

China and the Origins of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance

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ABSTRACT

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British imperial policy in East Asia during the latter decades of the 19th century was informed primarily by a strategic agenda. It was focused on preventing Russia from gaining control of ports or population centers on the periphery of the Eurasian landmass. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, this paper will argue that Britain's initial interest in East Asia was primarily economic, by 1895 both diplomatic and economic policy had been thoroughly subsumed by strategic imperatives. However, by that same decade British resources were stretched maintaining security commitments at a variety of points around the globe. A new imperial contest in East Asia presented fresh challenge to these already strained budgets. An alliance with a technologically modernizing Japan represented an effort by both Britain and Japan to limit Russian expansion, and to prevent any future conflict that did break out from spreading into a global conflagration.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance was a strategic agreement designed to prevent an expansionist Russia from gaining access to major population centers and warm water ports. The agreement cannot be properly understood without reference to China, which after 1895 was perceived as too weak to defend its own borders and thus became a target for Russian territorial ambition. As both Britain and Japan stood to lose in a variety of ways from Russian expansion into Korea or dominance of large areas of mainland China, the strategic rationale for their partnership long predated the actual conclusion of an alliance.

Previous work on this subject has tended to focus too narrowly on specific factors which contributed either to the alliance directly, or to the circumstances which made the alliance possible. Authors such as P. J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins have tended to focus exclusively on the financial dimension of British policy in East Asia, largely neglecting the real and ultimately dominate strategic agenda which informed policy decisions in the region. Ian Nish on the other hand tends to approach the alliance as a product of elite diplomatic maneuvering, focusing on the interpersonal relationships which made the alliance possible rather than larger forces driving their decisions. Military historians such as G. A. Ballard have also addressed the topic, but have tended to portray events as a series of technological and military conflicts only distantly related to the evolution of higher policy.

This work will argue that while finance, diplomacy, and armed conflict all informed the decision to enter into the 1902 alliance, they were contributing factors to a shared Anglo-Japanese policy to contain the Russian state to the interior of the Eurasian landmass. Strategic concerns were what prompted increasingly explicit commitments to regional stability, including the possibility of armed conflict between European powers. If East Asia was merely the latest theatre of this contest for the British, and the only one for Japan, that does not diminish the similarity of their agendas.

Britain had originally sought influence in East Asia to pursue new commercial markets, but by 1870 East Asia had become a theatre of strategic competition between Britain and Russia for control of the Eurasian landmass. In 1904, British geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder clearly stated the policy goals which had implicitly guided British policy in East Asia throughout the 19th century: checking the emergence of any Russian advantage with regard to population centers along the Eurasian periphery, to say nothing of direct access to the oceanic communications upon which British world power depended.¹

The contest had begun in the Near East in the Ottoman Empire, continued in the territories of Persia and Afghanistan, finally extending to East Asia. The Sino-Japanese war in 1894-5 made the weakness of the Chinese state apparent to all. Fearing that their Great Power rivals would attempt to turn that weakness to their own advantage, the British were prepared by 1900 to contemplate a Great Power conflict to protect the

¹ See Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, National Defense University Press ed. (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1942).

integrity of Chinese territory.² As elsewhere around Eurasia, their most likely adversary was Russia.

However, East Asia was the distant end of both British and Russian supply lines, making it the least accessible theatre for both parties and requiring significant new transport infrastructure if it was to be brought within easy reach. To minimize expenses and provide political cover, the contest for influence was conducted with commerce, diplomacy, and bank loans as far as possible.³ The British were even prepared to tacitly acknowledge a Russian sphere of influence in Manchuria, provided the Russians respected a tacit British sphere which would have had the effect of containing the Russians in Northern China.⁴ Their agreement failed to stabilize the region. Russia proved unwilling to compromise its vision of an East Asian empire. Britain proved unwilling to sanction Russian domination of such a large territory and population. It is in the context of this struggle that Britain made its first alliance with Japan, a nation which had revolutionized its economy and military in a few brief decades.

By the 1890's Japan was able to fight for its own interests in East Asia, and by 1900 to contain the Russians in the Eurasian heartland with their own resources and for their own reasons. Britain had found that it lacked the resources to pursue a medium sized conflict in South Africa and safely guard its various global interests. Britain was thus prepared to seek a formal alliance in East Asia. The alliance was a delicate balance,

² *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from The Foreign Office Confidential Print*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed. Part I, Series E, *Asia: 1860-1914* Vol. 24 Ian Nish ed. document 202, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 118.

³ Frank H. H. King, *The Hong Kong Bank in Late Imperial China, 1864-1902: On An Even Keel*, vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 15-17

⁴ Keith Wilson, *The International Impact of the Boer War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 158-9.

geared to preserve the territorial integrity of China, minimize the danger to Britain of being pulled into a global war in East Asia, and to minimize the danger of a European coalition forming against Japan in the event of a regional war between the Japanese and Russia.⁵

The alliance Great Britain signed in 1902 was its first since the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. The 19th century was dominated by shifting alliances between the great powers of Europe, but Britain had not taken part. British European policy aimed to prevent any single power from dominating the continent, by allowing the British to swing the balance of a major conflict there. Abroad, Britain's industrial economy ensured that its manufactured goods dominated foreign markets first in textiles, and later in heavier goods such as steel.⁶ As a result, British policy was to maintain open sea lanes and open markets. Britain's initial policy goals in East Asia were economic in nature, intended to open the region's markets to British goods with as little regulation as possible.

Authors such as P.J. Cain, A.G. Hopkins, and Niall Ferguson have asserted that the British Empire which emerged in the years after 1815 was fundamentally an economic project.⁷ Ferguson argues that the British economy was the star which guided imperial policy, while Cain and Hopkins argue, less plausibly, that the imperial policy of Great Britain was little more than a mechanism to funnel money into aristocratic pockets.

⁵ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 178.

⁶ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, (London and New York: Longman, 1991), 9.

⁷ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, 2nd ed., (Harlow: Essex, Longman, 2001), 29-31., Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, Paperback ed., (New York: Basic Books, 2004), see chapter one.

Certainly, Britain had strong economic motives for creating its global trading network, but over time, in places like India and South Africa, British trading rights could only be protected by entering into local security commitments. If the empire had a powerful economic dimension, any attempt to portray it as purely economic is strikingly incomplete.

The 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance was created to pursue strategic goals, and cannot be fully understood in purely economic terms. While British interest in East Asia had begun with the pursuit of markets in China and later Japan, those markets remained marginal to British trade, even if India came to rely on opium sales to China to prop up its balance of payments.⁸ At the beginning of the 19th century, China remained a minor economic market at the distant end of Europe's trade routes and seemed of little strategic value.⁹ This explains why the Opium and Arrow Wars were limited coastal operations, conducted on a shoestring, and aimed at extracting limited economic rather than more direct territorial concessions.

As other nations began to industrialize they were able to present significant challenges to British predominance. While France and Germany presented real and serious challenges at different times and in different ways, Russia was the power which seemed the greatest and most consistent threat to British interests. Committed to protecting waterways and territories around the globe, the very scope of British interests became a vulnerability, particularly in a contest for influence against the aggressively

⁸ Cain and Hopkins, 362-3.

⁹ Ibid., 363.

expansionist Russians, whose position at the center of the Eurasian landmass shortened their communication lines and made direct assault difficult if not impossible.¹⁰

The rise of Tsar Nicholas II marked an aggressive shift in Russian policy. It combined expansionist diplomatic maneuvering with a massive railway project intended to link Siberia to industrial and population centers in the western part of the country.¹¹ A major Russian military presence in East Asia would have been a serious threat to British interests. The construction of an installation from which Russia might stage significant armies, or worse, operate a year-round naval base, would threaten the balance of power in East Asia and might have far wider consequences. A major Russian naval presence would require a matching British commitment to protect the Pacific theater. In time, Russia might aim to incorporate some, or all, of China into its already vast territory. A Russian-dominated China would utterly unmake the global balance of power. With the additional population and resources, not to mention the enormous warm water coastline, Russia threatened to become uncontrollable.

The British gained solace from the belief that China remained a significant military power.¹² China remained the center of a vast, if fraying, empire which had dominated East Asia for millennia. Despite abundant contrary evidence of rampant corruption, widespread unrest, and plainly demonstrated military inferiority, racist attitudes ascribed these shortcomings to inherent ethnic differences rather than decaying

¹⁰ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, 1st paperback ed., (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 138-9.

¹¹ Andrew Malozemoff, *Russian Far Eastern Policy 1881-1904: With Special Emphasis On the Causes of the Russo Japanese War*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 62.

¹² S.C.M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-4.

political and military institutions. Maintaining this attitude toward China required considerable mental agility, as Japanese society presented Western observers with a very different example of East Asian society, undertaking a deliberate and successful program to industrialize their economy and equip modern military forces.¹³

In *The Sino-Japanese War 1894-5*, S.C.M. Paine argues the 1894-5 conflict between Japan and China was the critical event that destabilized East Asia.¹⁴ The destruction of China's navy, and most of her modern ground forces, did make it easier for Western powers to pursue territorial claims within its boundaries, but the scale of the Japanese victory would have been impossible had they not been fighting a military organization fundamentally corrupted by years of systematic neglect. Japan did not so much create a new balance of power in East Asia as reveal the one which had already been in existence for years. As a number of contemporary press sources suggest, the most significant result of the first Sino-Japanese war was the destruction of the idea of China as a great power.¹⁵

As British Foreign Office documents make clear, once the European powers realized that China could not defend its borders, the character of their dealings with Chinese officials became more aggressive. It is clear from these documents that financial institutions such as the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation both facilitated private trade and served as conduits for political influence. Indeed, trade agreements had

¹³ For example, see, W.G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), Chapter 4.

¹⁴ Paine, 3.

¹⁵ For example, see, "Chinese Accept War," *The New York Times*, 3 August 1894, p. 5., "Planning A March On Peking," *The New York Times*, 29 August 1894, p. 3.

¹⁵ Paine, 175.

always contained an implicit strategic dimension, but after 1895 investments in infrastructure, bank loans, and western-dominated customs houses became thinly veiled markers of foreign influence, delineating shadowy imperial claims.

So long as the contest for East Asian influence was primarily a financial one, Britain was prepared to tolerate the competition for influence by other powers such as Russia and Germany. It was not until the Russians demonstrated overt territorial ambitions inconsistent with Chinese independence that the British turned to a military alliance which, had it ever been invoked, would have resulted in a conflict that would not have been localized to East Asia.

If all of these general, regional trends contributed to the circumstances of the Anglo-Japanese treaty in 1902, a specific set of events made the alliance possible. Ian Nish deals extensively with the specific antecedents to the treaty. In British eyes, Japan occupied a unique position by the turn of the century. Japan had consciously remodeled its society on a hybrid Western model, combining an apparently Westernized governmental system with a regionally limited imperialist foreign policy which did not threaten British interests. Japan had also taken steps to successfully modernize its military. Being an archipelago, Japan relied on its navy to project its influence, and it was the only modern navy on the planet which saw East Asian waters as its primary theatre of operation.

Japanese foreign policy also contributed to the alliance. Japan conducted its foreign policy with the specific intent of impressing on Western societies the degree to which its reforms had prepared it to join the ranks of modern imperial states. Japan had

distinguished itself restoring order during the Boxer rebellion, where it dispatched a large contingent of troops at its own expense into the vicinity of Beijing, and had then withdrawn them without attempting to seize territory.¹⁶ Although it entertained a wider imperial vision for itself, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Japanese ambition was focused on Korea.

Korea in the late 19th century occupied an unenviable geographic position, finding itself the point of intersection between the imperial ambitions of China, Russia, and Japan. After 1895, China was really no longer in the hunt, which focused and accelerated the competition between the remaining contenders. Japan felt that control of Korea was vital to its national security, while Russia had a defensive interest in keeping any other power away from its Siberian holdings, and the positive goal of securing Korea's ports. While the British had earlier concluded that it made little difference whether Korean politics tilted toward Beijing or Tokyo, keeping Russia away from Korea's excellent ports was a priority of the first order. Indeed, as the 1902 treaty makes clear, in the final analysis it was a goal Britain would use force to achieve.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance was informed by a variety of global and regional factors which had the effect of transforming Britain's East Asian agenda from a focus primarily on trade to a focus primarily on geostrategy. Britain, strained by the global breadth and increasing cost of the security commitments necessary to protect its economic order, saw in Japan a competent regional power with ambitions that seemed compatible with Britain's. Japan hoped to gain formal recognition of the progress it had

¹⁶ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed., Part I Series E, Asia: 1860-1914 Vol. 24 Ian Nish ed. document 337, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 204-8.

made since the Meiji Restoration, as well as an ally with the sort of global influence that would deter humiliating diplomatic browbeatings such as the Three Power intervention.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH PREDOMINANCE IN EAST ASIA

The British first arrived in East Asia at a period in the 19th century when they were near the peak of their military and economic influence around the world. Their policy goals at the time were overwhelmingly economic, reflecting assumptions about the nature of Chinese power and the relative absence of serious strategic rivals. That said, the British were not without rivals, particularly the Russians, who enjoyed a preexisting trade relationship with the Chinese that would suffer greatly from British competition. However, the primary obstacle to British policy was the Qing government which ruled China, and their efforts to regulate foreign trade. The market access the British forced them to concede by 1870 would undermine the central authority of an already faltering government, and would contribute significantly to the destabilization of the Chinese state, making what had once seemed a relatively stable part of the world a battleground for great power rivalries.

Great Britain emerged from the Napoleonic wars a nation energized and transformed by the conflict. The British had fought Napoleonic France, without interruption, from 1803-1814, but the great turning point had come with the destruction of the French fleet at Trafalgar. Great Britain used the resulting naval superiority to capture French possessions in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. However, the real advantages of control of the seas would prove to be economic.

The expense of equipping armies, the pillage of marauding soldiers, and the indemnities Napoleon had levied against the wealthy to fuel his war machine had greatly disrupted Europe's economies. The continent was then bled white by the imposition of the Continental System in 1807, an economic program which sought primarily to deny British merchants the use of European ports, and secondarily to pursue a sort of autarky on the continent, although in practice this second point amounted to a restructuring of tariffs to favor French interests.¹⁷ Napoleon had launched the continental system with brave words about giving European industry an opportunity to develop without fear of British competition. While this certainly wasn't his primary aim, he probably did believe that after some initial dislocation, Europe would begin to produce for itself what it could no longer import from abroad. The reality was grim. Cut off, not just from British manufactured goods, but from much of the global trade network laboriously constructed over the preceding three centuries, the European economy was forced to find domestic sources for products it was long accustomed to importing or do without them. In effect, the continent was plunged back to a trading landscape unknown in Europe since 1400. Continental economies stagnated, and then began to revert to subsistence over the next seven years. In major continental ports, merchant and fishing fleets crumbled in dry dock.¹⁸ As markets imploded, nascent continental industrial movements withered. The precise dimensions of the economic damage are difficult to calculate, but they probably set continental economies back a generation behind that of Great Britain.

¹⁷ Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 406.

The British response was to impose a counter-blockade, declaring that any vessel approaching French-controlled Europe would be sunk if it was not sailing under the Union Jack. The unintended consequence of this economic struggle would be the crippling of early-industrial economies across continental Europe, while the British economy flowered at the center of a growing network of international trade.

Indeed, the war had already been good for the British economy before 1807, as captured French possessions had opened new markets to British industrial goods.¹⁹ In 1809, Britain reported record high export levels, which continued to improve into the next year.²⁰ Expansion overseas coincided with an aggressive extension of domestic transport infrastructure as roads, bridges, canals, and especially railroads spread across the British landscape.²¹ At war's end, the British economy would be larger than those of all of continental Europe combined.

Further, the victory over Napoleon was seen as a moral victory, one which had demonstrated the superiority of British institutions and culture.²² Although the effects would take some time to manifest, many facets of British society were subsequently viewed in a new light, not least the empire. Before the war, the empire had been run largely as a multifaceted exercise in generating, or stealing, wealth by whatever means were expedient. In the 19th century, the empire would also be seen as a national institution for transmitting British cultural and legal traditions to other parts of the

¹⁹ Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How The British Navy Shaped the Modern World*, First Harper Perennial Edition, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 402.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 406.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 413.

²² Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 2-3.

world.²³ As restrictive mercantilist policies were replaced by Liberal economic thinking, the oceans would serve to link together a vast network of colonies and trade stations. Without other great power competitors the British were able to impose their economic institutions across large areas of the globe, and by the end of the fighting in 1815 maps of British territory understated the actual scope of British influence.

However, the British were not the only ones to emerge from the Napoleonic Wars with a new sense of their place in the world. Alexander I, Tsar of Russia, had completed the Great Patriotic War convinced that God had specially appointed him to defeat the Napoleonic antichrist. The impressive conduct of Russia's armies throughout the fighting, and the fact that the Tsar maintained a standing force after the war of almost a million men, greatly increased European opinion of Russian military potential. In many ways perceived as possessing the landed equivalent of the British Navy, the erstwhile allies would find themselves engaged in an increasingly bitter competition for influence, territory, and trade for the remainder of the 19th century.

David Gilliard argues that enmity between the Russians and Great Britain which spread across Eurasia was not inevitable, citing the British emphasis on the balance of power within Europe, their relative indifference to Russian expansion throughout the 1820's, and the very different conceptions of the two nations' imperial policies.²⁴ While it is true that Anglo-Russian relations were relatively amicable in the early years of the 19th century, for them to have remained that way would have required the Russians to have been content holding territory in the heartland of central Asia, rather than pursuing a

²³ Niall Ferguson, 93.

²⁴ David Gilliard, *The Struggle for Asia 1828-1914: A study in British and Russian imperialism*, (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1977), 18-20.

foreign policy geared toward expansion and the acquisition of a major warm water port.

In short, it would have required those who administered the Russian state to re-conceptualize their own roles and their states' basic policy objectives.

Rather, policymakers in Russia during the 19th century were informed by intellectual currents of pan-Slavism and a vision of a Russian "manifest destiny" directed across Asia. Historians such as Mikhail P. Pogodin and Vasiliy O. Klyuchevsky painted Russian history as a series of imperial conquests through which Russia was able to reorganize vast territories and non-Slavic peoples, reorienting them toward St. Petersburg. Such thinking served to justify Russia's aggressively expansionist policies, and its tendencies toward Russification in many of its newly acquired territories.²⁵ While Russification programs were often problematic, Russian armies proved very effective at extending the Tsar's influence. The fundamental goals of Russian policy, and more importantly the scale of its success, meant that eventual rivalry with the British was inevitable.

In 1800, 2,000 miles of central Asian territory, most of it unexplored by Europeans, separated Russia's borders from British India. Russia expanded across that buffer in almost a single generation, seemingly relentless in its pursuit of a warm water port on the Mediterranean and a pressure point on the British regime in India.²⁶ From the British perspective, these efforts to gain control of territory in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Afghanistan, all seemed part of a greater plan to threaten the security of India,

²⁵ Milan Hauner, *What Is Asia To Us?: Russia's Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 22, 38-40.

²⁶ *Official History (Naval and Military) of the Russo-Japanese War*. Vol. 1 to 24 August, 1904, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1910), 1.

if not directly then by menacing the sea lanes which made British rule of India possible. The result was what a British officer named Arthur Conolly termed the “Great Game,” a contest for influence which amounted to a Victorian cold war.²⁷ Occasionally this cold war turned hot, as in the Crimea in 1854, but for the majority of the 19th century it remained a contest mostly confined to the economic and diplomatic spheres. The British and the Russians were able to achieve a *modus vivendi* with regard to the Ottoman Empire, but in East Asia compromise would prove more difficult. Russian merchants had been trading in Chinese markets decades before the first British ships arrived, on an official basis after the 1689 signing of the treaty of Nerchinsk, and Russian trade had continually increased throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries. By 1840 it amounted to twice the volume the British could claim. It was an advantage the Russians intended to maintain, and exploit.²⁸

East Asia generally, and China in particular, occupied an unusual position in the European contest for dominion and markets and for many years, it amounted to something of a backwater for Great Britain. Economically, the China trade was a minor contributor to the balance sheets of the British economy, amounting between 1840 and 1870 for 5% of British imports, but less than 3% of exports.²⁹ The enormous distances involved, especially before the opening of the Suez Canal, also meant that it was rare to

²⁷ A.T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect Upon International Policies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), 56. ; see also Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, (Kodansha: New York, 1992).

