

The 1936 London Naval Treaty

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The 1936 London Naval Treaty (LNT36), signed on 25 March 1936, tied the British Empire, the United States, and France to a set of quantitative limits which covered all classes of major warships. Italy acceded to LNT36 in 1938,¹ and Russia and Germany entered bilateral naval agreements with Britain on 17 July 1937, which broadly mirrored the LNT36 restrictions, leaving Japan alone among the major naval powers outside the LNT36 framework.

A key feature of the treaty was the introduction of a “no-construction zone” whereby before 1 January 1943, no capital ships could be laid down with a standard displacement of less than 17,500 tons, or with a main armament of less than 10-inch guns,² and no cruisers could be laid with a displacement of more than 8,000 tons, or with a gun of more than 6.1-inches in caliber.³ The objective of these restrictions was to protect the qualitative limits agreed for cruisers—otherwise vessels could have been built which by definition could have been categorized as capital ships but which were, in reality, superior cruisers.⁴

In order to extend the LNT36 framework even further, Britain initiated a series of bilateral negotiations with the lesser naval powers of Europe. Within days of the signing of LNT36, the British representatives in Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Spain, and Sweden were being asked to discuss the potential for general adoption of the terms of LNT36 with their host governments,⁵ and over the ensuing months and years before the outbreak of World War II bilateral negotiations along similar lines were also held with the Governments of Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Poland, and Finland. The negotiations essentially took a standard form—the basic text of LNT36 was adapted for each proposed agreement, and the corresponding nation invited to sign up to essentially identical terms as all of the other participants in the process.

Britain raised the proposal to negotiate bilateral naval agreements with the delegations of the four Scandinavian nations—Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland—in Geneva in mid-1936,⁶ and talks were convened at the the British Foreign Office in September 1936. The major warships of the principal Scandinavian navies had

traditionally been coast-defence battleships; relatively slow ships approximately the size of a cruiser with a few heavy guns. All four Nordic nations presented requirements for replacement ships that fell within the “no-construction zone” articulated in LNT36.⁷ Finland reported the two *Ilmarinen* class ships built in 1930 were too slow, and might want the next ships built to have a speed of 28 knots and be fitted with guns of only 8 inches. Denmark did not want to build ships as fast as cruisers, but 10-inch guns were too big, and 6-inch guns were too small for Danish requirements. Norway was proposing building four replacement ships of less than 8,000 tons with 8-inch guns, and Sweden was reserving the right to build ships as large as 10,000 tons with guns of between 8 and 10 inches in caliber.

The Scandinavian claims to be able to build ships that were clearly best suited to their requirements had considerable merit and were difficult to refuse. Existing vessels were no match for conventional battleships employed by the major navies, and by themselves had little impact on the overall balance of naval power. But the threat existed the next generation of Scandinavian coast-defence battleships might be faster vessels that could prompt Germany and/or Russia to build further ships of the “pocket battleship” type and bring about a serious rupture in the global qualitative limitation regime Britain was attempting to establish.

Britain offered a compromise proposal, whereby the Nordic nations would be able to build a limited number of non-conformant ships during the life of LNT36 (i.e. before 1943). If ships were limited to 8,000 tons and armed with guns of 10 or 11 inches, then the inherent trade-offs associated with naval design would ensure the resulting ships would be slow and best suited to coastal operations. However, the British insisted if the ships were only armed with 8-inch guns, they should be speed limited to 25 knots in order to differentiate them from cruisers.⁸ The initial meetings held from 15–17 September produced the proposed limits summarised in Table 1, although Sweden recorded a reservation in respect of a forthcoming commission into naval armaments.⁹

Sweden had significant concerns about the speed

Table 1: Proposed limits for Scandinavian Coast Defence Ships

NATION	MAXIMUM NUMBER	MAXIMUM DISPLACEMENT (TONS)	MAXIMUM SPEED (KNOTS)	GUN CALIBRE
DENMARK	4	8,000	25	X ¹⁰
FINLAND	4	8,000	25	8-10 IN.
NORWAY	4	8,000	25	7-9 IN.
SWEDEN	6	8,000	25	X

restriction—specifically arising from the intention of the Soviets to build as many as seven heavy cruisers armed with 7.1-inch guns.¹¹ The speed limit was ultimately rejected by the Scandinavians, and they continued to press for an exemption clause to allow the building of 8,000-ton ships with guns of between 8-10 inches. Such a clause was effectively a license to build heavy cruisers,¹² and this was unacceptable to Britain. Britain therefore stalled the negotiations until after Anglo-Soviet and Anglo-German agreements had been ratified. On 18 January 1938, the final meeting endorsed a new formula which allowed each of the Nordic countries to build 24,000 tons of armored ships of 8,000 tons or less, and armed with guns of between 8 and 10 inches.¹³ A further deviation from the terms of LNT36 allowed the Scandinavian countries to convert old armored ships into submarine or destroyer depot ships, after which they could be classified as auxiliary vessels in spite of their retention of armor plating.¹⁴

Although the agreement was still unsigned, when Chile attempted to order 8,700-ton 8-inch gun cruisers from Finland and/or the Netherlands in 1938, the draft was used by the British to put considerable pressure on Finland to prevent a Finnish shipyard from constructing the proposed ships, and on Sweden to prevent Bofors from constructing 8-inch guns for the ships proposed for construction in the Netherlands.¹⁵

