admiralty

Introduction of the Topic

Since the Napoleonic Wars, Britain has reigned supreme as the premier naval power of Europe, and arguably the entire world. However, the world of the 19th century is moving at an incredibly fast pace, and the Royal Navy must keep up. Wooden ships of the line are still in living memory, yet the new face of naval warfare consists of massive steel battleships dwarfing anything the Royal Navy could have even thought of 50 years ago. New innovations in everything from navigation to metallurgy to explosives mean that even the newest ships rolling out of the dockyards could be rendered obsolete in less than a decade. Likewise, tensions are rising throughout the world. Old empires are slowly crumbling, leaving power vacuums in their wake, while rising powers seek to challenge and disrupt the status quo.

In this committee, delegates will represent a variety of politicians, military officers, scientists, and industrialists under the British Admiralty as Britain navigates an era of rapid technological development and increasing global tensions. Delegates will face a variety of political, military, and economic issues throughout the committee pertaining not just to the Royal Navy and the Admiralty, but the affairs of the entire British Empire and international developments as well.

Topic History

Naval Developments

In 1855, three French floating batteries, each covered in extensive iron plating, bombarded a Russian fortress into submission in southern Ukraine. Despite being targeted by dozens of guns, the ironclads emerged nearly unscathed, prompting navies around the world to begin developing what would become the first ironclads (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 61). When the French

under Louis Napoleon III laid down the *Gloire*, all wooden warships were rendered obsolete as the French started construction on ocean going ironclads impervious to all existing armaments. The British Empire, keen to maintain their naval hegemony, laid down HMS *Warrior* 14 months later, ushering in a new era of ironclad ships (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 74).

The success of littoral ironclads employed in large numbers both by the Union and the Confederacy in the American Civil War, most famously at the Battle of Hampton Roads, cemented the dominance of ironclad ships over wooden vessels (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 77). For the next several decades, there was a constant series of developments that quickly rendered previous vessels obsolete almost as quickly as they were designed, such as turrets, armored piercing shells, and advancements in gunnery, armor, and engines. At the end of the century, the rapid pace of naval advancements shows no sign of halting, and there are several promising fields of research that the British Empire can pursue.

Torpedoes

As with ironclads, torpedoes rose in prominence during the American Civil War, where the Confederacy develop a variety of underwater explosives and submarines to challenge the Union's naval supremacy and blockade, to limited success. (Burke, 2017, p. 17-18). These experiences were followed shortly thereafter by Robert Whitehead, who designed and improved the first self-propelled torpedo that could move on its own power, as opposed to the contact mines and spar-mounted explosives employed by the Confederacy (Burke, 2017, p. 33).

The invention of the self-propelled torpedo presented a projectile that could contain a far larger payload than any explosive shell and could detonate under a ship's waterline, causing severe

damage and flooding, even crippling a ship with a single torpedo. Navies in the 1870s and 1880s were quick to capitalize on the invention, developing the torpedo boat, a small, cheap vessel whose sole purpose was to launch torpedoes at enemy ships (Burke, 2017, p. 47). The cheap construction of a torpedo boat meant that a navy could afford to lose dozens of these torpedo boats in exchange for sinking a single battleship.

Because of the threat of torpedo boats, navies developed a whole array of countermeasures to protect their battleships and cruisers from the new threat of torpedoes. The 1890s saw the rise of the destroyer, a new ship class slightly larger than a torpedo boat that was armed with quick-firing guns to destroy torpedo boats and its own torpedoes to threaten any capital ship. In addition, new measures were also employed on new capital ships, such as redundant systems, better flood control and bulkheads, and torpedo nets, to mitigate the damage a torpedo could cause (Burke, 2017, p. 48-49).