²⁸ O. Edmund Clubb, *China & Russia: The “Great Game,”* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 71-2.

²⁹ Cain and Hopkins, 363.

have statesmen with first-hand experience of the region.³⁰ Distance also meant that Europeans posted to the region tended of necessity to receive an unusual degree of independence from the controls of their political masters. Further, European assessments of the strength of the Chinese state and military tended to be informed by assumption, and a body of writing stretching back to Marco Polo which veered between sycophantic and fantastic, rather than any significant first hand experience with regional armies or governmental institutions.³¹

Those assumptions tended to reflect a myth of China that the Chinese leadership worked to perpetuate. For millennia, China had stood at the center of an empire which had dominated East Asia, imprinting its political and cultural traditions across the region.³² The invasion of Han China by Manchurian armies had established the Qing Dynasty in 1644, but by that date Chinese military technology was already being eclipsed by developments in Europe. The Qing government was dominated by a scholarly elite which looked to Confucian tradition as the sole source of legitimate policy decisions. Their outlook generated a resilient conservatism which worked to slow innovation and reform across the Chinese state. Further, it served to isolate Chinese rulers from the realities of their place in the global power structure, ensuring that they would be even less prepared for the challenges of European rivals.³³

³⁰ Zara S. Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1898-1914*, paperback ed., (London, New Jersey: The Ashfield Press, 1969), 21.

³¹ Johnathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), chapters 1-4.

³² For examples of early European impressions of China, see, Spence, p. 66, 187.

³³ Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchu and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 1-7.

Indeed, the Chinese state had been in a relative decline since the 1760's, when the Qing bungled a border campaign against Burma, and another against Vietnam in the 1780's. Small rebellions broke out in that latter decade over the government's failure to adequately maintain the canal infrastructure which moderated flooding and facilitated food distribution.³⁴ As almost every Western observer who commented at the time noted, the source of these problems was an increasingly corrupt bureaucracy that siphoned off greater and greater amounts of public funding for its own uses. Chinese political culture struggled to maintain a clear line between personal and public finances, and longstanding tradition compelled Chinese officeholders to secure their positions with gifts and elaborate dinners. The delicate exchange of gifts and favor was pervasive and tended to require politicians to focus on maintaining their influence with local elites rather than pursuing systematic reforms. While there were undeniably a handful of exceptional regional governors who struggled mightily to reform their own provinces from within this system of patronage, they were novelties. By the end of the 18th century, as the system of food distribution broke down, corruption was threatening the ability of the state to govern.³⁵

Faced with starvation, the countryside responded with violence. Indeed, China was convulsed by overlapping, regional rebellions which stretched for decades through much of the 19th century. As the usual punishment inflicted on rebellious towns and villages was mass execution, the carnage and disruption were staggering. The White Lotus rebellion of 1796-1804 consumed five central provinces, and threatened not just

³⁴ Paine, 24.

³⁵ Ibid.

secession but the replacement of the Manchu Qing with an ethnically Han dynasty. The suppression of this rebellion was intentionally prolonged by Manchu officers such as General Fu K'ang An, who found the diversion of state funds intended for his armies into his own coffers too profitable to end the fighting.³⁶ Despite the brutal conclusion of this revolt, without institutional reform the Qing were unable to stabilize the countryside. In 1813 a secret society called the Eight Trigrams actually breached the walls of the Forbidden City before the imperial guard beat back their assault.³⁷

Britain would play a prominent role in accelerating the de-legitimization of the already struggling Qing. The Chinese had a number of goods attractive to Western merchants, from silk to porcelain, but the commodity that defined China trade in the 18th century was tea.³⁸ The Russian trade for tea, facilitated through overland trading routes established by a series of treaties dating back to the 1650's, was largely financed with furs and woolen textiles. As a result, these goods were China's predominant foreign imports in the early 19th century, and by that point they made a significant contribution to Russia's nascent textile industry.³⁹

By the early 19th century Britain had also come to depend on China as the world's only source of tea. In 1830, Britain imported 30 million pounds of tea from Chinese growers, purchased and transported exclusively by the East India Company.⁴⁰ A relic of the Elizabethan adventure capitalists, the Company served as the de facto government of

³⁶ Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, second ed., (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), 175.

³⁷ Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 176-84.

³⁸ Ferguson, 11-2.

³⁹ Clubb, 72.

⁴⁰ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War 1840-1842*

India where it facilitated trade with private merchants, but the tea trade remained its monopoly, and tea duties contributed £3 million annually to the Exchequer. However, the Chinese market was notoriously difficult to trade in- their craftworks and hand looms actually competed favorably with machine-made British products well into the 1830's, forcing the Company to purchase its increasingly large tea consignments with silver, a practice still anathema in those declining days of mercantilism.⁴¹ The British search for a product which Chinese merchants would pay cash for eventually settled on the opium produced by the company in the provinces around Calcutta.

Small amounts of opium had found their way out of northern India and into Chinese markets for centuries, but increasing consumption in the southern provinces had led to a ban in 1729. The ban was a turning point, because it meant that this easily transported, now enormously profitable, commodity had to be traded illicitly through a network of private British and Chinese merchants who had to evade or subvert state institutions in order to function.⁴²

More interested in their own profits than Chinese efforts to stabilize their governments, British merchants readily abetted the creation of this criminal network, whose profits worked to deepen and accelerate the very corruption Westerners so often derided in Chinese society. Because Opium could not legally be landed, British ships were permanently anchored off the Canton coast to receive deliveries from India and serve as floating distribution warehouses. By never actually coming ashore, British vessels also conveniently evaded the customs and import duties, depriving the Qing of

⁴¹ Ibid., 53.

⁴² Ibid., 49.

the legitimate revenue the increasing trade should have provided. On shore, Chinese traders would pay cash for chests of opium in legal markets, row their stamped receipts out to the anchored ships, and smuggle their cargo ashore. Most of the government officials in the locality would have to be bribed to facilitate this, and the trade rapidly spread north and west as regional officials proved only too ready to supplement their incomes and offset the lack of legitimate revenue.⁴³ In addition to the social problems attending increasing levels of opium consumption, the effect of its illicit trade in China was to enrich a criminal element which relied on subverting Qing laws and officials for its livelihood, further weakening the grasp of state institutions on the economy.

The effect for the British was also remarkable. The East India Company found a significant new source of revenue selling its opium for silver to British merchants, those merchants found that opium covered the cost of their tea with profit to spare, and Whitehall reaped tax bounties on that tea when it reached London's docks. The wildly profitable new trade soon spawned a fleet of specially designed ships to run opium through the brutal monsoon winds which dominated the South China Sea.⁴⁴ By 1832, opium accounted for half of China's foreign trade, and rather than becoming saturated, the market only continued to expand.⁴⁵

By the 1820's, intensive lobbying by adherents of the Manchester school in Britain combined with increasing British reliance on food imports helped to stimulate

⁴³ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 50

⁴⁵ Yen-ping Hao, *The Commercial Revolution in Nineteenth-Century China: The Rise of Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism*, (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), 16, 21.

free trade policies.⁴⁶ In East Asia, an increasing number of foreign traders who were prepared to ignore the British trade monopoly combined with the increasing difficulties the Indian government was having meeting its financial obligations, and in an effort to increase Indian exports, the British abolished the East India Company's monopoly in 1833. For all its efforts to gain unfettered access to Chinese markets, the East India Company had more or less respected the agreed annual shipment quotas for their opium, which exerted a partial check on the amount of the drug which entered the Chinese market.⁴⁷ The open market brought a tidal wave of private merchants who were limited only by market demand. By 1834, one year later, non-British carriers were moving three-quarters of Indo-Chinese trade and forcing British carriers to compete with Portuguese and American merchants for access to the profits the drug generated.⁴⁸

As the scale of the opium trade continued to increase, the relationship between Chinese officials and European merchants became strained and Britain sought a diplomatic solution that would legalize, and normalize, western access to Chinese markets. For their part, the Chinese were mostly concerned with reasserting their control over the foreigners on their coasts, and these cross purposes meant that subsequent Chinese attempts to curtail the sale of opium at Canton with statute implied to Western merchants a profitable market being closed to them only by backward Qing regulations.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Harry G. Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers, and Evangelicals :Britain's 1840-42 War With China, and its Aftermath*, (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27., Hao, 33.

⁴⁷ Hao, 26.

⁴⁸ Hao, 21., Herman, 443.

⁴⁹ Cain and Hopkins, 362, Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy 1830-1860*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 108.

The British responded to Chinese efforts at regulation with gunboats. In some ways the Opium War (1839-1842) was typical of the small, one-sided fighting the British occasionally engaged in at various points around the globe. A handful of Royal Navy vessels, landing a few thousand soldiers to destroy coastal forts, was pretty much the measure of it.⁵⁰ However, due to the great distances involved Whitehall had little idea what was happening from moment to moment, and the conflict was supplied and directed from British facilities in India.⁵¹ The Chinese military, despite great effort, proved to be woefully primitive compared to the British, who had little trouble making their way toward Beijing. The peace settlement was portrayed as an instrument for introducing China to the benefits of free trade, but the program that would give international merchants greater access to the Chinese economy would represent an unprecedented humiliation for the Qing, for whom the strict regulation of foreign trade was a traditional marker of dynastic vitality.⁵² China was forced to abolish its strict policies for the regulation of foreign trade, open five “treaty ports” where British merchants and government representatives were granted extraterritoriality and permission to reside, establish import and export tariffs (which would be scrupulously collected by a British staff and remitted to the Chinese government), grant Britain Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status with regard to those tariffs, cede control of the excellent port at Hong Kong, and pay an indemnity to defray the expense of acquiring these concessions.⁵³

⁵⁰ Clubb, 77., Graham, 106-8.

⁵¹ Graham, 276.

⁵² Ferguson, 139.

⁵³ Paine, 27.

From the British perspective, once the initial reluctance to incur the expense of fighting had been overcome, the situation became quite convenient. At minimal cost, the presumably vast Chinese market had been legally opened to Western trade.⁵⁴ The addition of Hong Kong to the existing naval base at Singapore would give the Royal Navy a solid base of operations in Asian waters, and it would come to serve as the market hub through which a huge increase in Chinese foreign trade would pass in the following years as various industries attempted to find markets for Western goods beyond opium.⁵⁵

For the Russians, however, the economic ramifications of the Opium Wars were disastrous. At a stroke, the previously closed port cities were thrown open to seaborne industrial goods from almost every economy in Europe. Worse, Russia was unable to sign on to the new arrangements as nations such as Belgium and Denmark did, as its trading relationship with China was already established by the older agreements which had previously seemed so advantageous. The Russians attempted to re-negotiate them in 1848, seeking new concessions for their overland trade or access to Chinese ports. These requests were all rejected, and Mandarins in the coastal provinces were ordered to turn away the occasional Russian ships which had started to appear there, sending them back to sea empty handed. In the decade which would follow before the Russians could establish MFN status for themselves, the Chinese market for Russian textiles evaporated in the face of predominantly British competition.⁵⁶ The Russians must have been envious of the British ability to deal with the Chinese militarily, but it isn't clear how they could

⁵⁴ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War 1840-42: Barbarians at the Gates in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 2-4.

⁵⁵ Herman, 443.

⁵⁶ Clubb, 73-4, 85-6.

have done the same at this time, and in any case Russian resources were soon directed toward the pressing matter of suppressing the revolts which spread throughout Europe in 1848.

Interestingly, Europeans, and the British, maintained a high level of respect for China as a regional power.⁵⁷ Despite the endemic corruption which attended every effort of the Qing, despite the internal disorder and the revolts of which the Europeans were at least vaguely aware, and especially in the British case, with first-hand knowledge of how easily modern weapons had overcome Chinese defenses, Westerners generally continued to view China as a formidable military power whose vast population could at need be translated into enormous armies capable of swallowing up any invaders, including European ones. The reality was that political constraints had made the assembly of such a force practically impossible for some decades, and trade concessions to foreigners were an added humiliation which only made a reassertion of extensive central authority even less likely.

If the Qing could largely conceal their military defeats at European hands from most of the Chinese public, the implications of the humiliating peace terms could not be hidden and contributed to the now widespread impression among their subjects that the Qing mandate of heaven was fading. Combined with the continued deterioration of domestic infrastructure, it fueled the flames of new revolt. An organization called the Triads spread to the mainland from Taiwan and produced the Red Turban Revolt of 1851-1868 which, aiming to restore the fallen Ming dynasty to power, came dangerously

⁵⁷ Paine, 13-15.

close to capturing Canton.⁵⁸ A systematic failure to maintain the dyke system along the Yellow River caused widespread flooding and destruction in 1851, sparking revolt across eight central provinces. That same year saw the beginning of the Taiping Rebellion, a persistent and unusually successful uprising which came very close to toppling the Qing. Spreading across 16 provinces, its fighting razed an incredible 600 cities, and went so far as to produce a short-lived rival monarchy in Nanjing. Although no count of the casualties was kept, they would probably have to be numbered in the millions.⁵⁹

In the midst of this internal unrest, the Qing were confronted by a second European challenge in 1856. The Chinese had studiously avoided complying with several of the provisions of the Treaty of Nanjing, specifically those which had granted British representatives right of residency, (indeed, the Chinese language version of the treaty had intentionally omitted the relevant section) to the growing frustration of British officials. Following the Chinese seizure of a vessel suspected of smuggling, the British consul, Harold “Harry” Parkes, was given an opportunity to assert British prerogatives.⁶⁰ Parkes consulted with the Governor of Hong Kong and the admiral on station, and proceeded to demand the freedom of the vessel and crew. When these were not granted in the permitted 24 hour time limit, and without consulting Whitehall, the British navy began The Arrow War (Second Opium War) with a bombardment of Canton. Troops on hand

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ferguson, 139.

rapidly seized most of the local defenses, and lacking adequate forces Parkes attempted to consolidate Canton while he waited for reinforcements from India.⁶¹

What followed was a five year conflict in which Britain, France, the United States, and Russia would all contribute forces to improve their own positions in China, each of them having MFN treaty arrangements which would be improved by any concessions the British managed to win.⁶² The conclusion of hostilities in 1860 forced China into a new round of humiliating concessions, another indemnity, and established a pattern of relations with the Western governments which would endure for decades. The agreements which resulted from the Opium Wars came to be collectively known as the first of the “unequal treaties,” and would prove a source of long-term disaffection as they were imposed on various states across East Asia.⁶³ The British gained the right to reside in Beijing, access to ten new treaty ports, and consistent regulations for overland transport duties. Perhaps most significantly, the internal provinces of China were also opened to Western travelers and missionaries.

By the end of the Arrow War, Britain found itself facing one of the fundamental difficulties which would, with shifting nuances, inform British policy toward China well into the 20th century. Implicitly in the policy embodied by these treaties, and explicitly by 1900, Britain wanted a Chinese government which was weak enough that it could be forced to honor the agreements forced upon it and open itself to Western economic and religious institutions, but one which was strong enough to discourage foreign invaders

⁶¹ James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in 19th Century China*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 32-3. Alexis Krausse, *The Far East: Its History and its Question*, 2nd ed. (London: Grant Richards, 1905), 36-7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶³ Clubb, 71., Hsu, 210-11.

intent on seizing land and resources.⁶⁴ Britain was deeply concerned by the prospect of creating an eastern analog to the Ottoman Empire, a Sick Old Man of East Asia.

Chinese literature on the Opium Wars often suggests that Western intervention, with its associated destruction of several coastal garrisons, was the fundamental source of Qing decline eclipsing the decades of internal revolts, and the prolonged disruptions these produced.⁶⁵ It seems more balanced to suggest that the Opium Wars were one of a number of factors, many of which are mentioned above, that contributed to the decline of the Qing state. In either case, the strategic problem for British policymakers remained the same. If the other powers made a concerted effort to seize Chinese territory, Britain might be forced to attempt to assert direct control over Chinese territories themselves.⁶⁶ Even if such a thing were possible, the last thing Whitehall wanted was the expense of conquering another Raj. And British policymakers did not have to tax their imaginations searching for potential East Asian rivals.

The march of British arms up the Chinese coast to Beijing had not been an unbroken string of successes. In June of 1859, the British detachment en route to sign the Treaty of Tientsin was ordered to clear a series of Chinese forts around Dagou. The attacking British force was cut to pieces by Chinese guns, repeated ground assaults were repulsed, and British forces withdrew having suffered 89 dead, 345 wounded, and the loss of 4 gunboats with two others severely damaged.⁶⁷ Revealingly, neither the observers

⁶⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed., Part I, Series E, Asia, 1860-1914 vol. 23, Ian Nish ed. document 52, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 126-129.

⁶⁵ Paine, 28.

⁶⁶ David McLean, *Britain and Her Buffer State: The Collapse of the Persian Empire, 1890-1914*, (London: Royal Historical Society, 1979), 2., Hevia, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

on the scene nor commentators back in London seriously entertained the possibility that they had run up against a particularly competent Chinese unit, or even simple misfortune. Based in part on the assumption that British forces would be superior to Chinese, and in part on the less than conclusive evidence that some of the Chinese gunners appear to have been wearing fur hats, it was widely accepted that the Dagu incident revealed the presence of Russian military equipment, and advisors trained in its use, deployed to limit the success of British efforts.⁶⁸

The arrow war set a precedent for cooperation among the Western powers in their dealing with China, but once the costly business of conducting a war in so remote a location had been concluded, the powers turned quickly enough to the pursuit of their own narrower interests. Within the Chinese government, the end of the Opium Wars brought about an effort at reform directed not from the Forbidden City but by some of the more talented governors at the provincial level. Mostly rising to prominence during the suppression of local revolts, their efforts were directed at improving their military forces. What came to be known as the “self-strengthening” movement began in 1862 seeking to construct railways and lay the foundations of a modern weapons industry. It would continue for years and produce mixed, limited results before finally falling victim to political infighting in 1874.⁶⁹ In the interim, Chinese weakness was obvious, and European states would seek to extend their influence across China in a variety of ways.

The ongoing Taiping uprising, which had continued to spread in fits and starts since 1851, sent a rebel army toward Shanghai in the spring of 1862. A small contingent

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Frank H. H. King, *A Concise History of Modern China (1840-1961)*, (New York: Praeger-Pall Mall, 1968), 15-16., Paine, 29.

of British troops were dispatched from Beijing, and arrived in April to join a locally raised Chinese army which had been organized by westerners residing in and around Shanghai. Eventually coming under the command of a British engineering officer named Charles George Gordon, the force had pushed the rebels back 30 miles from Shanghai by the end of the year. Gordon went on to lead his predominantly Chinese force, which came to be known as the “Ever Victorious Army,” sweeping the Taiping out of the entire region and capturing Suzhou and Chanchufu in the spring of 1864.⁷⁰ As the existence of what amounted to a personal army fit comfortably within Qing military tradition, Beijing reacted to these events not with alarm, but by making Gordon a general in the Qing imperial army and proceeding to decorate him. Had Britain wanted to extend its formal empire, this would have been a peerless opportunity. The Chinese state had already formally recognized Gordon’s command, and by implication his control of the region around Shanghai, which would have been central to any British formal sphere on the mainland. Instead, after scattering the rebels Gordon marched his army back to Shanghai and disbanded it.

By way of contrast, the Russians used the breakdown of Chinese central authority to consolidate their hold on a significant amount of territory. During the Crimean War, blockade of the Black Sea had made the Amur River the only way for Russian supplies to reach the Sea of Okhotsk, and as the Russians had moved a series of armed flotilla up the river, they had taken the opportunity to line its banks with forts. The Russians chose 1864 to renegotiate the destabilized Sino-Russian border, exploiting a combination of geographic ignorance on the part of Chinese negotiators and the general turmoil to

⁷⁰ Krausse, 41.

solidify their control by treaty over a massive area of territory along the northern Chinese border, amounting to over 185,000 square miles and including some of only areas in the region amenable to agriculture.⁷¹ Even as Russia took steps to extend its influence in East Asia, another state that would come to have considerable regional ambitions was beginning of one of the most remarkable social experiments of the 19th century.

⁷¹ Clubb, 88., Krausse, 39. Paine, 32, 69.

