Building the Palace of Peace: The Hague Conference of 1907 and Arms Control before the World War

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“[H]ow much further and greater a step we could take in advance if for a single year this great country of ours should cry ‘Stop!’ to the building of battleships and devote the same amount of money to the erection … of a temple of peace, and show a confidence and a belief in our fellowmen all over the world.”¹


Retrospect – Copenhagen, August 1807

In August 1807, British diplomats desultorily withdrew to their man-of-war in Copenhagen harbor after unsuccessfully negotiating for control of the Danish fleet with representatives of the latter nation’s government. In the midst of a titanic struggle with Napoleonic France, the possession of the neutral Danish fleet would tip the naval balance of power decisively.²

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¹ Address of Henry M. Leipziger, as quoted in Report of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Mohonk Lake Conference on International Arbitration 1905, 121, 122 (1905).

² J.H. Rose, “Canning and Denmark in 1807”, 11 English Historical Review 82, at 86 (1896).
Canning government concluded national interests must override international law. In early September, the long line of British ships, which had stood unceremoniously at the entrance to Copenhagen since the previous July, just as unceremoniously opened fire on the peaceful and stationary Danish squadron sheltered at their berths, slowly reducing them to hulks of charred wood. The British then turned their guns landward. Aided by artillery landed by British marines, the British fleet began the systematic destruction of the harbor and populous city. Copenhagen lay in ruins within a week. Fearing further loss of life, the Danish government concluded an armistice, under the terms of which the majority of Denmark’s navy was to be taken into captivity, manned, and sailed away by the conquering British force. On an early morning in October, as the night fog was lifting from the sea, a long line of ships began its exodus from Danish territory. A total of fifty six ships filed out of the harbour under the guns of their British escort, crossed the Sund and vanished into the horizon, beginning their long captivity. Thus was ended through the blunt and unilateral application of force, a strategic arms controversy that diplomacy failed to resolve.

The Hague, August 1907

Having put off discussion of the contentious issue through much of the summer negotiations, delegates at the Second Hague Peace Conference awkwardly shuffled papers as Sir Edward Fry took the floor. The topic of arms control had been studiously avoided by international lawyers and diplomats alike, but the British delegation would not forgo the opportunity to open discussions. As members of the German foreign office had prepared their government’s official position on arms control for the conference to be held at The Hague in the centennial summer of the action at Copenhagen, perhaps anxieties of a preemptive strike were borne in mind when negotiating with a British government intent on limiting expenditure on naval armaments.


4) It should also be pointed out that circumstances in 1807 and 1907 were greatly different, in that at the earlier date, Great Britain had been at war intermittently for fifteen years, while in 1907 the empire had been at peace, at least in Europe, for fifty one years. Nonetheless,