Other Technologies

Although torpedoes are the most drastic example of a technological overhaul, almost every aspect of a ship is being revolutionized with the introduction of new technologies at a rapid rate. As guns became far heavier and could now fire at the very edge of human eyesight, navies developed new fire control systems, mechanical computers, and other instruments to better coordinate and aim these increasingly heavy armaments (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 183). In the naval review for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Sir Charles Algernon Parsons demonstrated the *Turbinia*, a boat that could go nearly ten knots faster than the fastest warships of the Royal Navy utilizing his newly invented steam turbine (de Courcy Ireland, 1954,

p. 7). In 1887, Heinrich Hertz demonstrated the feasibility of wireless communication, and his discovery has since been improved on by the likes of Guglielmo Marconi, who claims to be on the verge of a transatlantic radio broadcast (Gebhard, 1979, p. 5-6). The current method of communication is semaphores, but those only extend to visual range and currently rely on long relay networks of ships to communication across an entire fleet. Once wireless communication technology has reached, fleets can coordinate hundreds, if not thousands of miles apart, allowing for an unheard-of level of flexibility and coordination in fleet battles.

Doctrines

The rapid pace of technological development has meant that naval doctrine, or the overall strategy behind a navy, has not caught up with technology. The Royal Navy has not fought a major naval engagement since the Crimean War, and without valuable combat experience, the navy must turn to these doctrines and theoretical ideas to compensate for the lack of combat experience.

The predominant doctrine of the Royal Navy, along with most of the world's navies, is the Mahanian school of thought, which was codified by Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* in 1892. In his treatise, Mahan (1918) advocated for the idea of force projection and the idea of a decisive battle that will single-handedly end a war, citing examples such as the failure of Spain and France to decisively defeat the British navy in the Caribbean during the American Revolution and Tourville's failure to destroy the Anglo-Dutch fleet (p. 536). As a result, many nations started building large battleships and heavily armored cruisers that could both sail for thousands of miles and fight in large engagements as ships of the line, in line

with the key concepts of projection and a decisive battle that Mahan proposed in his analysis of naval history.

However, some theorists have developed doctrines running counter to the Mahanian school of thought, most notably with the French Navy's partial adoption of the *Jeune Ecole,* also known as the Young School. Under Admiral Théophile Aube's tenure as the French Minister of Marine from 1886 to 1887, the French Navy adopted a strategy focused on commerce raiding and coastal bombardment, with an emphasis on constructing large numbers of small ships (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 142).

Political Developments

The diplomatic scene at the turn of the century is one of rising and falling powers. The biggest geopolitical shift since the Napoleonic Wars has been the unification of Germany, under House Hohenzollern of Prussia. What was formerly a complex network of proxies beholden to the more unified empires neighboring Germany had unified, and in the span of five years, decisively defeated both the French and the Austrians, both of which were formidable powers (Clark, 2007, p. 552-553). The German economy also grew at a rapid pace and industrialized quickly, although for most of the late 19th century, Germany was content in their position as the premier land-based power in Europe. However, that changed with the coronation of Wilhelm II, who espoused a more expansionist and imperial foreign policy, which conflicted directly with British interests. As a result, the German navy increased substantially in size with the Naval Law of 1898 (St. John, 1971, p. 80-81). Furthermore, the doctrine of Weltpolitik meant that German imperial ambitions also ran counter to British interests, such as with the Boers, which Wilhelm II

gave nominal support to as the Boers fought against the British troops in South Africa (St. John, 1971, p. 79).

Outside of Europe, there are similar political developments. The two ascending powers outside of Europe are Japan and the United States, for different reasons. The United States had overseas ambitions in the early and mid-19th century, such as with the Monroe Doctrine, the securing of Pacific islands for the guano deposits, and the forcible opening of trade in Japan and China (Lafeber, 1986, p. 705). However, the US truly became a world power in the 1890s, after prominent intellectuals such as Alfred Thayer Mahan advocated for the US to expand its global presence in the interest of national security and the United States annexed vast swathes of overseas territory with the Spanish-American War and the annexation of the Hawaiian Republic (Lafeber, 1986, p. 707-708). Likewise, Japan also experienced a new political wave calling for overseas expansion as the Meiji Restoration ushered in a new wave of political thought alongside a rapid industrialization of the country. With the rapid progress that Japan had made, the political and military leadership now viewed their Asian neighbors as backwards and reactionary, and they decided to expand their influence in Korea and China to halt these reactionary forces, culminating in their unexpected victory over the Qing Dynasty in the Sino-Japanese War (Conroy, 1955, p. 826). Although both the United States and Japan are still relatively new players on the world stage, their new expansionist ideals and the industrial capacity to build a strong navy make them formidable allies or enemies.