CHAPTER TWO: THE RISE OF A MODERNIZED JAPAN

The Japanese encountered the western powers in the same way most of the traditional Asian states had, specifically as the target of aggressive efforts to open their markets to foreign trade. Their obvious military inferiority in the face of forces fielded by industrial states toppled the existing system of Japanese government, but the result was not widespread disorder, but rather a new political system that set about systematically remaking the Japanese political and economic systems on an industrial model. The result was that in the space of a few decades, Japan emerged as a regional power in East Asia capable of pursuing its own imperial vision and of posing a serious obstacle to other powers seeking influence in East Asia.

Britain encountered Japan in 1858, seeking access to markets which the Americans had opened in 1854 using a series of treaties almost identical to the ones Britain had used in China after the Opium Wars. Japan was nominally one of the tribute bearing nations which took its cues from Beijing, but was in practice independent. The initial Japanese response to the arrival of Westerners was very similar to the one China had attempted. They signed the treaties the Westerners demanded, and then proceeded to work to prevent their implementation, largely by pretending that they did not exist. More annoyed than threatened, the Royal Navy led an international fleet of gunboats which undertook a predictably effective bombardment of the gun batteries at ChoShu in 1864, and dictated a new wave of trade agreements to compensate for the inconvenience. The

Japanese response was singular. Following the timely deaths of the sitting Shogun and Emperor, the newly appointed Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, accepted that the shame of his father's defeat by the Western powers precluded his own effective leadership of Japan. He acknowledged this state of affairs and resigned, taking the institution of the Shogunate with him. He probably spared the country a civil war, and it cleared the political field for innovative new ideas.

Rapidly concluding that they lacked the technology to compete militarily with Western powers, Japan undertook an ambitious program of social, political, and military reform designed to adopt and adapt Western technology to Japanese ends, a movement called "enrich the country, strengthen the army."⁷² The new leadership of Japan, mostly low- to mid-level former samurai, used the image of the Emperor to find legitimacy. The newly created civilian government, under the guise of the Meiji Restoration, implemented reforms which would transform Japan from an essentially feudal state to a modern industrial power in the space of 30 years.⁷³

Diplomats were dispatched around the world, instructed to send back detailed reports on the industrial, economic, and political institutions of the Western powers that Japan could pick and choose between. As the world's leading industrial power, it was impossible to ignore Britain, no matter how unpopular it was as the leading beneficiary of the hated unequal treaties. The relationship reached a tipping point in 1870, as Japan sought to acquire modern weapon systems. Japan turned to Britain for assistance, particularly with naval matters. In 1871, the first Japanese officers were admitted to the

⁷² G.A. Ballard, *The Influence of the Sea on The Political History of Japan*, (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 106., Paine, 80.

⁷³ Beasley, Chapter 4.

Greenwich Naval College.⁷⁴ The influence of these early experiences was profound. The Japanese would ultimately not so much learn from the Royal Navy as attempt to duplicate it in miniature, adopting British uniforms, signal codes, even the music for their marching bands.⁷⁵ British officers seconded to the Japanese navy in a training capacity began sending back glowing reports as early as 1872.⁷⁶ In 1873, the Japanese began offering British officers nine year appointments at their newly constructed Naval War College (built of imported red English bricks), beginning a relationship which would see many of these instructors staying on as advisors. The result was a curiously intimate relationship between the Japanese and British navies. From the beginning, the Japanese were familiar with British naval strategy and tactics- a large number of officers had literally trained at British facilities using British equipment.

The relationship with Japan was not limited to military matters. Indeed, in Japan as elsewhere, all of the powers would attempt to use loans to garner wider influence in East Asia. With British encouragement, Japan floated loans in The City to fund railway construction in 1870 and 1873.⁷⁷ A naval expansion program was to follow. Unsurprisingly, Japanese officers preferred British warships, and in 1882 British yards received orders for 19 vessels.⁷⁸ In 1889, the emperor granted Japan a constitution which established a bicameral Diet, giving the country at least the trappings of parliamentary representation, even if political power remained concentrated in the hands of ministers

⁷⁴ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 8., Dennis Warner and Peggy Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905*, (London, Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 42-3.

⁷⁵ Herman, 473.

⁷⁶ Kanichi Asakawa, *The Russo-Japanese Conflict, Its Causes and Issues*.

⁷⁷ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 7.

⁷⁸ Herman, 472.

appointed by the emperor.⁷⁹ Realizing that they had many suitors for their investment needs, the Japanese were able to distribute their loans between nations and institutions such that no one power was ever able to dominate the Japanese market, and although Britain enjoyed a brisk economic relationship with Japan it remained a very distinct second place to China as a destination market.⁸⁰

As it industrialized, Japan began to see itself as having a civilizing, imperial mission in Asia, a vision supported by a similar logic to that which had propelled European nations to conquest around the globe.⁸¹ As the only successfully industrializing Asian nation, Japan saw itself as entitled to a sphere of influence in East Asia.

In 1867 a Japanese fishing vessel had run aground on Formosa, where locals killed its crew. Japan had sent repeated protests to Beijing regarding the matter, but had gotten no response of any kind, probably because Beijing's control over the troops stationed on Formosa was nominal, and the Qing had little idea what the Japanese were talking about. In 1871 this incident provided the pretext for a Japanese occupation of the island. The situation might well have led to war, but the British were leery of further military blows against the Chinese state. Britain intervened to mediate a resolution, with Japan agreeing to withdraw in exchange for a sizable indemnity.⁸²

China would have to borrow to pay it, and the British government found itself playing a prominent role in arranging the loan. It was a well established tenet of British

⁷⁹ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸¹ Ernst Satow, *Korea and Manchuria Between Russia and Japan 1895-1904: The Observations of Sir Ernst Satow British Minister Plenipotentiary to Japan (1885-1900) and China (1900-1906)*, (Tallahassee, FL: The Diplomatic Press, 1966), 74-5.

⁸² Cain and Hopkins, 366., Krause, 43.

policy to maintain an official separation between the government and private business interests, and if this was often observed in the breach to varying degrees, in China the degree of collusion would prove unusually high.⁸³ As elsewhere, control of foreign debt would be a marker of influence in China, and the privately owned but British oriented Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) handled this first loan to the Qing.⁸⁴

The HSBC would play a prominent, but not exclusive, role in financing the foreign debt China would acquire in the coming years. Although the HSBC was a privately owned institution originally intended to provide a local source of financing for East Asian traders weeks away from their European banks, major loans to East Asian governments were inevitably highly political in nature. As Chinese officials were forbidden to interact directly with foreign banks, they had instead to make requests through government representatives at the appropriate foreign legations.⁸⁵ The result was that, at the very least, legation officers were well informed regarding the business dealings of their banks, and in many cases came to exert significant influence over the terms of financial dealings. As the other banks opened in East Asia tended to be overtly associated with national governments, the HSBC became the default proxy of the British government despite remaining in private hands.

The Japanese had gambled with their occupation of Formosa, and although they had backed down in the face of British pressure, Formosa was not central to the Japanese imperial vision. Early on, Japanese imperialists had fixed their ambitions on the Korean

⁸³ McLean, 4.

⁸⁴ Roberta Allbert Dayer, *Finance and Empire: Sir Charles Addis, 1861-1945*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 35-6., Cain and Hopkins, 366.

⁸⁵ King, 15-17.

peninsula.⁸⁶ Between 1592 and 1599 Japan had briefly occupied, and by all accounts ravaged, Korea. The episode had left a negative impression which remained strong two and a half centuries later. The general directing this operation, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, brought 40,000 Korean ears back to Japan as a testament to the conduct of his occupation regime, and was so proud of this cargo he entombed them in a public monument in Kyoto.⁸⁷ Little surprise then that the Koreans recalled the Japanese occupation with horror. Korea had fallen under Chinese hegemony in 1637, and in addition to tri-annual tribute missions to Beijing, surrendered control of foreign policy and defense to the dragon throne.⁸⁸

So matters rested into the 19th century. As the pace of Japanese industrialization increased, the Japanese came to see Korea as a valuable source of raw materials, and as crucial to Japanese security. The Chinese, correctly reading Japanese designs on the region, urged the Korean king to seek Western allies as early as 1867; using the barbarians to check one another had become a favorite Chinese diplomatic ploy.⁸⁹ However, Korea remained inert, and Japan provoked a diplomatic incident in 1875, sending a boat into Korean waters, and then feigning outrage when it was fired upon.

Japan used the incident to secure an agreement with Korea, the Treaty of Kanghwa, which looks remarkably like the unequal treaties the Japanese so hotly resented having been forced to sign with the Western nations. Japan gained commercial access to three treaty ports, extraterritoriality, and most-favored-nation status. However,

⁸⁶ Julian S. Corbett, *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905*, Vol. 1, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 3, 5.

⁸⁷ Paine, 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

whereas the Western powers had all proceeded to raise (usually minimal) tariffs against their own goods, with the British going so far in China as to actually collect them for the Qing government, Japan gave itself open, unchecked access to Korean markets which it proceeded to flood with cheap goods. Most importantly, however, the treaty declared that Korea was an independent nation, not tributary to the Chinese empire at all.⁹⁰ Clearly, this combination of political and economic changes aimed at pulling Korea into a Japanese sphere of influence.

The Chinese were in no position to respond with force, tied up with another rebellion in Xinjiang, where Russia was pursuing further territorial gains, and a diplomatic row with the British over the murder of a missionary on the Burmese frontier. Japan exploited Chinese weakness by seizing the Ryukyu Islands in 1879, and then opening an embassy in Seoul in 1880. For all their boldness, however, the Japanese had not formally challenged Korean sovereignty, and China still retained significant legal privileges from its own treaties. In 1880 the Qing dispatched a dynamic mandarin, Li Hongzhang, to Seoul with the task of reasserting Chinese authority.

China continued to reel across the political stage, fighting and losing a war with France over Vietnam between 1882 and 1885.⁹¹ The cost of the fighting necessitated another foreign loan, which the HSBC again provided. As the bank came to control ever greater levels of Chinese debt, it remained international in its clientele but was increasingly tied into London's financial markets as a source of reserve capital.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., 44-5.

⁹¹ Krausse, 45., Paine 45.

⁹² Cain and Hopkins, 367.

With the Chinese so engaged, neither Japan nor Britain expected Chinese diplomacy to be any more effective in Korea than it had been in Beijing. So it was to general surprise that Li proved a highly capable statesman. By 1884 he had cemented trade relations between Korea and the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Russia, and France. While this had the effect of diluting Japanese efforts, it also enormously complicated the exercise of Chinese influence. These alliances, so contrary to the isolationist traditions of the Korean governing elite, sparked a coup that its leaders could not control and which rapidly degenerated into little more than a riot. Li intervened to restore order, place a pro-Chinese king on the throne, and in a gesture of magnanimity designed to underline Chinese control of the situation, proceeded to order the new monarch to offer apologies and an indemnity to Japan.⁹³

The Japanese were frustrated to observe their diplomatic progress in Korea being deftly undone by the Chinese. Japan attempted its own coup in 1884, but outnumbered 7 to 1 by Chinese troops it went quickly off the rails. The Japanese ambassador, who had been indiscrete enough to become personally involved in the assault on the Korean royal palace, resigned in disgrace and Korea formally requested additional Chinese troops to secure the capital, further strengthening Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula.⁹⁴ As the Chinese deftly reasserted and consolidated their influence, the Japanese star dimmed in Korea. However, the disorder in Korea had not gone unnoticed by other interested parties.

⁹³ Paine, 54-5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 58.

Russia had observed the rivalry on the Korean peninsula between China and Japan with interest. Although Korea fell outside most conceptions of the Russian sphere of influence, as a continental power with enormous land borders it had long sought to prevent any other power from establishing footholds on its perimeter, especially in vulnerable East Asia.⁹⁵ In 1885 Karl Veber arrived as the Tsar's representative to Seoul, charged with complicating Japanese efforts at re-exerting their influence.⁹⁶ The Koreans were probably eager to explore alternatives to closer relations with either China or the hated Japanese; in any event, with Chinese help Veber had little trouble finding friends in high political circles. In short order, Korea agreed to exchange Russian military protection and advisors for permission to lease a naval base at the port of Yong-Hung-Hang (Port Lazareff).

Caught off guard, Britain was particularly alarmed, and reacted energetically to the possibility of a Russian advance into Korea. It was one thing for China and Japan to scuffle over Korea- the outcome of that struggle would hardly change the regional strategic picture in British eyes. The sudden presence of the aggressive, expansionist Russians was another matter entirely.⁹⁷ At a stroke, it threatened to extend the contest played out across the Near East to an entirely new region of the globe. The Russians had the capability to station significant naval resources in the region, potentially threatening the entire Pacific theater. Britain quickly moved to occupy the island of Komundo (Port Hamilton). However, on further examination, it was determined that the complete lack of

⁹⁵ John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1797: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiii.

⁹⁶ Paine, 75.

⁹⁷ E.W. Edwards, *British Diplomacy and Finance in China, 1895-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 16.

transport infrastructure meant that any Russian base in Korea would have to be supplied by sailing around Africa, and as a result the threat posed by a Russian base there was not as great as it had initially seemed. After the crisis subsided, Britain would review its strategic interests in East Asia, and quietly place Korea outside them.⁹⁸

The Chinese were upset for similar reasons, and their newly appointed governor in Korea Yuan Shi-Kai unceremoniously quashed the provision of the Russo-Korean agreement which invited Russian military advisors onto the peninsula. The brusque treatment did not have the intended effect- further evidence of Chinese interference actually made a strong Russian presence more desirable to the Koreans, who were discovering that their alliances could give them a degree of independence if properly managed.⁹⁹ Although tensions in the area remained high, matters gradually began to settle, and Britain and Russia simultaneously withdrew from their new naval bases in 1887. The next year, the Russian government, who had been drawn to see East Asia in a new light and been disturbed at the lack of development in their East Asian holdings, began to explore the practicalities of constructing an overland route to East Asia as an alternative to developing the region by opening it to foreign investment.¹⁰⁰ A railroad over such a distance would be terrifically expensive, and considering the low population density of Siberia, had no obvious commercial use. Ominously, from the earliest stages it was agreed that Vladivostok would not be a suitable terminus for such a project, as it was iced in for at least two months each year.¹⁰¹ A warm water port, of the sort which Britain

⁹⁸ Ian Nish, *The Anglo- Japanese Alliance*, 17.

⁹⁹ Paine, 76.

¹⁰⁰ LeDonne, 184.

¹⁰¹ Paine, 76.

had denied to the Russians further west, was the most desirable terminus for such a monumental undertaking and one of the strategic factors that justified the enormous cost of the project in the first place. It would have to be found further south.

The obvious threat naval power was beginning to pose to China, combined with the political cover presented by the assumption of formal power by the Guangxu Emperor in 1871, provided the occasion for a modest naval expansion program. The Chinese took the opportunity to purchase five modern warships from British yards. When a request that a British flag officer be seconded for training purposes, it seemed as though China might be starting down the path of Japanese-style reform. One Captain Lang was subsequently dispatched, but was subordinated to a Chinese admiral and permitted to advise only on matters of basic seamanship. Excluded from financial, strategic, or even tactical decision making, Captain Lang resigned his position in frustration and returned to British service before the end of a year.¹⁰²

In 1890, the tectonic plates of European alliance shifted. The Chancellor of Germany, Otto Von Bismark, whose hand had guided German foreign policy for decades, was forced to resign. With him went the Russo-German treaty of alliance, leaving Russia isolated. Faced by the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, the Russians entered into an alliance with France, which began in 1891 and evolved to its final form in 1894. The realignment had numerous repercussions. Within Russia, it made possible a series of French-guaranteed loans which were invested in military infrastructure. It also made possible the financing which transformed the Trans-Siberian

¹⁰² Krausse, 46.

railroad project into a going concern, and following the publication of an imperial edict by Alexander III, construction began that year.

Indirectly, it also influenced Anglo-Japanese relations. By 1890 Japanese foreign policy was guided by two overarching, related themes: the desire to be rid of the unfavorable treaties imposed by the Western powers when Japan was first opened to foreign trade, and the desire to create a regional Japanese empire. The shifting alliances on the continent seemed to highlight Britain's dearth of strategic partners, and it suddenly seemed expedient to reevaluate Japanese requests for revision of the "unequal treaties."

The ostensible justification for them from the British perspective, that they were a key component of some sort of enterprise to introduce a backward Japan to the advantages of Western industrialism, had been losing weight year by year. By 1890, when Japan had completed its series of notably Western legal and political reforms, it had become pretty well impossible to maintain.¹⁰³ Requests for revision became increasingly less tactful until April 1894, when Foreign Minister Mutsu Munemitsu practically demanded reforms.¹⁰⁴ Fearing that the Japanese might nullify the treaties if they continued to refuse negotiations, on 16 July of that year Britain agreed to a revised commercial treaty which pledged the two nations to treat one another as political equals, coming into effect five years hence, in 1899.¹⁰⁵ The other Western powers quickly followed the British lead, but Britain had (if somewhat reluctantly) been first. It would be difficult to overstate the influence of the treaty revision on Japanese political

¹⁰³ Paine, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Krausse, 77., Paine, 101.

¹⁰⁵ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, Japan and North East Asia. Document 1 pg. 1. Full text of the revised treaty found on pages 1-21.

consciousness; the Meiji reforms could be cast as having successfully carried the state through a period of subjugation and returned to it the ability of independent political action. Further, it suggests that among elites in the British government, there was already a recognition that, at least on paper, Japan had become a significant regional player, operating at a considerably more sophisticated level than China.¹⁰⁶

However, as the date for implementation of the Anglo-Japanese treaty of 1894 approached, something of a diplomatic revolt began to spread through Britain's imperial possessions. Since the 1850's, Canada and Australia had been working to create legal structures designed to exclude Asian immigrants.¹⁰⁷ As early as 1897, Australia had become alarmed by the provisions of the treaty which extended reciprocal property rights between Japan and Britain. Fearing an influx of Asian immigrants, the Australian colonies and New Zealand had opted to exempt themselves from the treaty and passed new immigration laws which set racial quotas. Although Japan asked to be exempted from these new measures, Whitehall decided to allow them.¹⁰⁸ By the time the treaty came into effect, exemptions had been extended to large areas of the empire, including India, Canada, Newfoundland, the Cape, and Natal. Whitehall had exempted Natal and Queensland by fiat. The other areas had requested exemption from the agreement.¹⁰⁹ Natal, where issues of race and immigration had already proven so divisive, was an obvious political accommodation to keep the regional peace. Queensland was probably a nod to the impracticability of allowing immigration into one part of Australia but not the

¹⁰⁶ R.P. Dua, *Anglo-Japanese Relations During the First World War*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1972), 24-5.

¹⁰⁷ Offer, 173.

¹⁰⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 3, pg. 26-7.

¹⁰⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 22, pg. 43.

others. In effect, the breadth of the exemptions significantly reduced the scope of the treaty. While the initial response was largely a cultural one, increasing British reliance on the Japanese navy for Pacific security after 1902 would introduce unprecedented strains into the relationships between Britain and the colonies which relied on it for their defense.¹¹⁰

However, the other major goal of the Japanese government, the acquisition of an overseas empire, seemed threatened during these same years as never before. Russia, the only Great Power that had demonstrated an appetite for Chinese territory rather than trade, was reenergizing its effort to expand its influence in East Asia. The announcement of the Trans-Siberian project seemed to indicate that Russia was, at least indirectly, intent on thwarting Japanese ambitions for an empire on the mainland. The Russians had hardly been subtle about their territorial designs on China; in 1887 the Japanese had even acquired a secret memorandum from an officer on the Russian general staff outlining a four-stage conquest of the Celestial Empire.¹¹¹ Considering the logistical nightmare which would have attended Russian field operations in China in 1887, such an undertaking would have been delusional. But each new mile of track brought Russia closer to the day when it would be possible to conduct a major campaign in East Asia, and potentially pose a serious threat to the Japanese imperial vision.

The British popular press gave significant coverage to the threat posed by a newly aggressive Russian drive toward East Asia, and had come to see Japanese control of

¹¹⁰ Offer, 191.

¹¹¹ Paine, 102.

Korea as preferable to Russian.¹¹² Of course, the opinions of British journalists carried limited weight with policy makers, who at this point were far more concerned with the maintenance of British trade relations than with anyone's control of the Korean peninsula.¹¹³

The Chinese were hardly indifferent to these developments along their northern border. Indeed, their strategic picture was looking increasingly bleak. The new Russian railway would enable the Tsar to move troops rapidly along the borders of provinces in which the Qing had no equivalent transport infrastructure. Further, both Russia and Japan were increasingly aggressive in their contest for economic influence in Korea, a competition which the Chinese were eager to win themselves.