The US, France, and Germany approved the draft text of the agreement just before Munich;¹⁶ however the Soviets raised an issue with the agreement making no provision for Britain to inform all nations with which Britain had entered a similar treaty should any of the Scandinavian nations inform Britain they were exercising their right to build vessels exceeding the treaty limit for light cruisers during the term of the Treaty. The Soviets were concerned information on heavy cruisers it provided to the United Kingdom under the Anglo-Soviet Naval Agreement might be passed on to the Scandinavian nations without reciprocity, however Britain gave the requested assurance this would not occur.¹⁷

The final agreement was signed on 21 December 1938, and ratified by Norway.¹⁸ In the Danish Parliament, the agreement was criticized by the pro-German Conservative Party spokesman on the grounds it imposed on Scandinavian countries a quantitative restriction, without imposing any corresponding obligation on the part of Great Britain.¹⁹ Sweden decided against ratification in 1939 using the German denunciation of AGNA35 as a pretext,²⁰ and in May 1939 the Swedish Parliament voted to build two new coast defense ships.²¹ Britain belatedly concluded strengthening the Swedish Navy, rather than disarmament, was in Britain's best interests, and the matter was quietly dropped.²²

Notwithstanding the demise of the Treaty, Scandinavian building plans prior to the outbreak of World War II appear to have conformed to its intent. In 1939, Denmark was planning two ships of 5,730 tons armed with four 10-inch guns and a speed of 20 knots,²³ while the new Swedish

vessels ordered in 1939 were of 8,000 tons, armed with four 10-inch guns, and would have had a speed of 23 knots.²⁴

Notes

1. Exchange of notes regarding the accession of Italy to the Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armament, signed at London, March 25th, 1936, Rome, April 16, 1938, appended to Agreement regarding questions of mutual concern consisting of a protocol and annexes, signed at Rome, April 15, 1938, and Exchanges of Notes relating thereto of the same date, and declaration bringing into Force these instruments, signed at Rome, November 16, 1938 [1939] LNTS 42; 195 LNTS 77.
2. LNT36, Articles 4(3)-(4).
3. LNT36, Article 6(1). Note there were limited exceptions to the heavy cruiser prohibition for Germany and Russia.
4. CMD5137.
5. Craigie to HM Representatives at The Hague, Copenhagen, Oslo, Madrid, and Stockholm, 6 May 1936, *Archives New Zealand: N 1 22/4/21*. Memo on the Proceedings and results of the Naval Conference, May 1935, TNA: ADM 116/3376. Craigie minute, 25 March 1936, TNA: ADM 116/3928.
6. Holman to Watson, 29 July 1936, NAA: A981/4, TRE 232.
7. J.A. Maiolo, 2004, *Naval Armaments Diplomacy in Northern Waters: The Origins of the Anglo-Scandinavian Naval Agreement of 21 December 1938*, in R. Hobson & T. Kristiansen (eds), 2004, *Navies in Northern Waters, 1721-2000*, Frank Cass Publishers, Portland, pp. 198-199.
8. Ibid.
9. Record of the Conclusions reached during the Naval Discussions between Representatives of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK from September 15-17 1936, NAA: A981/4, DIS 27 PART 3.
10. The character 'X' was included in the table in the agreed record of the meeting. The meaning of this character is not clear.
11. Eden to Greenway, 23 Nov 1936, NAA: A981/4, DIS 27 PART 3.
12. Which is exactly what Sweden was planning to do in 1937—build 8,000-ton armoured cruisers with a speed of 29 knots, and an armament of six 8.2-inch guns. BR. Hallenius, 1979, Question 5/78, *Warship International*, 16 (1), pp. 83-86.
13. Record of a Meeting with the Scandinavian Delegates on 18 Jan 1938, TNA: FO 371/21536.
14. Holman to Cahan, 23 Jun 1938, TNA: FO 371/21537.
15. Foreign Office Minute, 20 Jul 1938, TNA: FO 371/21436.
16. Maiolo, p. 204.
17. Cahan to Beith, 1 Oct 1938, Foreign Office to Cahan, 5 Nov 1938, TNA: FO 371/21537.
18. See <https://naval-arms-control-archives.sites123.me/documents?limit=12&page=4> for the full text of the agreement.
19. British Legation Copenhagen to Foreign Secretary, 9 Mar 1939, TNA: FO 371/22823.
20. British Legation Stockholm to Foreign Office, 5 Jun 1939, TNA: FO 371/22823.
21. A. Berge, 1983, *The Swedish Navy in the Interwar Period: Strategic Thinking at a Cross Roads*, *Militärhistorisk Tidskrift*, 187, p. 107.
22. P. Salmon, 1997, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 335.
23. G. Paloczi-Horvath, 1996, *From monitor to missile boat: coast defence ships and coastal defence since 1860*, Conway Maritime Press, London, p. 86. R.S. Steensen, 1963, *Vore Panzerskibe 1863-1943*, Marinhistorisk Selskab, Copenhagen, 448. Gard reports the proposed ships as 7,000-ton vessels with a speed of 18 knots. B. Gard, 1966, "Scandinavian Coast Defense ships. Part 2: Denmark," *Warship International*, 3 (3), 208-215.
24. *Janes Fighting Ships, 1940*, 428; C. Borgenstam & E. Gradelius, 1996, "Projected Swedish Coast Defense Ships," *Warship International*, 33 (3), 312-315.