At the same time, other powers are declining in prominence, and the fall of these empires may be a flashpoint for another great power conflict in the future. The first of these declining empires is the Ottoman Empire, which has slowly been burdened with debt and dealt a series

of defeats that have chipped away at its territory. Given the Ottoman Empire's geography, there are multiple competing great powers looking to take advantage of the Ottoman Empire's weakness in what is known as the Eastern Question. The Russians seek access through the Dardanelles, as to enable them to project power across the Eastern Mediterranean and gain unfettered trade access to the rest of the world, Great Britain wants to secure the Egypt and the Suez Canal, and a variety of powers have a vested interest in the Balkan regions formerly under Ottoman suzerainty (Marriott, 1969, p. 2-3). These interests often clash, and as the Ottoman Empire grows weaker, the chance for one of the interested powers to go to war over the Eastern Question increases.

Likewise, the Qing Dynasty faces a similar decline. In 1839, the British and the Qing clashed over the Opium trade in the First Opium War, which in a humiliating defeat as British ships easily outclassed the junks of the Qing navy. Soon after, other Western powers also employed their naval supremacy to gain territorial or economic concession from the Qing in a series of treaties known as the Unequal Treaties (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 36). China's decline was cemented by its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, when a modernized Chinese navy was decisively defeated by the Japanese in a series of pitched battles where Japan did not lose any ships. The defeat, along with the subsequent confiscation of all modern Chinese warships, relegated the Qing as a second-rate power even in East Asia, as an industrialized Japan became the greater power in the region (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 170-172). These humiliations by foreign powers also have resulted in a complex web of financial and territorial concessions, alongside the ambiguous fate of countries formerly under China's sphere of influence, such as Korea. As a result, commercial interests are often clashing in the area, and with the expansion of military bases, these

commercial conflicts may turn into larger diplomatic incidents with the potential to spark a war. In addition, an anti-foreign movement has emerged in China, calling itself the Boxers. The Qing are unable or unwilling to do anything to suppress the revolt, and the Boxers may soon threaten British concessions in the area if nothing is done (Sondhaus, 2012, p. 185).

Directive

Delegates in this committee will represent naval officers, bureaucrats, other government officials, and industrialists under the Admiralty or affiliated with it starting at the dawn of the 20th century. They will work to respond to naval technological developments, the naval buildup of foreign powers, economic issues, and the willingness of Parliament and public to fund the Royal Navy while maintaining historical accuracy to their positions.

Crisis Procedure

It is highly recommended that delegates research naval developments from 1860 onwards, starting with the launch of ironclads such as the HMS *Warrior*, the *Gloire*, and the ironclads of the American Civil War, as well as the international situation in the 1890s.

The first session of the committee will begin on January 1st, 1900. All directives will go through the backroom, which will represent the rest of the British government, including subordinates to the delegates, the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty not represented by delegates (such as the First Sea Lord), Parliament, and the Cabinet. Detail in personal and committee directives is encouraged! Although the backroom will adapt and interpret any ambiguous wording, it may not always be in the way you envisioned it!

The committee will follow a general timeline of events, but as a general crisis procedure, the backroom will adapt to the directives put forth by the delegates. Ultimately, the committee will be driven primarily by the actions of the delegates.

Note to the Delegates

Welcome to TechMUN 2023! I am Andy Yu, your Under Secretary-General Crisis, and on behalf of the Crisis staff, I want to say that we are excited to have you all on this committee! The topic is one that fascinates me ever since I developed a fascination with “big ships” visiting museum ships in San Diego, but it also is important in understanding the political context of the rest of the twentieth century, whether it be the naval arms races that escalated tensions leading up to World War I, the importance of naval treaties as precursors to modern disarmament treaties, and the rise of the modern military and the associated military-industrial complex. I look forward to seeing you all will rewrite history through your crisis arcs!

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me regarding any questions about this background guide, the topic, positions, or the conference in general.

From,

USG Crisis Andy Yu (ayu303@gatech.edu)

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