¹¹² Ibid., 105.

¹¹³ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 25.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR AND THE CONTEST FOR INFLUENCE IN CHINA

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894 destabilized the balance of power across East Asia. The modernized Japanese military smashed the Chinese forces sent against it, and not only supplanted the Chinese in the minds of Western observers as the regional hegemon, but threatened to extend their influence across Chinese territory to the detriment of those powers' ambitions. The Japanese had hoped that their victory could be parlayed into a regional empire, but a coalition of European states threatened to intervene if they did not withdraw the demands that would have given them a commanding position *vis a vis* China. The Japanese would come away from the conflict believing that they had exposed the hypocrisy of Western standards of political legitimacy, and their future diplomatic choices would be informed by the desire to diplomatically isolate their opponents in East Asia, while gaining allies if opportunity permitted. Eventually, efforts to stay on top of the shifting diplomatic sands would drive them to pursue permanent allies.

The pretext Japan exploited to justify open conflict was a relatively minor rebellion amongst the peasant farmers in Korea. The excuse was particularly flimsy. The Korean peasantry resented the taxes they were forced to render to corrupt local bureaucrats, and had engaged in similar uprisings almost every year since 1885.¹¹⁴ The treaty of Tianjin had given China and Japan the right to send troops to Korea if the other

¹¹⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 2, p. 20., Ballard, 128-9.

power did, and the Japanese cabinet had previously determined to take advantage of this if the opportunity arose. The resolution, passed on 2 June 1894, warned the Koreans to Japanese intentions. Hoping to rapidly restore order, the King of Korea requested a contingent of Chinese troops.¹¹⁵ The request was accompanied by another to Tokyo, requesting that Japan not intervene. Legally, as the revolt was effectively over by this point, neither China nor Japan had any justification to station troops on Korean soil. Nevertheless, 2,000 Chinese troops landed at the small port city of Nanyang on June 7, with Japanese troops arriving hours later. Already these deployments were obviously very different in nature. While the Chinese troops lingered setting up camps near their ships, the Japanese troops formed up and immediately marched toward Seoul.¹¹⁶

International ships begin to arrive on the 13th, in theory to monitor the unfolding situation but at least as interested in monitoring one another. On 15 June, eight more Japanese transports arrived, and began to disembark another 6,000 combat troops, ostensibly for the defense of the embassy and business interests.¹¹⁷ The Japanese press was flooded with stories of the misgovernment Korea had suffered, misgovernment which, the stories posited, Japan was uniquely positioned to correct.¹¹⁸

The Chinese response was a series of diplomatic efforts geared to placate Japan. Yuan Shi Kai began requesting permission to evacuate the Chinese diplomatic corps in late June. It finally withdrew on 19 July, abandoning the diplomatic field in Korea to the

¹¹⁵ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc . 125, p. 66.

¹¹⁶ Paine, 112-13.

¹¹⁷ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed., Part 1, Series E Asia: Sino-Japanese War 1894, Ian Nish ed. ,Vol. 4, Doc 1, (University Publications of America, 1989), 3., Paine, 114.

¹¹⁸ Paine, 115.

Japanese.¹¹⁹ Other than authorizing the flight of their diplomats, the Chinese did little else to prepare for possible hostilities. The regional governor, Li Hongzhan, commanded the most modern troops in China, and he seems to have had a relatively clear understanding of Japanese military capabilities. His overall strategy suggests a high opinion of Japanese forces. Li worked to delay any direct military confrontation and began a scramble to secure the intervention of a Western power to check the Japanese. The strategy was flawed. Li had badly misread international opinion generally, and Japanese intentions in particular. Most foreign powers quietly hoped that the war would create regional instability from which they could profit, and the Japanese, who fearing foreign intervention had no reason to delay, were preparing to move rapidly and decisively against Chinese forces.

Li first approached the Russians, but the possibility of the situation turning to Russian advantage kept their efforts at mediation half-hearted, if not utterly disingenuous. Fearing the Russians might succeed in turning things to their advantage, the British made repeated, good-faith efforts to bring about a regional settlement without fighting. Britain certainly had a tangible interest in maintaining the regional status quo, and it made an honest effort to mediate the crisis, which by the end of the war they would have attempted no less than eight times.¹²⁰ Indeed, here the British had an opportunity to head off the war. Had Britain been prepared to threaten Japan militarily, the Japanese would almost certainly have backed down, as they would when faced with similar threats later. Had they made the attempt, Britain would probably have been able to secure at least one

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ "Britain Wants China To Win," *The New York Times*, 12 August 1894, Pg. 17., Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 25.

ally from among the other powers when the Chinese could not, and as part of a coalition would then have been in a position to directly influence the shifting regional balance of power. However, any members of such a coalition would almost certainly have expected unpalatable Chinese concessions by way of compensation, which Britain would have had to openly acknowledge.

For these reasons, the British were ultimately not prepared to threaten the Japanese.¹²¹ In addition to the strategic concerns listed above, there was a significant strain of opinion filtering back from British agents in China who had become frustrated by Chinese unwillingness to institute Japanese-style reforms and who actually hoped to see the Dragon Throne embarrassed by an early reverse or two. These reverses would highlight the benefits of modernization.¹²² The great unspoken assumption supporting this vein of opinion was that ultimately, China would call upon its enormous military reserves and overwhelm Japanese forces with sheer numbers, no matter how effective Japanese military reforms had proven.¹²³ This was the conventional wisdom which had guided European thinking on Chinese military potential since the early 19th century. It was the destruction of this idea, the idea of a Chinese military competent enough to make any sort of invasion prohibitively expensive if not ultimately futile, rather than the destruction of most of China's modern military units, that would destabilize the entire region.

¹²¹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 290, p. 146-8.

¹²² Paine, 118.

¹²³ For example, see : "Japan Has Declared War," *The New York Times*, 13 August, 1894, p. 5; "China's Defeat Impossible," *The New York Times*, 13 August 1894, p. 5., "Britain Sustains Japan," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1895, p. 5

Certainly, there were observers who had some idea of what the Japanese had accomplished since the 1860's. Lord Curzon had personally toured East Asia in 1893-4, and seems to have taken a close and perceptive look at Japan's modernized military. Already having done a stint in Parliament and served as Undersecretary of State for India by this date, Curzon's penchant for travel would provide him with first hand knowledge of many of the politically sensitive parts of Asia. He won a medal from the Royal Geographic Society for his foray into Afghanistan in 1894, but by then had already spent two years in Persia and similar time in central Russia. Curzon's travels gave him unprecedented perspective for someone of his political rank, and regarding Japan, Curzon wrote in 1894:

Among the respects in which the advance of modern Japan has been most rapid, though as yet scarcely appreciated by foreigners, is the development of the military and naval forces of the empire. Aspiring to play a predominant part in the politics of East Asia, she has spared no effort and shrunk from no sacrifice to place herself in the matter of armed equipment upon a level with her possible competitors.¹²⁴

Curzon went on to suggest, prophetically, that, "...it is largely by the offer of the alliance of her navy that Japan hopes in the future to control the balance of power in the Far East."¹²⁵ This was in the future, and whatever the effect on Curzon's own thinking, there is little to suggest that his writing had much influence on wider contemporary opinion. That said, Curzon was soon back in a position to influence conventional thinking directly- after returning from his travels in East Asia, he became Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

¹²⁴ George Curzon, *Problems of the Far East: Japan-Korea-China*, (London: Longman's, 1894), 45.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

Curzon had also spent time in China, and had done a better job than most of reading its political and military predicaments. He argued that, "...there exists a large corps of writers who never cease to press upon the public acceptance an implicit belief in the strength and resolution of China..." but that a military operation against China would in fact, "...be a military promenade, attended by little fighting and no risk."¹²⁶ While China remained at peace during his visit, Curzon suggested that, "...the golden hour in which China might make herself strong if she either had the will or could resolve upon the way, is allowed to slip by; and a frontier which might...be rendered almost invulnerable continues to invite the enemy's assault."¹²⁷ Curzon went on to suggest that the strategic interests of China and Britain were so similar that an alliance between them was precluded only by the xenophobic policies which ruled in Beijing.¹²⁸ Had Curzon's observations been more widely distributed, the strategic picture in East Asia might have been quite different.

Still, the majority of opinions were informed by flawed assumptions, and the conventional wisdom regarding Chinese military potential rested on numbers, tangible units that military observers could record and quantify.¹²⁹ As China did not have a national army, Japan would engage Li Hongzhang's Northern armies, which certainly looked formidable on paper. Garrisoned across his three provinces, Fengtian, Shandong, and Zhili, were 40 battalions of Li's personal Huai army, trained and equipped with modern weapons, and the regular Han Green Standard army. However, beneath the spit

¹²⁶ Ibid, 299.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 301.

¹²⁹ For example, see *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 89, p. 52-3., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* Vol. 4, Doc. 92, p. 54.

and polish the Chinese military machine was a shambles produced by years of central neglect and contradictory political expectations.

Li had approximately 20,000 men who were properly equipped for front-line combat, with little hope of acquiring reinforcements.¹³⁰ Aside from parade drill, these units' previous military experience was limited to restoring order among rebellious farmers of doubtful military competence. The Green Standard Army, which enrolled another 20,000 men, was little more than an instrument for political patronage and in practice was useful only as a police force. It would have next to no value on a battlefield. Further, support infrastructure for any of these forces was all but non-existent. The lack of planning for engineering, transport, or medical services would have serious consequences for troops attempting to operate in, or even get to, the field. But the inability to organize even the most rudimentary supply services would not only influence the outcome of the fighting, but put the lie to China's ability to bring overwhelming force to bear against foreign aggressors.¹³¹

The lack of supply services would prove especially problematic as without regular supply Chinese troops were compelled to live off of the land they moved through. Supply was thus irregular and devastating to regional economies. It also meant that troop strength was limited by the ability of the local economy to feed it, ruling out the possibility of a million Chinese soldiers being concentrated anywhere near Manchuria.

Further, Chinese military regulations prescribed the death penalty for officers who made even tactical adjustments to the positions indicated in their orders, or destroyed

¹³⁰ Paine, 125.

¹³¹ Ibid.

government issued weapons or equipment for any reason.¹³² Such rules of engagement probably worked well enough against rebellious peasants, but would prove dangerously inadequate against a better trained opponent. In practice, it meant that the invading Japanese would be well supplied by captured Chinese goods and material.

Finally, politics further complicated matters. The use of independent commands compelled the Qing to maintain a series of relatively weak regional armies, intentionally starved of funds, to prevent their commanders from threatening the dynasty.¹³³ This explains why, for practical purposes, the nation of Japan was about to fight a war against a Chinese regional governor. The various military forces spread across China which Li did not command were effectively multiple independent armies, regionally recruited and equipped with the explicit intention of making any sort of joint operations as difficult as possible. Li could expect no help from that quarter. To whatever extent matters could be made worse, as hostilities loomed the Empress and the literati simply assumed that the impudent Japanese would be easily crushed, and would not even consider negotiation.¹³⁴ Li was commanded to fight, and expected to win, against a cohesive, modernized Japanese army of 100,000 well trained and properly equipped men.

Perhaps the only real advantage the Chinese possessed was geographic. The supply lines of any Japanese army in Korea would have considerable vulnerabilities. If the Chinese could disrupt Japanese naval operations, the fighting would probably be limited in scope and might end in short order. Failing this, a competent land defense

¹³² Guy Boulais, *Manuel du Code Chinois (Chinese Legal Code Manual)*, (Chang-hai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1924), 415-418.

¹³³ Paine, 143.

¹³⁴ "Chinese Accept War," *The New York Times*, 3 August 1894, p. 5.

would require the Japanese to move their supplies along some of the worst roads in East Asia, increasing the economic cost to Japan, slowing their advance, and buying time for the Chinese to pursue allies, all of which had the potential to make further hostilities impractical. If the conflict could be stretched into a battle of attrition, Li must have believed that a combination of the harsh Manchurian winter and complex Japanese supply chain would stall the Japanese and force compromise.¹³⁵

Li's thinking suggests a very narrow conception of the approaching conflict. He seems to have imagined that Japan, like Li himself, would strain its resources to the limit to fight in Korea and that as a result there would be as much combat in the political arena as there would be on the ground. In fact, Japanese planners would embark their German-trained armies on a campaign for total military victory, and would not pursue political goals until they had gained undisputed control of the field.¹³⁶

Even to contemplate the sort of operation the Japanese were about to undertake, they needed reliable control of the sea lanes between Japan and Korean ports. International opinion of the Chinese navy was informed by a series of erroneous assumptions very similar to the ones that surrounded the Chinese army. If skillfully employed, the Chinese navy could cripple or even completely undermine a Japanese campaign in Korea. Naturally, Japanese planners had as their first priority achieving decisive control of the sea lanes their armies would need for reinforcement and supply, after which they planned a pincer movement on Manchuria. One force would move up through Korea while another landed and besieged Wei-Hai-Wei, prior to an invasion of

¹³⁵ "Marching Against Seoul," *The New York Times*, 11 August 1894, p. 5., Paine, 154.

¹³⁶ Paine, 153.

Zhili Province and the investment of Beijing.¹³⁷ As Chinese armies prepared to defend their influence in a tributary state, Japan prepared to strike at the heart of the Chinese Empire.

Since naval dominance was vital to the Japanese plan of attack, Japan began the conflict by attacking Chinese shipping around Korea, increasing their odds of success by neglecting to issue any formal statement announcing the onset of hostilities. Chinese transports were already moving troops and supplies to reinforce positions around Seoul. Moving before these reinforcements could dig in, Japan seized the Korean royal palace on 25 July, at which point China inexplicably ordered its warships to steam back to Chinese waters. En route, two of them were sunk, and the Japanese created a major international incident when they subsequently sank the British-flagged transport *Kaoshing* which was carrying what Western observers considered to be the best trained infantry unit under Chinese command.¹³⁸ The Japanese proceeded to rescue the transport's British crew, but left the Chinese to their fates, although a passing German freighter rescued about 150 men.¹³⁹

Interviews with the rescued sailors produced sternly worded stories in the Western press decrying this treatment of the Chinese, and Japan took notice.¹⁴⁰ While Japanese treatment of the Chinese would hardly improve over the course of the fighting, Japan would make a concerted effort to manipulate the Western press into reporting that

¹³⁷ Ballard, 132-3., Paine, 151.

¹³⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 1, p. 13., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 194, p. 93., "Pei Yang Squadron Puts Back," *The New York Times*, 3 August 1894, Pg. 5.

¹³⁹ "Chinese Rescued By Germans," *The New York Times*, 4 August 1894, Pg. 5., Paine, 132.

¹⁴⁰ "Talk Of Peaceful Settlement," *The New York Times*, 6 August 1894, Pg. 5., "China Makes A War Levy," *New York Times*, 10 August 1894, Pg. 5.

it had, cultivating an image compatible with their claims to represent a civilizing force in Asia. Popular perceptions of relative strength in East Asia were about to be dramatically revised, and Japanese leaders understood that the success or failure of their media controls would play a significant role in legitimizing their actions.

Indeed, it was in the weeks leading up to the war that many Western publics became aware of an East Asia which had previously been of little interest to them. As hostilities seemed increasingly probable, broadsheets in all the Great Powers dispatched reporters who proceeded to file stories contrasting the backwardness of Chinese military organization with the Japanese mobilization, which any Western power would have been proud to have called their own.¹⁴¹

As might be expected by this point, the actual war was a rather one-sided affair. Probably fearing to lose more of his very expensive navy in piecemeal engagements, Li ordered the Chinese navy onto the defensive and never even attempted to disrupt the Japanese transport operation landing forces in Korea. Scarcely able to believe their good fortune, Japan commenced a brisk transport operation which poured troops and supplies into Korea. The land battles in Korea started at Songhwan, when the Japanese garrison in Seoul marched south to attack a detachment of Chinese troops encamped there as part of a vague strategy to pin Japanese forces in the capital. The Japanese attacked, and turned the Chinese out of prepared positions in a single night. They retreated toward the nearby

¹⁴¹ For Example, see “Japanese Naval Warfare: The Fleet Cruising About The Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li,” *The New York Times*, 16 August 1894, Pg. 5., “Britain Wants China to Win,” *The New York Times*, 12 August 1894, Pg. 1.

town of Asan. As their orders did not instruct Chinese officers to destroy them, the Japanese captured the large stores of food and weapons abandoned in the fortifications.¹⁴²

The reality of the situation was beyond the pessimistic imagination of the Japanese commander, Major General Oshima. The Chinese force he had defeated had not been a detachment but the main body of Chinese forces in Korea, and it had not withdrawn, but had disintegrated in the course of its rout, its troops often discarding their uniforms and stealing civilian clothes from local Koreans.¹⁴³ When Japanese troops renewed their advance the next morning, they found almost nothing in the way of opposition, and with that the encirclement of Seoul, along with most of China's influence in Korea, was broken.

Almost immediately, the regional network of telegraphic cables was effectively destroyed by the fighting, and reliable communications would be a problem for the remainder of the war.¹⁴⁴ Without reliable information, Japanese commentators struggled to explain the ease of their first victory. As subsequent fighting made it clear that the victory was not a fluke, Japanese uncertainty became elation.¹⁴⁵ The Chinese press, which had no way of receiving information so rapidly from the remote Korean front, did not allow that to hinder their reporting. Chinese sources initially reported a victory, and later that vastly outnumbered Chinese forces had held out for days, inflicting serious losses before tactically withdrawing.¹⁴⁶ This was the beginning of a pattern of official

¹⁴²*British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 1, p. 4., "Routed the Chinese Troops: Report of the Fight at Shan Yeng – Fleeing Toward The Country," *The New York Times*, 4 August 1894, Pg. 5., Paine, 158.

¹⁴³ Paine, 159.

¹⁴⁴ "Want To Fight For Japan," *The New York Times*, 7 August 1894, Pg. 5.

¹⁴⁵ "Japan Confident of Victory," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1894, Pg. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Paine, 160.

misinformation which would appear in the Chinese press for the rest of the war.¹⁴⁷

Western reporters, whose access to information was at first largely through statements provided by the two governments, were perplexed by the contradictory announcements, and when evidence of the massive Japanese victories became undeniable, would see the deception as yet another indicator of the fundamental corruption of the Chinese government.¹⁴⁸

Songhwan was to set the tone for the Chinese land campaign. Again at Pyongyang, numerically superior Chinese forces dug into prepared positions were routed by Japanese troops at the end of their ever lengthening supply lines. Six hundred prisoners from Pyongyang were brought back to Japan and treated to the finest medical care available, for the benefit of the foreign correspondents stationed there.¹⁴⁹ Glowing stories were filed in Western newspapers reporting on the excellent treatment these captives received, and the remarkable kindness and generosity of the Japanese. The event was unique, however. Indeed, as reporters caught up to the advancing Japanese front, they began to note that the Japanese would often emerge from combat with no prisoners at all, not even wounded, suggesting that in at least some cases captives were probably executed.¹⁵⁰ Intimations to this effect found their way into press stories, which the

¹⁴⁷ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 360, p. 186.

¹⁴⁸ For example, see "Shining Specks On Mars: Affairs Of Corea Not More Easily Interpreted," *The New York Times*, 5 August, 1894, Pg. 1., "Japanese Fleet Defeated," *The New York Times*, 12 August 1894, p. 5., "A Victory For The Chinese: Japanese Driven With Heavy Loss From Ping-Yang," *The New York Times*, 22 August 1894, p. 5. "Planning A March On Peking," *The New York Times*, 29 August 1894, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Paine, 175.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

Japanese government denied by suggesting that the allegations had their origins in official Chinese statements and were thus wholly unreliable.¹⁵¹

What made the conflict so interesting for British observers was the spectacle of an island nation, employing thoroughly modern British equipment, grappling with the challenge of conducting a major land campaign on the continent. Certainly, the technical aspects of the conflict were of interest. All the Great Powers, with their fleets of gleaming new warships, had relatively little experience with actually using them to fight. How much armor was “adequate?” Was it better to have large guns, or ones with higher rates of fire? Basic assumptions about how their untried, modern weapons would stand up to field operations were being tested before them in East Asia. More significant, at least for British observers, were the geostrategic similarities between Japan and Britain. It was difficult to miss the parallel, even more so after the Japanese navy proceeded to conduct itself with a professionalism which compared favorably with Western standards, and certainly the British would be interested in the performance of a force so closely modeled on their own.¹⁵²

Indeed, Julian Corbett, who prepared a secret history of the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese war in 1914, assessed the strategic similarities between Japan and Great Britain. Corbett was a theoretical pillar of the British navy at the turn of the century. He’d studied law, and gone on to produce numerous well regarded historical works on topics ranging from the operations of the Tudor navy to Trafalgar. A regular lecturer at both Greenwich and Portsmouth, Corbett worried that many of his contemporaries had become overly

¹⁵¹ “False Tales of Cruelty,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 1895, p. 5.

¹⁵² Corbett, 1.

reliant on the possibilities offered by new technologies, and were neglecting the philosophical tenets of naval strategy in their officer training. Seeing himself in an age dangerously bereft of guiding principles for naval commanders, he sought to instill practical, critical thinking skills in officer candidates.¹⁵³

As a result, Corbett was highly critical of the version of events which would emerge in Britain's first official history of the Sino-Japanese War, which was compiled after the fighting but compromised in a number of areas for political reasons.¹⁵⁴ Corbett's secret work, which was restricted for decades after its completion, was able to be frank and critical, tending to present modern naval conflict as an exercise in the tactical and strategic employment of naval force rather than a contest between technical or weapon systems.¹⁵⁵ He went so far as to suggest that Korea occupied a similar place in Japanese strategic thinking as the Low Countries did for the British, equating Britain and Japan so thoroughly that the reader is invited to exchange their geographic positions.¹⁵⁶ Corbett saw Japan as engaging the same sorts of challenges Britain would face in attempting to conduct similar naval operations, to land troops in France or Belgium, for example. However, those challenges were never very significant in this earlier conflict with China. The Chinese navy of 1895 had already demonstrated a questionable grasp of naval strategy by retreating rather than attempting to harass Japanese transports bound for

¹⁵³ Geoffery Till, *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in memory of Bryan McLaren Ranft*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 65-7.

¹⁵⁴ Donald M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe*, (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), 137-41.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 70-1.

¹⁵⁶ Corbett, 2-4.

Korea. The Japanese Navy would go on to prove that sophisticated strategic thinking was hardly necessary to prevail against the Chinese.

After the early black eye of the *Kowshing* affair, the Japanese navy would proceed to distinguish itself, destroying the Chinese fleet in two engagements. Before the fighting began, it was widely believed that Japan and China enjoyed a rough naval parity.¹⁵⁷ Chinese ships tended to be older, but they mounted heavier armor and guns, while the Japanese navy had been built to favor speed, and employed newer, quick-firing guns.¹⁵⁸ Once again, China would provide the world with a spectacle of incompetence.

The Chinese fleet had been ordered to stand on the defensive at the opening of the war, and when the Japanese proceeded to attack them, the Chinese sailors proved to be inadequately trained and were unable to maneuver their vessels effectively. Once again, systematic neglect would hamper Chinese operations as ships put to sea with inadequate supplies of coal and fresh water, their magazines half-filled and often loaded with shells of the wrong caliber.¹⁵⁹ What shells there were proved unreliable, sometimes having had their high-explosive warheads filled with cement or porcelain by corrupt contractors.¹⁶⁰ Operating with textbook precision, the Japanese shot them to pieces. What remained of the Chinese navy limped back under the protection of the heavy shore batteries of Port Arthur, its morale shattered.

The Japanese proceeded with their plan to capture key strategic points on the approaches to Beijing. They began by marching their army in Korea across the Chinese

¹⁵⁷ Krausse, 48, Paine, 180.

¹⁵⁸ Ballard, 133.

¹⁵⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 413, p. 216-7.

¹⁶⁰ Paine, 181-2.

border and somewhat recklessly directing it to capture the modern and well defended fortress of Port Arthur on the Liaodong Peninsula. The operation had the makings of a military disaster. The attacking Japanese force was exhausted and lacked the appropriate equipment for a siege. The fortress was well sited and reasonably equipped. Against a motivated garrison, the proposed attack should have been suicidal. As matters stood, the Chinese defenders were brushed aside and the fortress was captured in 48 hours. Having anticipated a siege of considerably duration and hardly able to believe the scale of the unfolding victory, Japanese forces proceeded to move toward the city of Mukden, politically sensitive as the site of the Qing imperial tombs. Simultaneously, Japanese troops attacked and captured Wei-Hai-Wei.

Faced with such glaring reverses, the Chinese government finally stopped claiming victories but continued to portray its defeats as variations on the Greek performance at Thermopylae.¹⁶¹ This series of defeats, particularly the collapse of Port Arthur to a Japanese force which lacked heavy artillery and which was able to capture the remaining 10 Chinese warships resting idly at anchor, finally killed the myth of Chinese military effectiveness for European observers.¹⁶² As the confusing, contradictory battlefield reports resolved themselves into Japanese victories, it became clear to European observers that the Chinese military was not struggling to effectively employ its modern weapons, or even to put its military resources in order, but was simply in the process of collapsing.¹⁶³ Further, it was clear that with control of the naval approach to

¹⁶¹ Ballard, 135-7., Paine, 201.

¹⁶² Paine, 220-1.

¹⁶³ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, ed. Part I, Series E, Asia: The Sino-Japanese War and the Triple Intervention, Vol. 5, Doc. 1, p. 1.

Beijing, Japanese successes would not be reversed by hordes of Chinese soldiers drawn from the internal provinces. The prospect of a sweeping Japanese success, possibly toppling the Qing, began to enter discussions in capitols across Europe and North America.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, with the capture of Wei-Hai-Wei the Japanese had achieved most of their initial strategic goals for the war. In the estimation of most Western governments, Japan had not only replaced China as the premier regional power in East Asia, but had demonstrated that it could punch at the weight of a Western power.¹⁶⁵ The Japanese navy had performed very respectably. By the end of the war it had destroyed 22 vessels of the Chinese fleet, and captured 12 others intact while losing only two of their own. Indeed, after Wei-Hai-Wei, the Chinese actually closed their naval board- it no longer had any vessels to maintain.¹⁶⁶ The Japanese reflagged the captured ships and entered them into their own service.

Momentum had begun to build in certain parts of the Chinese government for some sort of diplomatic settlement after the humiliation of Port Arthur.¹⁶⁷ Even the Chinese political leadership had begun to notice that the longer the war continued, the more territory they seemed to lose. However, the Qing desperately wanted a peace which could be politically spun as a victory, allowing them to maintain their aura of cultural superiority. Cognizant of this, Japan conducted its diplomacy with the explicit intention of thwarting Qing ambitions. The result was a series of diplomatic false starts, as the

¹⁶⁴ "China's Hopes Of Peace," *The New York Times*, 12 April, 1895, p.5., "Chinese Dynastic Peril," *The New York Times*, 18 April 1895, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 308, p. 188., Ballard, 172.

¹⁶⁶ Paine, 235.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-8.

Chinese attempted to negotiate with teams of improperly accredited diplomats, who were each rejected by the Japanese government.¹⁶⁸ During the ensuing delay, Japan invaded Formosa and the Pescadore Islands.¹⁶⁹

The peace agreement was intended to give Japan the beginnings of its Asian empire, requiring China to acknowledge the “independence” of Korea, cede the Liaodong Peninsula, a large area of the Manchurian coast, as well as the Pescadores and Formosa, grant the Japanese an exploitative new commercial treaty modeled on those of the Western powers, and levy a massive indemnity of 300 million *taels*.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was intended to cement a new balance of power in East Asia, forcing China to seek significant foreign loans to pay the indemnity, which Japan would plow into new military spending. However, with Chinese weakness revealed to the world and Japan already beginning the process of carving up Chinese land, the whole region was in danger of becoming an international battleground for influence and territory.

Indeed, the Japanese Foreign Ministry was already concerned that the scale of Japanese success might draw unwelcome attention from one or several of the European powers. Isolating the Chinese from Western allies had been a fundamental prerequisite of the campaign, even dictating strategy- the Chinese arsenal at Shanghai, for example, had been left intact lest military operations disrupt the flow of British trade.¹⁷¹ As they formulated their demands for the Shimonoseki agreement, the Japanese released the

¹⁶⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 1, p. 6., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 187, p116-7., Paine., 256.

¹⁶⁹ “Japanese At Pescadores,” *The New York Times*, 9 April, 1895, p.5., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 215, p. 142-3.

¹⁷⁰ Ballard, 173-4., Paine, 265.

¹⁷¹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 191, p. 92., Paine, 279.

economic provisions of the treaty, which would automatically be extended to the other powers through the MFN clauses in their own treaties.¹⁷² However, this rather crude nod to the bottom line could hardly obscure the very favorable strategic position Japan would enjoy, holding the best ports on the sea lanes to Beijing.

Japanese concerns were well founded. Their success had aroused envy in a variety of states, and diplomatic wheels were already spinning.¹⁷³ Six days after the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki were announced, the German, French, and Russian ministers arrived at the Japanese Foreign Ministry to offer Japan their collective “advice.” It was the considered opinion of their governments that Japan should return the Liaodong Peninsula to Chinese control, as Japanese occupation would be a source of continual instability. It was made clear that Japan would face a coalition of European states if it failed to comply.¹⁷⁴

Product of an age when the practice of diplomacy was a continual exercise in secrecy, the origins of this meeting remain obscure.¹⁷⁵ The French, who signed on in the eleventh hour, had obviously come late to the game in support of their Russian allies. Witte claims in his memoirs to be ultimately responsible for the intervention, claiming that the foreign minister, Prince Lobanov-Rostovski, “...knew no more about the Far East than the average schoolboy.”¹⁷⁶ Russia would seem the likely instigator, save that Tsar Alexander III had died unexpectedly on 1 November, 1894, at age 49. His 26 year old

¹⁷² “Text Of China’s Treaty,” *The New York Times*, 22 June 1895, p. 5., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 275, p. 173.

¹⁷³ For example, see, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 296, p. 182.

¹⁷⁴ “Japan’s Terms For Peace,” *The New York Times*, 22 April 1895, p. 5., Ballard, 176., Paine, 289.

¹⁷⁵ For example, see, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, Doc. 1, p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ Sergei Witte, *The Memoirs of Count Witte*, Abraham Yarmolinsky trans., (Garden City, N.Y., and Toronto: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1921), p. 82.

son, who succeeded him as Tsar Nicholas II, was hardly in a position to organize a major international coalition in the hectic first days of his reign. It is also possible that Kaiser Wilhelm II, the ambitious 36 year old ruler of Germany, began the diplomatic effort, believing that a destabilized China held out the possibility of a significant territorial empire for Germany. While it is impossible to be certain, considering the Tsar's early experiences in East Asia, Witte's version seems more probable.¹⁷⁷

Whatever the origins of the Three-Power Intervention, the immediate results were clear. It did not take the Japanese long to complete the necessary addition and conclude that they could not reasonably hope to defeat a power on the order of France, Germany, or Russia singly by that point, let alone acting in concert.¹⁷⁸ Japan was already outnumbered, their forces committed across China, their costs mounting; a raft of new opponents was out of the question. Foreign minister Mutsu Munemitsu attempted a diplomatic offensive, first trying to split the Russians away from the other powers, and then trying to entice Britain or the United States to openly support the Japanese position. Such support was not forthcoming, and the Japanese were left to console themselves with the knowledge that at least concession would legitimize the other articles of the treaty. Every effort was made by the Japanese Foreign ministry to make the return of the Liaodong peninsula appear an act of magnanimity, although it also quietly increased the size of the Chinese indemnity by 30 million *taels*.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ See also, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 472, p. 277.

¹⁷⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 654, p. 366.

¹⁷⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 479, p. 279., Doc. 655, p. 366., Full text of final treaty available in, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 667, p. 372-6.

For its part, Great Britain would have preferred to see no disturbance at all to the regional status quo. The British cabinet met twice on the issue, but Britain was wary of disrupting long running efforts at maintaining stable relationships with Russia and France at a variety of points from Africa to India, and equally convinced after informal conversation that the French and Russians were prepared to resort to force.¹⁸⁰ Britain thus adopted a position of studied neutrality, unwilling to entertain the risks associated with support for either side.¹⁸¹ However, the Three-Power Intervention marked an increase in European diplomatic activity in East Asia, and Britain found itself after this date increasingly forced to shift away from its low-impact free trade policies, and toward a distinctly more assertive policy in which security and economic concerns would come to be inextricably intertwined.¹⁸² Indeed, considering the financial and diplomatic resources Britain would expend in the upcoming years in East Asia, to protect a Chinese market which in 1896 was purchasing only 8% of British exports, it seems more realistic to argue that British priorities would shift until strategic interests would come to eclipse trade by the turn of the century.¹⁸³

For Japan, the political ramifications of the intervention were enormous. Japanese foreign policy turned inward in the face of European threats. The Japanese concession opened a rift between the government and its military leaders. Japan's military establishment nurtured the idea that politicians on the home front had managed to lose at

¹⁸⁰ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 28-31.

¹⁸¹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 385, p. 229., Paine, 288.

¹⁸² Cain and Hopkins, 361, 368.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 363.

the conference table what they had won on the battlefield.¹⁸⁴ When the news became public, a significant segment of the population was relieved just to have the fighting over, but among the majority there was general outrage. In many Japanese eyes, the European powers had demonstrated that despite their publicly stated respect for international agreements, the only principle they would reliably respect was strength.¹⁸⁵ Almost overnight, the sense of elation which had infused Japanese politics since the early weeks of the fighting was replaced by humiliation.¹⁸⁶ The Ito government had initially hoped to invest the Chinese indemnity in repairing the damage the war had done to the Japanese economy and a series of new industrialization projects, but that had now become politically impossible.¹⁸⁷ Japan's last military spending bill in 1893 had limped through a clearly ambivalent Diet. Two years later, military spending had become an undisputed national priority. Defense spending bills in 1895 would double the size of the army and commence a decade long program of shipbuilding to expand the size of the navy.¹⁸⁸

In China, defeat left the Qing morally, and financially, bankrupt. Conduct of the war and the subsequent indemnity forced the Chinese to seek foreign loans in the amount of £48 million. Although the HSBC struggled to meet its portion of the amount (the full sum being split between it and German and Russian banks) and requested formal guarantees for the issue from Whitehall, it was feared that any official assistance would encourage other governments to pursue more direct action. As a compromise, the HSBC was permitted to list as a condition of the loan the transfer of repayment authority to the

¹⁸⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 646, p. 361-2.

¹⁸⁵ Paine, 290.

¹⁸⁶ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 724, p. 417.

¹⁸⁷ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, Doc. 731, p. 420.

¹⁸⁸ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 36.

British-run Imperial Maritime Customs, which as part of the agreement effectively assumed control of a large portion of Chinese state finances.¹⁸⁹

Strategically, the situation was also dire. The Chinese Navy had been annihilated, along with the best units from its most sophisticated army. Provinces that had seen fighting had been stripped of crops and livestock by hungry soldiers from both sides, and reports of famine began to arrive from Manchuria during 1895. Most ominously for Beijing, the literati who stood as virtually the last bastion of support for the Qing, saw the defeat as irrefutable evidence that the dynasty was failing to perform the fundamental duties Confucian tradition required.¹⁹⁰ The humiliation of Shimonoseki would prod the Qing into a fresh effort at reform, which would founder as it gradually became apparent that the regime no longer had the authority necessary to carry it off.¹⁹¹

Further humiliations were in store as the powers that had intervened against the Japanese turned to demand new concessions from China by way of reward. The French moved first, adjusting China's southern borders in their favor and receiving a variety of railroad and mining concessions in provinces near Indochina.¹⁹² France also extracted a port in the Pescadores.¹⁹³ German negotiators received their first minor concession at Hankou, but as they crossed the region with rail lines and mining operations the concession rapidly evolved into a springboard, allowing the Germans to gain control of the entirety of Shandong province just two years later.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Paine, 303.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ British Documents on Foreign Affairs, Vol. 4, Doc. 1, p. 12., King, *A Concise Economic History of Modern China*, p. 75.

¹⁹² Paine, 304.

¹⁹³ "France Obtains A Port," *The New York Times*, 12 June 1895, p. 5.

¹⁹⁴ Paine, 305.

However, the most assertive and threatening demands would come from Russia. Over the course of the Sino-Japanese war, the Japanese threat to Russia's vision of itself as the dominant power in East Asia had become only too apparent. Even though Britain had opted not to play a part in the Three Power incident, Japan had succeeded in gaining influence in Korea and was obviously now in a position to threaten Manchuria.¹⁹⁵ The scale of Japanese success had transformed the Russian understanding of Japanese policy goals from an inconvenience into a major security risk.¹⁹⁶ Further, Japanese reliance on naval power to project their influence made the Russian acquisition of a warm-water port in East Asia along with a major increase in Russia's Asian naval power a matter of great urgency.¹⁹⁷ The combination of factors augured increasing tension across the region.

On 6 April, 1895, Russia's new Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince A.B. Lobanov-Rostovskii presented Nicholas II with a memorandum which gave the young Tsar a straightforward policy choice regarding East Asia. The Tsar could choose to tack toward peace with a prostrate China that could no longer threaten Russian interests in the region and concentrate diplomatic and military resources elsewhere. Lobanov-Rostovskii's other option for his Tsar was to fundamentally reorient Russia's foreign policy goals away from the Near East, and to direct resources toward acquiring the territory of the crumbling Qing Empire.¹⁹⁸

It was now a risky proposal, as Russia was coming late to the game. Ten years earlier, Russia might have contemplated a contest for Chinese territory as one fought

¹⁹⁵ Malozemoff, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Paine, 286.

¹⁹⁷ Malozemoff, 67., "Russia and Japan," *The New York Times*, 1 June 1895, p. 7.

¹⁹⁸ Malozemoff, 62.

mostly against China. Now any such campaign would have to take into account the interests of all the Great Powers, including an assertive Japan that was clearly prepared to fight for its interests. Further, the fundamental reason that Russia had never previously mounted a serious expedition in East Asia remained unchanged- the only reliable access was still a very long walk across the Asian mainland. In the end, it was a combination of ambition fueled by Chinese weakness and the threat that some other power would claim territory that could threaten the security of Eastern Russia that decided matters. Nicholas resolutely chose to make Northeast China the new focus of Russia's territorial ambitions.¹⁹⁹

The instrument to facilitate Russian dominion would be the Trans-Siberian railroad. A monumental undertaking, the projected costs were enormous. Finance Minister Sergei Witte, who had focused his university education on railway network construction, had begun preliminary work in 1891 as part of a project to cultivate the economic potential of Siberia and Russia's Pacific coast. The new strategic urgency brought the project an influx of new funding and construction was greatly accelerated. The railroad promised significant advantages to Russia. Not only would it gain the ability to project troops into East Asia, their movement could no longer be hampered by naval intervention.

It was with this new strategic picture in mind that the Russians came to the bargaining table with China. Unlike France and Germany, Russian negotiators offered the Chinese a secret alliance, in which Russia guaranteed to protect the Liaodong Peninsula

¹⁹⁹ Denis Warner and Peggy Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905*, (London, Portland OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 69,76., Clubb, 118-9.

from Japan in return for a railway concession which would allow them to run a line of the Trans-Siberian railroad across Manchuria to it.²⁰⁰ Negotiated in a flurry of ostentatious gifts and outright bribery, the Russians secured a position that was at least as threatening to the balance of power as Japanese occupation of Liaodong had been.

If the British response to the latest Russian advance was ambivalent, the nature of the agreement made Russia's agenda clear. The new railway cut hundreds of miles into Manchuria. It ran through Harbin and was built on the Russian gauge, drawing its traffic toward Russia rather than China. Further, the Russians secured the right to use their own regular army troops as a security force along the tracks, meaning that Russian soldiers could legitimately be stationed from the Amur River, the northern Chinese border, all the way across Manchuria.²⁰¹ When the Germans moved to consolidate their control over Shandong Province in March 1898, the Russians pressured China into an outright 25 year lease of the Liaodong peninsula, the very location the Sino-Russian alliance had ostensibly been intended to preserve for the Qing. For good measure, the Russians demanded yet another rail concession, this one running to Port Arthur.²⁰² Clearly, the Russians seemed determined to continue their southward expansion.

²⁰⁰ Paine, 307.

²⁰¹ Malozemoff, 67.

²⁰² Ibid., 111.

CHAPTER FOUR:
STRATEGIC CHALLENGES TO BRITISH AUTHORITY AND THE SEARCH FOR
A MODUS VIVENDI WITH RUSSIA

If the British continued to enjoy global preeminence over their rivals, it was a preeminence increasingly challenged, and maintained at increasing cost, by the closing years of the 19th century. Challenged by Russia's assertive diplomatic agenda and by the increasing difficulty of maintaining economic and naval preeminence around the world, Britain would seek to reduce the commitments straining its limited military resources without abandoning its fundamental policy goals of maintaining open sea lanes and containing the Russians in the Eurasian heartland. However, with each passing month the Russians worked to improve their strategic position in East Asia, looking toward the day when the trans-Siberian railroad would enable them to operate there without fear of being stymied by naval power. The British effort to reduce the mounting costs of their global network of naval vessels translated into a search to economize on their naval costs in any way possible. This meant withdrawing entirely from some stations, such as those around North America. However in East Asia, where the security threat was far more immediate, the British would seek a diplomatic solution with Russia. The Japanese were also confronted with the challenge of Russian power, and would seek a diplomatic solution that would acknowledge Japanese and Russian spheres of influence. Both Japan and Britain would reach independent agreements with the Russians, but these treaties were rapidly undermined, either by the actions of local Russian commanders far from Moscow,

or by explicit order from ministers who had never intended to allow diplomatic agreements to impede the Russian imperial vision for East Asia.

It was the revitalized effort at constructing the Trans-Siberian railway, and its unexpected success, that riveted British attention on the region. The initial British response to the assertive new Russian policy was positive, even encouraging, observing that:

The Far East is a safety-valve for Russian aggression; it will take her years to consolidate her hold on Manchuria, while the prodigious outlay this step has involved is by no means finished. In a sense, this latest advance will for many years be a source of weakness to Russia in offering points of attack, which before the occupation of the Liao-tung peninsula were so few, that, with the exception of Germany, she was practically invulnerable...²⁰³

In addition to these new strategic vulnerabilities, the Russians were turning away from their long running efforts in the Near East, which the British saw as threatening to Indian security, and embarking on the Trans-Siberian project which would necessarily consume their foreign policy for years, even decades.²⁰⁴ Some doubted Russia was even capable of carrying off such a project of such scale and complexity.

So it was with increasing alarm that the British watched a combination of French capital (made possible by their alliance with Russia) and Witte's organizational ability push Russian rails across central Asia at a very rapid pace. Further, in the years after 1895 the Russians managed to maintain the working relationship established with the

²⁰³ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 7, document 149, pg. 117.

²⁰⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Volume 7, document 149, pg. 117., Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, (London and New York: Longman, 1985), 232.

French in East Asia during the Three Power negotiations.²⁰⁵ Having just left the Japanese to their fate over Shimonoseki, British influence in the region seemed at low ebb.

Indeed, East Asia is the clearest expression of a series of trends which troubled the makers of British foreign policy in the closing decades of the 19th century. As noted above, in 1815 Britain had enjoyed significant advantages in naval power and industrial capacity, advantages which it had used to assert a renewed imperial vision around the world. In 1848, Britain had dominated the world's oceans with a relative handful of vessels - the Home Islands were protected by only 35 warships. The rest asserted British authority around the world: 31 in the Mediterranean, 27 in West Africa, 27 in China and the East Indies, 10 in the West Indies, 14 in South America, 12 in the Pacific, and 10 at the Cape of Good Hope.²⁰⁶ The British also owned thirty percent of the world's commercial shipping. The relatively small forces under British command were the largest Navy in the world, by a significant margin. No other nation even approached such an agglomeration of vessels, or the capacity to project influence that went with them.²⁰⁷ Further, the lack of a formidable rival meant that Britain was able over time to gain control of what Sir Admiral John Fischer would later call the "strategic keys that lock up the world" at relatively little expense.

As late as 1860, Britain continued to enjoy economic preeminence of similar dimensions. Britain dominated the European textile industries from the early 19th century, and by 1830 fifty percent of British exports were cotton goods.²⁰⁸ As the bottom began to

²⁰⁵ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 36.

²⁰⁶ Reynolds, 8.

²⁰⁷ Ferguson, 138-9.

²⁰⁸ Reynolds, 9.

fall out of the cotton market in the 1840's, the British used their advantageous industrial lead to dominate the emerging European markets in coal and steel.²⁰⁹ The profitability of these industries allowed Britons to accumulate significant capital reserves which could be invested abroad, financing the construction of industrial infrastructure around the world.²¹⁰ Indeed, in 1860 Great Britain, a nation with 2% of the world's population, controlled 40% of global trade in manufactured goods and enjoyed the highest GNP and per capita income in the world by a significant margin.²¹¹

However, in 1860 it was already possible to discern the trends which would bring increasing pressure on British economic predominance by the 1890's. Simply put, other countries had also begun to industrialize. British efforts to control the spread of their industrial technologies were ultimately futile, and nations following the British example could adopt proven equipment and techniques rather than repeating the experimentation which had been necessary to invent them.²¹² Worse, it was obvious that countries like the United States, with a vast internal market and barely surveyed natural resources, or Russia, which had historically buttressed its claims to great power status by reference to its enormous population, would have industrial potential on a scale which Britain would struggle to rival.²¹³

If the British were to uphold the fundamental strategic precept that had guided their foreign policy for the last century, specifically that no single power should be able

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 9-10.

²¹² Ibid., 13.

²¹³ Cain and Hopkins, 383., Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991), 81.

to dominate the European continent, they required control of the seas. Industrialization made strategic rivalry possible for those looking to challenge that naval predominance. By the second half of the 19th century, overseas colonies were seen as a marker of great power status by European states, and all who were able strove to acquire them. If Britain was no longer able to exercise decisive authority in Europe by the end of the 19th century, as evidenced by its inability to prevent the emergence of a unified Germany which would clearly become an economic rival, its naval preponderance allowed Britain to maintain its influence abroad. It is hardly coincidental that the economic rivalries which began to manifest around 1890 were accompanied by new strategic ones. Up to around 1890 Britain had been able to maintain a broad consensus that the maintenance of an open aquatic commons served broader European interests. Soon after that date, however, a confluence of trends meant that British naval power was challenged as it had not been in a generation.

The 1887 publication of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* accelerated something of an international obsession with naval power. While governing elites from around the world, including Japan and the United States, read the work with interest, it probably found no more favorable audience than in Germany.²¹⁴ Whereas before, France and especially Russia had been Britain's greatest rivals, the German decision to embark on a naval building program which was clearly intended as a challenge to British predominance was a major contributing factor to the siege mentality which began to emerge in Britain after 1890.²¹⁵ However, France and

²¹⁴ Herman, 473.

²¹⁵ Cain and Hopkins, 389.

Russia also began their own building programs, with most new French ships bolstering their Mediterranean fleet and with Russia assigning all new vessels built after 1898 to Port Arthur, Britain was forced to redeploy their forces across a variety of theatres to maintain regional balances of power.²¹⁶

However, the numeric challenge was only one dimension of the increasingly complex naval situation. Beginning with the launch of *Le Gloire* in 1859, the first “ironclad” ship, naval technology entered a five-decade period of accelerating technological experimentation. The products of the industrial revolution began to transform naval warfare, and ships were constructed in a dizzying variety of configurations. New ship designs experimented with rigging and armor, engines and gun configurations. Naval engineers refined the new technologies over time, but the trend seemed always toward larger ships with thicker armor, heavier guns, and larger engines, all purchased at ever greater expense. By the time the Anglo-German naval race was in full swing, it would be possible for a ship to become obsolete in the time necessary to construct it.

Domestically, the voters enfranchised in 1867 and 1884 demanded ever larger portions of the budget be directed toward social welfare, while at the same time international challenges stretched British defense spending to the breaking point.²¹⁷ The British response to the challenge of foreign naval construction was the Naval Defense Act of 1889, which codified the so-called two power standard. With this the British committed themselves to maintain a fleet capable of standing on equal terms against any

²¹⁶ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 93-4.

²¹⁷ Cain and Hopkins, 385.

two other navies in the world. The act appropriated funding to launch seventy new vessels, enough for several new fleets, but the pace of technological change would severely limit its service life.²¹⁸ It was becoming clear in Britain that it could no longer take for granted the naval superiority on which its prosperity had been built in the 19th century. The new surge of naval construction affected the bottom lines of governments across Europe in the 1890's, but Britain was hit the hardest. Committed to the two power standard and with security commitments which stretched from Newfoundland to Australia, while simultaneously finding that ever larger numbers of vessels were needed around the Home Islands to deter European rivals, the Royal Navy was desperate to economize.

One approach was to withdraw from the North American stations, in the belief that the United States, which would become responsible for regional security by default, fundamentally identified with British traditions of open markets and rule of law. As such, the American Navy was not an immediate security threat. In East Asia, the British were faced with harder choices. The newly assertive Russian policy there, manifested in the 1895 Three Power intervention, meant that East Asia was becoming a serious security threat, and Britain was determined to offset Russian advances. In March of 1895, Britain proposed taking over the port of Wei-Hai-Wei from the Japanese after they withdrew, with the conclusion of China's indemnity payments. It was an entirely political maneuver; Royal Navy inspectors had clearly stated in reports that Wei-Hai-Wei was not a particularly useful port, and the cabinet had to meet 5 times before a consensus to

²¹⁸ John Tetsuo Sumida, *In Defense of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy 1889-1914*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 21.

formally request the lease from China could be reached. The alternative, attempting to force the Russians to give up Port Arthur, was deemed too likely to start a shooting war.²¹⁹ The Japanese response illustrates that they were still hoping to resolve their outstanding security issues independently. Realizing that the British offer was diplomatic gold, the Japanese replied evasively, stalled the British, and opened a dialog with the Russians.

The inactivity of the Earl of Rosebury's government during the Three Power intervention drew intense domestic criticism, and the subsequent effort to demonstrate British interest in the region by securing Wei-Hai-Wei was not enough to save it. Following his resignation, voters returned a Unionist government in July of 1895 under Lord Salisbury, a figure who towered over the British political landscape and who would act as his own foreign minister.²²⁰ The Japanese quietly sounded out the new government on the possibility of an alliance through Ernest Mason Satow, who was serving in Siam at the time but was nevertheless seen as the most desirable contact due to his uniquely close relationship with several prominent Japanese politicians. Salisbury was wary of the Japanese, believing their military strength overrated and their diplomatic overture a ploy to play Britain and Russia off one another to Japanese advantage.²²¹

It was a reasonable concern. If the Japanese quarrel was with the Russians, perhaps it was the Russians they should be talking to. However, Russo-Japanese negotiations had hung up on questions of influence in Korea. In June of 1895, just after the end of war against China, the Japanese had loudly proclaimed Korean independence,

²¹⁹ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 57.

²²⁰ Steiner, 24.

²²¹ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 40.

and seem to have assumed that they could now act with impunity. When the Korean government resisted, the local Japanese administrators ordered the assassination of the Korean queen. The assassination was a political error of the first order, and could not possibly be concealed. The Japanese ambassador, named Miura, and much of his staff were recalled to Japan to face charges when their prominent role in the murder became embarrassingly common knowledge.²²² However, the *potemkin* trials which ensued were little more than damage control for the Western press. The cases were dismissed due to lack of evidence, and if Miura's career was affected, it was positively. He was ultimately made a viscount and served as privy councilor to the emperor.²²³ Clearly, Japan was tiring of attempting to manipulate Korea indirectly.

The murder of their monarch did little to improve Japanese standing with Korean political elites, and in February 1896 they appealed to the Russians for protection. The Russians responded energetically, and the Tsar's representatives moved to assume the role of regional hegemon by appealing to Chinese vanity. They concluded another secret defensive treaty with China in June 1896 which pledged them to joint military action to oppose any Japanese advance against Korea, China, or Russian East Asia.²²⁴ As the Russians were not about to place much value on the potential Chinese contribution to such an endeavor, they also extracted as their real price for the security guarantee a grant of Russian control over the Chinese Eastern Railway.²²⁵ Not that the Russians proved any more reliable with this second treaty than they had with the first- the Chinese request for

²²² Ibid., 42.

²²³ Warner and Warner, 94-5.

²²⁴ Clubb, 123.

²²⁵ Malozemoff, 117.

assistance when Germany seized Tsingtao in November of 1897 never received a response.²²⁶

With tensions rising, the Japanese and Russians resumed their negotiations, which Salisbury interrupted on 1 May by suddenly offering Japan British guarantees if they would acknowledge Korean neutrality. The sudden *volte face* is revealing. Whatever he thought of Japanese political maneuvering, Salisbury was alarmed by the prospect of Korea falling under Russian influence. His last minute maneuver came too late. Japan was less than 24 hours away from concluding an arrangement with the Russians, and the British were turned away.²²⁷

The ensuing treaty, formalized in June 1896 as the Yamagata-Lobanov Agreement, codified the financial relationship which each country could have with Korea, and permitted both to station troops on its soil to protect their assets which each could reinforce in the event of an emergency.²²⁸ While this might have appeared a neutral declaration, it was actually another blow to the Japanese, who were once again forced to watch their imperial ambitions thwarted, but at least it appeared that the Russians were prepared to acknowledge that Japan had legitimate interests at stake. Many in the Japanese government would come away believing that it might be possible to resolve their differences with the Russians diplomatically.

It was a somewhat counterintuitive body of opinion, as the Russians proceeded almost from day one to violate the terms of the new agreement with the Japanese, sending

²²⁶ Clubb, 124.

²²⁷ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 43.

²²⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 3, p. 26, document 386, p. 356., Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 44.

large numbers of “military advisors” to reorganize the Korean army and redoubling their efforts to gain control of the Korean economy.²²⁹ A Royal Marine named Mercer submitted a detailed report on the matter, concluding that if the Russians managed to reorganize the small Korean army, “...it will give her the entire command and control of all the available fighting forces in the country, and would most materially strengthen her position should she ever wish to occupy Korea (*sic*).”²³⁰ The Russians further moved to establish a Russo-Korean bank, and to seize control of the Korean customs.²³¹ Although the Russians consented to withdraw their military advisors after Japanese protests and the arrival of a British squadron at Seoul, Foreign Minister Mutsu became convinced that the agreement had been a diplomatic blunder and resigned in disgrace to write his memoirs, which stressed the need for Japanese military strength and an alliance with Great Britain.²³²

In the way of compromises, the 1896 agreement left both Japan and Russia dissatisfied with the situation in Korea. After the signing, negotiations really never stopped and the Japanese adopted a new, if hardly novel, formula for long term stability which they would continue to advocate with increasing frustration until 1905. The Japanese proposed that each side acknowledge that the other had a legitimate sphere of influence in East Asia, which essentially meant that Russia would have to acknowledge Japanese hegemony over Korea, while Japan acknowledged Russian predominance in

²²⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 238, p. 257., Nish, *The Anglo Japanese Alliance*, 45.

²³⁰ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 249, g. 269.

²³¹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 266, 268, p. 282-3.

²³² For example see Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku: A Diplomatic Record of The Sino-Japanese War, 1894-5*, Gordon Mark Berger Trans. (Princeton and Tokyo: Princeton University Press, University of Tokyo Press, 1982), p. 46, 107.

Manchuria. The “Man-Kan kokan,” as this formula came to be known, seemed eminently reasonable to the Japanese. The Russians probably rejected it partially because it would have given Japan a solid foothold on the mainland, partially because it would have meant limiting their own territorial ambitions, and partially because the easy racism of the day prevented the Russians from imagining that the Japanese were really a threat that they had to appease. The revised Nishi-Rosen pact of 25 April 1898 was very similar to the 1896 agreement it replaced, but it began a remarkable emigration of Japanese to Korea, and the influx of population which rapidly made the Japanese the largest minority group on the peninsula greatly assisted Tokyo’s efforts at exerting its will there.²³³

The failure to extract Russian concessions also meant that the Japanese went ahead with the transfer of Wei-Hai-Wei to the British.²³⁴ The calculated and evasive tones adopted in diplomatic exchanges were hardly reflected by military leaders on either side, as the Japanese not only transferred their base intact to the British, but local survey maps and intelligence sources. The Japanese even helped the arriving British unload their ships.²³⁵ Nevertheless, if the Japanese had ultimately sided with the British, they had proven themselves just as ready to deal with the Russians. Britain had been forced to take a small step toward the further division of China into spheres of influence, but Salisbury was clearly indicating that he was prepared to actively oppose the spread of Russian influence. Proving themselves quick studies of the imperial game, as a brokerage fee for

²³³ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 2, pgs. 21-26., Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 59.

²³⁴ Corbett, 11.

²³⁵ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 62.

the British lease of Wei-Hai-Wei, the Japanese extracted an agreement from Beijing granting them concessions in Fujian, the mainland province nearest to Taiwan.

As a series of events pulled the British away from East Asia and toward Africa, Salisbury's health had already begun to fail, contributing to the difficulty the British had in coordinating their responses to the proliferation of difficulties which began to amass without a central authority to direct policy.²³⁶ In September of 1898, a British flotilla led by Lord Kitchner encountered a French contingent camped around the town of Fashoda in central Sudan. While both commanders on the scene politely but firmly refused to withdraw, a major diplomatic row broke out when the news reached Paris and London. Theophile Delcasse, the French foreign minister, ultimately backed down, but not until both nations had begun to mobilize and rushed to the edge of open conflict.

Far more seriously, tensions were rising around the Cape Colony. The discovery of fantastic deposits of gold in 1873 had attracted waves of settlers who were denied political rights by the Dutch-speaking founders of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The Second Boer war, which began in October of 1899, was envisaged by the British as yet another imperial brushfire conflict. They anticipated sweeping the troublesome Boers before them, then annexing the wealth of their states and decisively subjecting them to British rule. Instead, the British met with serious initial reverses, and when it became obvious that the war could not be won quickly, the resources of the empire were directed toward South Africa in the form of reinforcements and supplies.²³⁷ As British resources were re-directed toward the fighting in Africa, British leaders from

²³⁶ Steiner, 25-7.

²³⁷ Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 14th ed., (London: Abacus Books, 2000), xv, 159.

across the empire felt themselves dangerously exposed, and worried that the Russians might take the opportunity for some aggressive action. Collectively, they began a quiet exchange of letters on the need for an ally to help the British defend the expanse of their interests.²³⁸

Fortunately, East Asia remained relatively stable as the Russians continued to run railways across Siberia and Manchuria. Amicable trade with Japan continued through a series of unstable, short lived governments. The Japanese further improved their political standing in Britain by plowing the vast majority of the indemnity extracted from China into the construction of new warships, ordering 41 new vessels of all types from British yards between 1894 and 1901.²³⁹ This had the practical effect of giving the Japanese an expanded, modernized navy literally built on British lines, as well as strengthening their relationships with powerful friends in the British naval lobby.²⁴⁰ The existence of a Japanese fleet which seemed to grow stronger every year helped to fuel press speculation about an alliance which cropped up with increasing frequency after 1895.²⁴¹ Further Japanese financial institutions became more familiar in and with European ones. As part of a deliberate effort to increase the affinity between their economies, Japan transitioned the yen from silver to gold reserves, allowing them to float a loan of £10 million on the London markets at an impressive 4% in 1899.²⁴²

When British diplomatic efforts failed to produce an agreement with the Russians in 1898, the British floated another raft of loans for the Chinese government in

²³⁸ Wilson, 160.

²³⁹ Nish, *Origins of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance: In the Shadow of the Dreibund*, 8.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 12-3.

²⁴² Nish, *Origins of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 77.

exchange for rail concessions. The general drift of British policy was increasingly Janus faced, seeking to placate the Russians on the one hand, while pursuing policies which tended to align with Germany in antagonizing Russian interests on the other.²⁴³ The new rail concessions had the practical effect of strengthening the British position in China, such that their future negotiating position would include, for practical purposes, a sphere of influence in China sketched out by their of railway concessions.

In April 1899 the British government, in the face of significant domestic opposition, managed to achieve what was hoped would prove a *modus vivendi* with Russia. Salisbury had originally begun the talks hoping that the agreement would be a comprehensive one able to stabilize Anglo-Russian boundaries around the world, but the Russians were only interested in pursuing a regional agreement for an accommodation in China.²⁴⁴ The Russians were prepared to recognize what amounted to a British zone of influence in China, in return for British recognition of a reciprocal Russian zone in the north. Britain agreed not to pursue railway concessions north of the Great Wall, and Russia similarly agreed to respect the Yangtze basin, as *de facto* British territory. Although the agreement was technically only binding with regard to railway concessions, in practice it had the effect of creating spheres of political influence for the two powers, even if it did almost immediately begin a tiresome, interminable argument over the precise boundaries of the “Yangtze basin.”

From the British perspective, this agreement was a strategic achievement of the first order. Manchuria, for all its potential to provide significant resources, was sparsely

²⁴³ Ibid., 74.

²⁴⁴ Wilson, 158-9.

populated, and the British zone of control along the far more populous and wealthy Yangtze effectively created a boundary to Russian southward expansion. Geography and treaty would hopefully combine to form a geopolitical firewall precluding a Russian conquest of the remainder of the Chinese empire. Competition for political and commercial influence in East Asia would be free to settle into less dangerous courses. Both Britain and Japan had now concluded more or less explicit sphere of influence agreements with the Russians, in hopes of coming to a regional understanding which would leave everyone concerned reasonably satisfied. However, the Russians would, for one reason or another, struggle to honor the terms they had agreed to.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE BOXER REBELLION

The Boxer Rebellion was a widespread, popular uprising directed against the foreign influence that many in China had come to see as insufferable. Evolving into a pro-monarchical movement violently opposed to Western influence in China, it was fueled by an ideology that could appeal across the social spectrum, including at the highest levels of the Chinese government. If Chinese support for the movement was cautious, it was real, and the Western institutions in Beijing were rapidly threatened by large numbers of Chinese rebels. While the Russians saw the instability as a potential opportunity for expansion, the British were tied down in South Africa and had few troops to spare for East Asia. As a result, the British found themselves inviting Japan to act as their proxy in East Asia, offering to finance the operations of the Japanese army in China provided that it sought only to restore the ante-bellum status quo. Japan, in refusing British subsidy but proceeding to commit significant forces, demonstrated to Western observers that it was prepared to play the role of at least a regional power, while China appeared to be in danger of being dismembered by ambitious Western generals and statesmen.

Although few realized it, China was on the verge of disintegration in the summer of 1900. The new concessions China had been forced to divulge in 1898 had sparked an effort at wide ranging governmental reform, led by the Guangxu Emperor. Called the Hundred Day's Reform, it actually lasted 102 days before the Dowager Empress Cixi and

conservative members of the literati effectively deposed the emperor and returned the state to their vision of the traditional, Confucian path. The program had attempted to reduce the size of Chinese military by one third, to make funding for modern weapons available. Whether or not this program ever produced any modern weapons is unclear, but it succeeded in spreading bands of unemployed, disgruntled ex-soldiers across the countryside.²⁴⁵ These unemployed soldiers were probably most concerned with losing what they would have assumed to be lifetime appointments, but the wider population was increasingly disaffected by what they perceived as yet another step in a decades-long decline in Chinese prestige, and increasingly prepared to strike out against any “foreign oppressors” within reach.

The first in a series of revolts which would collectively come to be known as the Boxer Rebellion began in March of 1898 in Shandong province as a response to the increasing prominence of buildings erected by Western missionaries, and then drew in those alienated by the seizures of territory which followed the Three Power Intervention and the wandering groups of unemployed soldiers. Increasingly frustrated by decades of accelerating Western intervention and the obvious inability of the Qing to prevent it, these segments of the local Han population rose in revolt, and the unrest was accelerated by widespread crop failure that year. Beginning among the Han, the uprising was anti-foreign and directed against both German and Manchu.²⁴⁶

As they had throughout the 19th century, the Qing dispatched an army to quell the unrest, and the rebels suffered heavy casualties. However, these troops appear to have

²⁴⁵ Victor Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising: A Background Study*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 176.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

become sympathetic to some of the movement's basic goals, and by the end of the summer Boxer ideology had morphed into a movement prepared to embrace the Qing, and turned exclusively against the Western Powers.²⁴⁷ What had begun as an isolated, regional disturbance about the location of churches had discovered an ideology which ultimately appealed to a broad spectrum of Chinese society, from the literati to landowners, from the Empress to common farmers, and which appealed across regional and ethnic divisions. Its appeal to elites was critical to the success of the movement. They considered the spread of Christianity to be socially disruptive, and they resented the ever increasing influence wielded by foreign merchants who were extracting a 69 million tael trade surplus from China by 1899.²⁴⁸ Further, the spread of rail lines was disrupting traditional Chinese economic patterns, and as cities along the major canals were cut out of trade routes tens of thousands who had earned their livings as porters found themselves joining first the ranks of the unemployed, and then of the rebellious.²⁴⁹

Spreading rapidly across provinces and gaining popularity among the other regional armies, what had begun as a series of poorly coordinated uprisings coalesced around a central core of ideas, particularly that the performance of magical rites could render the practitioner invulnerable to Western projectile weapons, and that foreigners, along with Chinese Christians who had been corrupted by their influence, should leave China or be slaughtered.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 225.

²⁴⁸ Hsu, 472-3, Purcell 173.

²⁴⁹ Hsu, 474.

²⁵⁰ Hsu, 476-7, Purcell 238.

The rebellion had now become a complex phenomenon for the Qing government. On the one hand, it was an uncompromising, ultra-reactionary, widely popular movement which strongly supported the monarchy and might actually succeed in throwing out the foreign powers. On the other hand, overt support for the rebels might well be interpreted by the Western powers as a declaration of war, and justify a full-scale invasion. In either case, the wide appeal of the Boxers and their propensity to murder bureaucrats who did not support them meant that the Qing really couldn't control them in any meaningful sense.²⁵¹ The winter of 1900 was passed in a confusion of bureaucratic infighting, as various regional governors struggled to maintain authority over their provinces with police and military units who were increasingly sympathetic to the uprising. In April, the Qing court moved to embrace the movements by issuing an edict to provincial governors instructing them to legitimize the rebellion by labeling rebels "people's militias," although the degree of acceptance varied from province to province.²⁵²

As anti-foreign violence began to spread across the internal provinces, where regional officials usually turned a blind eye, the foreign legations in Beijing requested that the Qing try to repress the movement. When it became clear that the Qing were going to do nothing of the sort, the legations requested that their respective warships docked at Tientsin dispatch marines to defend the legation district, and on 1 June a multinational force of about 440 Russian, British, French, American, Italian, and Japanese troops moved into Beijing.²⁵³ The unilateral movement of foreign troops into

²⁵¹ Hsu, 478.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., 480.

the capital did not have the intended effect, and actually accelerated the crisis.²⁵⁴ On 3 June, a Boxer group tore up the rail line between Beijing and Tientsin, effectively isolating Beijing from the sea. Local officials who attempted to restore order were quietly reprimanded by court officials. On 10 June, a relief force of 2,100 left Tientsin by rail for the legations, but after fierce fighting were turned back by Boxer rebels, who proceeded to cut the telegraph lines to the capitol and then attacked a variety of high-profile targets, burning the British summer legation and killing the Japanese chancellor.²⁵⁵ Finally sliding over the edge, the Qing announced that the legations were “adequately protected” and ordered Beijing closed to foreign troops on 13 June. Greatly encouraged by this display of imperial support, the Boxers proceeded to go on a rampage, burning churches with their Chinese congregations locked inside them, and killing the German minister, Clemens von Ketteler. The Boxers were then ordered to attack the legations by figures from the highest levels of the Chinese government, who then withdrew to the relative safety of Xi’an in the distant interior to see how events would unfold.²⁵⁶ It was a risky move for the usually cautious Qing. Having surrendered political authority to the the mob, the circumstances under which they would get it back again were unclear.

While the Russian response to the crisis was initially confused, minister of war Alexei Kuropatkin eventually emerged as the leading voice. When news of the uprising reached St. Petersburg, Kuropatkin exclaimed, “On my part, I am very glad. This will give us an excuse for seizing Manchuria. We will turn Manchuria...into a second

²⁵⁴ Purcell, 246.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 250.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 253.

Bokhara.”²⁵⁷ The Russians then had a very different understanding of the Boxer uprising, seeing it as more opportunity than crisis. Although all the great powers sent contingents to China in response to the Boxer uprising, the Tsar already had significant forces in the region and when he dispatched an additional 4,000 men, they were ordered to remain north of Beijing.²⁵⁸

The British stood to lose enormously from the Boxer rebellion. Having traditionally used sea power to maintain their influence in East Asia the British faced in the Boxers a challenge that could only be met by ground forces, ground forces which were already overstretched. As South African operations began their descent toward fiasco, dangerous rumblings of great power intervention on behalf of the Boers began to emanate from Europe, and Britain was compelled to withdraw a portion of its East Asian fleet, further weakening its position.²⁵⁹ Salisbury disregarded the reports of sporadic violence from the Chinese interior, and the legation in Beijing for whom inland China existed largely in theory was disconnected from its surroundings to such a degree that it didn't realize it was in serious danger until the end of May.²⁶⁰ Salisbury seems to have hoped that if confronted by British inaction the situation would right itself, but as the scale of the grew, the security of the foreign legations began to look doubtful. As the other powers began to dispatch troops to the region, the scale of the potential threat to British interests would require some sort of positive action.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Witte, 107-8.

²⁵⁸ Purcell, 258.

²⁵⁹ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 81.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 83.

²⁶¹ Purcell, 245.

However, Britain lacked the manpower to secure its own interests, and found itself in the highly unusual position of requesting that the other powers send major contingents of land forces to China to restore order. The great danger, of course, was that once any given power deployed significant forces, they might prove reluctant to withdraw on any number of pretexts. The greatest danger of such expansion was from Russia, which at the beginning of the crisis already had some 50,000 troops stationed in East Asia, and which would transfer another 20,000 to the region by August.²⁶² With such large numbers of troops in Manchuria the Russians might attempt either to secure territory through aggressive intervention, or to leverage concessions from the Chinese for not doing so.²⁶³ While the intervention would ultimately involve every power that had a foreign legation in China, in their moment of crisis the British turned to Japan to help them secure their civilians and counterbalance any Russian threat. Its geographic proximity meant that Japan could deploy forces in China more rapidly, and at much less expense, than any of the other powers. It was also believed that the Japanese would be largely cooperative, as they would stand to gain almost as much from curtailing Russian influence as Britain itself.²⁶⁴

The Japanese were already mired in domestic arguments about intervention in China. They too had a Beijing legation to protect, but were much lower profile targets than the Western powers, and a correspondingly reduced sense of urgency about a possible commitment. Japanese policy aimed to avoid any activity which might provoke

²⁶² *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 25, document 293, pg. 224.

²⁶³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 81.

²⁶⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed., Part I Series E, Asia: 1860-1914 Vol. 24 Ian Nish ed. document 337, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 204-8.

another display of unified European opposition, but also wanted to simultaneously prevent the Russians from exploiting the disorder, without becoming isolated in their opposition.

On June 22, two days after the death of von Ketteler, the British Cabinet finally decided on a course of action. Orders were cut to dispatch a small force from India, and despite the fact that Japan had not yet agreed to the British plan, a diplomatic offensive would be organized seeking a great power mandate for a Japanese intervention with around 30,000 troops. The Cabinet agreed that Japan should be offered financial support to defray the costs of the expedition. This unprecedented appeal to have Japan assume responsibility for maintaining the East Asian balance of power should not be seen as the first steps in a conscious drift toward formal alliance, but rather as an expedient solution to a difficult situation. The British invitation was an expression of identified common interests, accumulated over the preceding decades, by a British government which suddenly found itself enormously overstretched and a Japanese government eager to curry favor with one of the Great Powers.

However, the British notion that the other interested powers were going to sanction a large-scale Japanese intervention was an unrealistic one from the start, and it proved to have a very brief lifespan in the drawing rooms of Europe. The Russians stated that they would not oppose a Japanese intervention, but had no interest in openly supporting it.²⁶⁵ The idea that Russia would have endorsed the invitation of a significant Japanese land force onto the continent was never likely, but the exchange did extract at least a statement of tolerance from St. Petersburg. Germany was similarly unwilling to

²⁶⁵ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 84.

give Japan any direct endorsement.²⁶⁶ Whatever the potential merits of this effort at coalition building, it was abandoned within 24 hours, and on 23 June Great Britain officially requested military assistance from the government of Japan.

The Japanese response to all of this prevarication was understandably cautious, stating that they could not contemplate such a move without the widespread and vocal support of the great powers, and made it clear that they expected the British to undertake the diplomatic heavy lifting necessary to secure it.²⁶⁷ The move served domestic needs as much as international ones- the foreign ministry began at this time to apply pressure to prominent politicians who seemed reluctant to intervene, as well as to ramp up a press campaign to build public support.²⁶⁸

In Europe, the defining feature of the Boxer crisis in the early summer of 1900 was confusion. Regular units of the regional Chinese armies had joined the Boxers in their siege of the Beijing legations on 20 June, the telegraph lines remained cut, and communication was limited to what could be smuggled out of the city. Very little was smuggled out. In place of reliable information, rumor and speculation ruled the day, and public pressure steadily increased on governments for an aggressive military solution.²⁶⁹ On 3 July the British made a second request for Japanese military intervention, the façade of diplomatic formality slipping with as the language called for any and all possible assistance. They appealed again on 5 July, this time providing the Japanese with a written

²⁶⁶ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 196, p. 174., Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 84.

²⁶⁷ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 6, document 196, p. 174., Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 85.

²⁶⁸ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 86.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

assurance that the Russians would not construe a Japanese intervention as a threat.²⁷⁰ On 6 July, the Japanese cabinet met and decided to mobilize a 22,000 man force which would embark for China as soon as possible, the largest force domestic opponents of the policy were prepared to endorse.

While the British Cabinet was relieved that the Japanese had finally committed to action, military advisors worried that the approved force would not be large enough to secure the legations.²⁷¹ Oblivious to the domestic political divisions which were limiting Japanese action, the Cabinet assumed that the barrier was a financial one, and decided to elaborate on their earlier offer of monetary support. On 14 July the British Cabinet extended to Japan an offer of subsidy, up to £1 million, provided that the Japanese would mobilize another 20,000 troops.²⁷² The offer was made publicly, and was plainly intended as a public expression of British confidence in Japanese capabilities. The Japanese declined the offer the same day, informing the British that their military decisions would be based upon the recommendations of their field commanders.²⁷³ Salisbury got the message, and made no further effort to prod the Japanese to act one way or the other. Unbeknownst to the British, on 9 July the Japanese had already decided to mobilize two additional divisions for China after their generals independently concluded that the British assessment of troop requirements was probably correct.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 87.

²⁷² *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers From the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt eds. Part I, Series E Asia 1860-1914, Ian Nish ed., vol. 25, document 94, (University Publications of America, 1994), 72., Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 87.

²⁷³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 88.

The series of exchanges surrounding the funding of the Japanese expeditionary force was a turning point in Anglo-Japanese relations. The British informed the world that they considered the Japanese capable of upholding regional security, and of being suitable proxies for British troops, but had then suggested with the financial offer that implied that Japan was only able to play the role with British support. The Japanese cabinet, by refusing the subsidy but sending troops anyway, demonstrated not just that Japan was prepared to work in conformity with British interests, but as significantly, to do so on its own terms for its own reasons, and it followed that the British had underestimated the degree to which Japan was moving out from under the shadow of the three power intervention.

The crisis also transformed the naval landscape, as detailed in an internal study the Royal Navy concluded on 31 October examining the balance of naval power in East Asia during and after the Boxer uprisings. The study found that the European powers had taken the opportunity to substantially reinforce their East Asian naval squadrons, in the case of Germany increasing from 28,148 tons to 102,173 tons, which roughly tripled that country's naval presence in East Asian waters. Further, "the vessels selected ...are not small craft, capable of acting upon the shallow coasts and rivers, but are practically almost all ships capable of taking a place in the line."²⁷⁴ As the Chinese navy had never been rebuilt, the powers could only be sending these vessels out to challenge one another. The report concluded that despite the heavy European reinforcements:

...it must be recognized that at present and for the next few months, the Japanese fleet, composed as it is of modern and efficient ships and controlled as a single unit from Tokyo (*sic*), possesses the command of the naval situation, not merely

²⁷⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, Doc. 212, p. 158.

by reason of its greater numerical strength, but also from its own close proximity to its base.²⁷⁵

While this study suffers from the assumption that the size of a naval force can be translated directly into military effectiveness, it still provides a sense of the way Britain perceived the strength of the Japanese during a time of crisis with the other powers. Taken as a whole, the way Japan handled the Boxer crisis would leave an overwhelmingly positive impression on British observers.²⁷⁶

Once the powers managed to get their troops on the ground in China, the Boxers operating around Beijing were dispelled in short order. Foreign troops seized Tientsin on 14 July with ease, inflicting heavy casualties and large discrediting the idea that mystical charms would be effective defense against small arms. As they had in so many other places throughout the history of imperial warfare, discipline and modern weapons overwhelmed numerical superiority and faith in indigenous traditions of warfare. The Japanese reinforcements caught up with the main forces there a week later, bringing the total force up to 50,000 men. They proceeded to advance methodically on Beijing, reaching the legations on 14 August.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Corbett, 20.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ANGLO-JAPANESE ALLIANCE

The diplomatic fallout from the Boxer Rebellion would move Britain and Japan closer to alliance, providing an arena for the two governments to demonstrate the degree to which they shared policy goals in East Asia. It was clear that Russia hoped to extract territorial concessions from the Chinese even before order had entirely been restored around Beijing. Russia would work to frustrate every diplomatic effort to limit their opportunities in exploiting the Boxer uprising. If the United States often gets the diplomatic credit for introducing the Open Door Policy, Britain and Japan had the most to gain from any agreement which might stabilize the region. A year of close cooperation in China would forge the goodwill and working relationships that made the treaty a reality in 1902. The strategic rationale for an agreement had already existed for some time. Only political will had been lacking. The treaty would raise the stakes for adventure in East Asia, threatening the possibility of a Great Power conflict as a consequence of attempting to bring the full possibilities of the New Imperialism to China.

The US secretary of state John Hay had advised Britain, Germany, Russia, France, and Japan of the Open Door Policy in September, by which the US hoped to elicit a general pledge from these nations not to partition Chinese territory.²⁷⁷ While the powers gave the policy their full public support, the reality was that behind closed doors a variety of competing ambitions informed national policies. Once the threat to the legations was removed, the various national contingents lost their unifying purpose and began to pursue

²⁷⁷ Warner and Warner, 122.

narrower interests as early as 10 August.²⁷⁸ In early August the British moved a contingent of 2000 troops from Hong Kong to Shanghai to secure their assets there.²⁷⁹ The Cabinet explicitly ordered British soldiers around Beijing to use force if necessary to prevent any of the other powers from seizing territory in the region.²⁸⁰

The order to, in effect, start at least a regional war to prevent any of the other powers from seizing Chinese territory reflects a transformation of British policy. At the start of the Opium Wars Britain had been reluctant to commit even a token force in China. The Boxer uprising legitimated the movement of large bodies of foreign troops into the capital, and after the Qing fled to Xi'an, the British contemplated the prospect of a Great Power conflict of their own making to maintain Chinese independence. The shift in British policy toward open support of Chinese territorial integrity was almost certainly intended to act as a deterrent, but having made the commitment to back down would have been out of the question. It was quite a risk for Britain to take. With foreign armies in effective occupation of Beijing the danger that one or more of them would try to seize control was real, especially considering that the Russians gave every impression that they were intent on extending their occupation further into Manchuria.

Russian forces dispatched to suppress the Boxer rebellion had marched ahead of the orders to remain in Manchuria, and had moved into Beijing with the rest of the powers before their instructions caught up. The Russians immediately began to withdraw

²⁷⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers From The Foreign Office Confidential Print*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed. Part I, Series E, Asia: 1860-1914 vol. 25 Ian Nish ed. document 92, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 72.

²⁷⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 25. document 144, pg. 105.

²⁸⁰ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from The Foreign Office Confidential Print*, Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt ed. Part I, Series E, Asia: 1860-1914 Vol. 24 Ian Nish ed. document 202, (Great Britain, Foreign Office: University Publications of America, 1994), 118.

toward Tientsin, from whence they redeployed to Manchuria, garrisoning towns and even applying new Russian names to some.²⁸¹ British observers perceived the danger immediately, cabling back to Whitehall, “It is not easy, considering the Russian declaration respecting non-partition, to explain this withdrawal of troops, for were all the Powers to do likewise, there could hardly be any step which would be more likely to bring about general chaos, resulting in the partition of territory.”²⁸² The other powers quickly followed suit. The Japanese proceeded to land troops around Amoy (Xiamen), ostensibly to protect Japanese assets there, although the assets in question did not in fact exist. In Japan, many urged that their forces in Beijing be redeployed to press Japanese claims in Korea.²⁸³ Japanese policymakers managed to deflect this pressure by arguing that Japan was not capable of winning the war with Russia that would probably have followed, but the public cry for further expansion was clear, and ominous.

Meanwhile, the British continued to work to keep China from being torn apart. At home the Cabinet was reshuffled, with Lord Lansdowne taking over as foreign secretary. Germany, seeking an indirect way to check the Russians, had approached the British as early as 22 August and indicated that it would be prepared to enter into an agreement endorsing the Open Door policy. Salisbury was reluctant, but the Cabinet saw the opportunity to conclude an agreement with the Kaiser as too valuable to pass up, and he was compelled to enter negotiations. The ensuing talks were extensive, and although Britain and Germany agreed to preserve the Open Door principle in areas where treaties

²⁸¹ Purcell, 258.

²⁸² *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, vol. 25, document 118, pg. 89.

²⁸³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 93.

gave them influence, the Germans balked at attempting to force the Russians to endorse the arrangement.²⁸⁴

Britain was thus denied a German ally against the Russians, and the subsequent collapse of the negotiations was hardly surprising. With the prospect of a strategic alliance withdrawn, Britain would have been compelled to grant the Germans access to the entirety of the Yangtze basin, while from an economic perspective the Germans had little more than the port of Tsingtao to offer to British traders. To save face, it was decided to reduce the document to the status of a general declaration, stripping it of any binding authority. When published, it received a variety of anodyne responses from the other powers, who also preferred to avoid taking a solid position on the issue.

Japan, however, saw the Anglo-German statement as an opportunity to achieve a number of diplomatic goals.²⁸⁵ The Japanese government had collapsed in the wake of the Boxer uprising, and the new Prime Minister Kato Takaaki had been in his post only a few days when the draft treaty was released. Believing that the treaty would allow Japan to improve its status with Britain, disrupt the relationship between Germany and Russia in East Asia, and generally improve its international status, Kato requested that Japan be permitted to sign on to the agreement.²⁸⁶ Neither Britain nor Germany had made any particular effort to court the Japanese, and although no one had anticipated the Japanese request to sign on to the document, their offer was quickly accepted.

Kato's arrival marked a watershed in Japanese foreign policy in that he came to office convinced that Japan could not deal with the Russians, should abandon the time

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 104-5.

²⁸⁵ Dua, 26.

²⁸⁶ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 107.

honored practice of trying to play the powers off against one another in pursuit of temporary advantage, and refocus its foreign policy toward the goal of a formal alliance with Great Britain. Ever since it was first proposed in 1895, acceptance of the Man-Kan Kokan in one form or another had been the ultimate goal of Japanese foreign policy. Yamagata had returned to the possibility of using it as the foundation of a regional agreement with the Russians as recently as July of 1900.²⁸⁷ Russia, which had used its newly arrived troops to garrison towns across Manchuria and had seized control of the port of Newchwang, was in no mood to offer concessions and had responded with a new variation on its program to neutralize the Korean peninsula, which in light of Russia's continued efforts at expansion was even less likely to appeal to Japan than it had been before.²⁸⁸

The relative isolation of East Asia from Europe served to transform a tense situation into a diplomatic incident. In early October, the Russians published the regulations for conduct in their area of occupation in Manchuria, a program which British diplomats characterized saying, "The first impression gathered from a perusal of these Rules and Regulations is that the Administration in Manchuria is to be of a permanent character..."²⁸⁹ Less publicly, they acknowledged that, "For some time past the Russian Government have been endeavoring through various agencies to acquire control over the Shanhaikwan-Newchwang (*sic*) railway."²⁹⁰ The situation became more serious on 26 November 1900 when a local Russian commander concluded an agreement on his own

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁸⁸ Warner and Warner, 128.

²⁸⁹ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, Doc. 189, p. 143.

²⁹⁰ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 7, Doc. 281, p. 226.

initiative with the Chinese governor of Fengtian. It should not have offended, as it served only to return control of the day-to-day operations of the provincial government to the regional Chinese literati even though Russian troops remained in occupation.²⁹¹ The agreement, which these men had intended to be a local, temporary, and expedient arrangement, was not referred to Beijing or St. Petersburg until a garbled version of it appeared in the London *Times* on 3 January 1901. The *Times* greatly mischaracterized the nature of the agreement, asserting that it was in fact an officially ratified treaty which set the terms of a permanent Russian seizure of Manchuria.²⁹²

Kato was furious, and Japan turned first to Great Britain, requesting that the British join their formal protest to the Tsar. The British, who had anticipated the possibility of such a move from Russia in their 1899 treaty, were not especially pleased by the prospect of an overt Russian consolidation of their Manchurian position but did not share the Japanese sense of outrage, and cooler heads prevailed. Lansdowne sent a polite inquiry to St. Petersburg requesting clarification of the situation. The Russians, who had no idea what Lansdowne was asking about, responded with a public declaration that Russia was not seeking any territorial gains in China, which was geared to placate the British. The British were not offended by the statement, but could hardly have taken it at face value. The Japanese on the other hand perceived the statement as a blatant lie that added insult to injury.

On 15 February 1901, Kato asked Lansdowne to enter into a joint declaration with Japan offering the Qing military support in the event that Russia demanded further

²⁹¹ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, p. 111., Corbett, 21.

²⁹² "England And Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, 2 June 1895, p. 1.

territorial concessions, probably intending this to be read as a guarantee of Korean territory against the Tsar's agents. Lansdowne viewed the proposal, which was a military alliance with China in all but name, as a commitment dangerously approaching to a blank check, and opposed it. Salisbury agreed, and also felt that the notion of an explicit British commitment to the defense of the Chinese interior was a dangerous liability. But the Prime Minister suggested that an arrangement with Japan to protect coastal cities where British interests were concentrated might be worth exploring.²⁹³ However, once Britain rejected the Japanese proposal the whole matter was left by the wayside as Kato pursued a series of increasingly bellicose policies toward the Russians on his own.

Russia had declared that it would resolve outstanding issues arising from the Boxer uprisings with China on its own terms some time ago, and foreign minister Lamsdorf transmitted Russia's proposed terms to the Qing on 16 February. While Russia offered to restore Chinese sovereignty across Manchuria, they demanded exclusive railway rights to run new lines across Manchuria and into Mongolia.²⁹⁴ Almost as a matter of course, the Chinese appealed to the powers to intervene on their behalf and moderate the Russian terms. Britain, with its Yangtze agreement in place to limit the southward spread of Russian influence, was increasingly reconciled to Russian predominance in Manchuria. They responded by requesting a copy of the proposed treaty. Japan, desperate to forestall yet another extension of Russian influence, submitted a note to Germany, inquiring after their position in the event of hostilities between Japan and

²⁹³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, p. 113.

²⁹⁴ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 7, Doc. 365, p. 326., Warner and Warner, p. 122.

Russia.²⁹⁵ The Germans, still working to quietly limit the Tsar's success, responded that in the event of East Asian conflict between Japan and Russia, not only would they remain neutral, but that they would work to maintain French neutrality as well. Kato had pulled off a remarkable diplomatic achievement. In the space of a few days, he had effectively isolated the Russians in East Asia.

Britain was alarmed by the aggressive tone the Japanese were adopting with regard to Russia, and Lansdowne sought to reign them in, advising that with its resources still committed to South Africa, Britain would have little choice but to remain neutral in the event of open Russo-Japanese hostilities.²⁹⁶ The crisis did prompt a British study evaluating the military situation in the region, concluding with remarkable optimism that, "...the Japanese fleet seems to be more than capable of tackling the Russian squadron. Should either Germany or France...throw in their lot with Russia, the issue would be somewhat doubtful, though victory by the allied fleets would be by no means a certainty."²⁹⁷ The study goes on to describe an allied Anglo-Japanese naval force in East Asia as "...irresistible." However, it proceeds to argue that British interests were better served by the status quo:

The real fact is that an alliance with Japan would mean deposing the Slav in the Far East and setting up in his place a Mongolian power. Possibly Japan is everything that she would have us believe she is, but this still remains to be proved and the doubt inclines "us rather to bear those ills we have than to fly to others that we know not of."²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, p. 113.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁹⁷ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 7, document 149, pgs. 112-3.

²⁹⁸ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, volume 7, document 149, pg. 116.

The difficulty was that with Britain standing aside, the Japanese found that they had isolated not only the Russians, but themselves. Faced with the unattractive prospect of independent action, the Japanese accepted a British-mediated resolution in which the Chinese agreed not to sign any independent treaties while they were still negotiating with all the other powers in Beijing. Strengthened by all the international attention, the Qing officially rejected the Russian treaty on 23 March and the Russians let it go.

The exchange surrounding the Manchurian treaty is relevant in that it establishes the diplomatic terrain that would ultimately facilitate the first of the several Anglo-Japanese alliances. Having obtained the private German declaration of neutrality, Kato had freed the Japanese government from the haunting specter of the Three Power intervention. Better, he had succeeded in drawing the British into opposition to Russian consolidation of their Manchurian position, even if they had balked at open support for Japan. Further, the Russians had actually backed down in the face of Japanese opposition. It is impossible to know to what degree Russia was responding to the threat of Japanese force as opposed to the possible threat of united action by the other powers in Beijing or even some obscure agenda of their own, but in all probability it was some combination of the above that informed the Russian decision. Japan had already demonstrated that it was prepared to engage in land operations in China in a way the British never had, and were probably incapable of in 1901. Further, the flood of reports which flowed into St. Petersburg from its agents on the ground in Beijing and wider East Asia were universally cautionary, and effectively convinced Lamsdorf that he was facing certain war over

Manchuria if he did not back away from the Chinese treaty.²⁹⁹ Whether Japan would ultimately have resorted to violence over the matter is less relevant than the fact that they successfully deterred the Russians.

Germany subsequently issued statements which backed away from the British position in East Asia. In a speech to Reichstag on 15 March, Count von Bulow washed his hands of the complex maneuvering over Manchuria, stating that he interpreted it as lying outside the Anglo-German Open Door agreement.³⁰⁰ Salisbury, whose failing health increasingly kept him from handling government business, was not available to respond, but it's hard to see how his presence could have mattered. The British effort to gain Germany as an ally against the Russians had failed, and Britain had no recourse. Kato was similarly disappointed by the German statement, and became convinced that German actions could best be explained by the existence of some sort of secret alliance between the Germans and the Russians.³⁰¹ While neither Britain nor Japan could afford to alienate the Germans for fear of driving them openly into the Russian camp, it was clear that Germany could not be relied upon to maintain the balance in East Asia. Indeed, the Germans harbored designs of their own to profit from any future discord between the British and Russians.

Ironically then, it was a German agent in Britain who began the process that he hoped would lead to an open alliance between Germany, Britain, and Japan.³⁰² Hermann Freiherr von Eckardstein was first secretary at the German embassy in London whose

²⁹⁹ Malozemoff, 166-7.

³⁰⁰ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 120.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 121.

³⁰² Warner and Warner, 124.

British wife made him oddly prominent in British society for a foreign national.

Apparently on his own initiative, the secretary launched a dark horse diplomatic effort in 1901 to create an Anglo-Japanese-German alliance East Asia.³⁰³ With the rest of Europe, the British would have been aware from von Bulow's speech that much of the German government was opposed to such a plan, and were not eager to invest effort into such an unlikely cause. Undeterred by explicit rejection, Eckardstein approached the Japanese ambassador Hayashi Tadasu with his scheme, claiming that he had already secured the support of leading German and British politicians.³⁰⁴ Hayashi was probably reluctant because he too would have been aware of von Bulow's statements, but on 11 April he requested permission from Tokyo to explore the possibility of an alliance with the British. Kato made quiet inquiries with influential figures across the Japanese government, and subsequently Hayashi received permission to begin a non-committal conversation with the British.³⁰⁵

Cutting out the curious middleman, Hayashi approached Lansdowne at a diplomatic reception on April 17 and began a conversation regarding a formal alliance between Japan and Great Britain. The conversation was apparently amiable, but as neither had any detailed proposals, they could accomplish little. Hayashi telegraphed back to Tokyo for further instructions later that day, but Kato did not respond, probably due to the increasing weakness of his government. There the matter might have rested, but for a letter to the emperor from the retired Yamagata, who had finally been convinced by the Manchurian crisis that Russian could not be trusted, and advocated in the strongest

³⁰³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 124-5.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰⁵ Warner and Warner, 129.

terms for an alliance with the British.³⁰⁶ Yamagata's conversion tipped the scales within the Japanese government in favor of a British alliance. It would have been notable if only due to the weight he carried with the emperor, but deserves even more attention for the effect it would have when his protégé, Taro Katsura, who assumed the office of prime minister that June.

As the mood in Tokyo continued to shift toward Britain, Hayashi remained in London, still awaiting instructions. As rumors about potential alliance terms swirled in London's diplomatic circles, Hayashi decided to renew his inquiry on his own initiative. He approached Lord Lansdowne again on 15 May inquiring whether Britain had formulated any specific basis for an agreement. Not having such a program, Lansdowne inquired after any Japanese proposal, and taking a page from Eckardstein Hayashi proceeded, again on his own authority, to suggest a program he had personally devised some weeks before. Lansdowne remained non-committal, but recalled the British ambassador in Tokyo on the 20th, almost certainly to discuss Hayashi's proposals. Aside from a revealing look at the remarkably personal nature of diplomacy even in the age of telegraphy, it is remarkable that the first steps toward the Anglo-Japanese alliance were mostly taken by diplomats either wildly exaggerating their own authority, representing their governments on their own initiative, or both.

In Beijing, Britain continued the struggle to prevent the other powers from carving out territorial concessions, and to limit the scope of the conference to the formulation of financial penalties which could be levied against the Chinese as compensation for the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. For the British, diplomatic

³⁰⁶ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 130-1.

events in London were reinforced by impressions filtering back from Beijing. Realizing that they were dealing from a position of strength, the Russians conducted their diplomacy in China with an eye toward extracting a whole new program of concessions from the Qing. As British policy was directed at preventing this outcome, the negotiations quickly became strained, and the British attempted to align the other delegates against the Russians. It rapidly became clear to the assembly that the German representatives in East Asia were still reluctant to openly take actions that could be publicly construed as opposing the Russians regardless of their efforts to do so behind closed doors. As in the past, the British and Japanese delegations would find that their interests aligned sufficiently to permit close cooperation.³⁰⁷

The details of this diplomatic struggle turned on the discussion of the size of the indemnity to be levied against the Chinese, and the means by which they would be made to pay it. It proved impossible to reach consensus on a formula for calculating the size of the indemnity, so the conference decided to simply accept whatever claims the various powers chose to make. These claims amounted to some 450 million *taels*, a sum which would have destroyed the already fragile Chinese economy. The United States proposed the expedient of reducing the total to a less punishing number and then proportionally scaling down each nations' respective claims, but the Russians objected on the somewhat obscure grounds that while they were participating in the conference, they reserved the right to pursue an independent settlement with the Qing. With the Russian position providing the political cover, Germany also felt inclined to hold out against group bargaining.

³⁰⁷ Warner and Warner, 129.

The British delegation suspected the Russians, and possibly the Germans, were attempting to use the bargaining table to pursue the territorial ambitions denied them at the end of the fighting. Returning exaggerated indemnity figures in order to waive them in exchange for territorial concessions from the Qing seemed a reasonable interpretation of their motives. In response, the British began to advocate for a strict formula for repayment which would preclude the exchange of territory for a waiver of payment.³⁰⁸

The parties were no closer to agreement on how the Qing would be made to pay whatever indemnity figure was arrived at. Germany and Russia suggested that payments be drawn from an increase in customs duties, a scheme which the British quashed as it would have placed the majority of the burden on British merchants. The Russians then proposed a series of loans from the powers to cover the cost of the indemnity, a scheme which was a fairly transparent vehicle to manufacture obligation on the part of the Chinese. The British counterproposal was a large bond issue, at 4 percent, which effectively tied the indemnity into a strictly financial framework. The problem was that few private investors were likely to see the Qing as a safe gamble, and as a result the powers themselves would almost certainly have to back the issue. That would be a disadvantage for governments with weaker credit ratings, such as Russia and Japan. While some at the conference (the British among them) may have quietly considered that disadvantaging the Russians lent a certain luster to the proposal, an effort was made to accommodate the Japanese, who ultimately increased the size of their indemnity claim to offset the cost of the loan.

³⁰⁸ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 135.

A year of grinding negotiation had been necessary to achieve this minimal progress, but the vast differences between the agendas of many of the powers had highlighted the similarities between British and Japanese policies and favorably impressed both sides. Further, it had fostered personal working relationships between diplomats who would otherwise have met only on rare formal occasions if at all. Perhaps most remarkably, Britain and Japan had been driven to adopt a common policy to contain the Russians, when the Japanese signed on to the new British plan to establish direct relations with the governors of the Northern provinces. The final treaty was signed on 7 September, 1901.

On 15 July of that year, Hayashi back in London was informed that the upper echelons of the British government were interested in concluding a wider understanding with Japan, but suggested that because it was such a radical departure from traditional British policy, it would take some time to conclude.³⁰⁹ It is unclear where the final impetus for the treaty originated within Whitehall, but it was probably motivated by a confluence of factors. The fear that some secret article buried in the Franco-Russian alliance would commit those powers to joint operations in East Asia was probably chief among them, but it was reinforced by the uncomfortable display of British weakness during the Boxer crisis, and by the unusual combination of traits Japan had managed to display. Japan had demonstrated itself to be a first rate power, one which had broadly similar interests to Britain in East Asia, and uniquely among the other powers, seemed to harbor no ambition to territories outside East Asia. Tokyo wired London on the 17th, pressing for details of the proposal. The British still did not have them, stalled for time,

³⁰⁹ Warner and Warner, 129.

and occupied themselves for the remainder of July with building a more concrete vision within Whitehall for the treaty proposal. Informal negotiations between Lansdowne and Hayashi began weeks later, on 31 July.³¹⁰

As the Japanese had no precise information on what the British were drafting, the telegram Hayashi sent back to Tokyo at the end of July was notably lacking in detail. The talks between Hayashi and Lansdowne had been vague, but Lansdowne had finally abandoned Britain's fading hopes that Germany could somehow be included in an East Asian security arrangement, accepting that Japan and Britain would have to work alone.³¹¹ Katsura, who had been in office less than two months, took the draft and scrambled to find support for an agreement within the Japanese political structure. After days of consultations in and around Tokyo, he sent Hayashi instructions to deliver a favorable response to the British proposal, and that he should proceed keeping in mind that the fundamentals of any agreement had to include a guarantee of Korean neutrality, and the containment of Russia in Manchuria.³¹²

Negotiations resumed in mid-August. The Japanese appear to have come away from the meetings convinced that the British were proposing a defensive alliance, despite the fact that the British had not gotten so far in their own planning. In fact, the government was not sitting and Salisbury would remain in Ireland until early October, so it's unclear how any such proposals could have been made. Whatever the origins of the suggestion, the Japanese foreign minister, Komura Jutarō, found himself thrown into a frantic study of the history of Anglo-Japanese relations and the formulation of a Japanese

³¹⁰ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance...*, 147.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

³¹² Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance...*, 159., Warner and Warner, 129.

draft treaty. Komura had served as the Japanese representative to the Beijing conference which had just ended, and pursued his task with an affinity for the British and an abiding distrust of the Russians.³¹³ On 7 October, Komura presented the Japanese cabinet with a proposal for a defensive alliance with the British. It was approved, and presented to the British in mid-October.

The British had also used the two month delay to continue their study of the possibilities for a treaty with Japan. The First Sea Lord, Lord Selborne, prepared a pivotal memorandum representing the naval opinion on what Britain should hope to gain from an understanding with Japan. Selborne argued that the two-power standard had become untenable in the event of war with the United States, or even a war between Britain and the Franco-Russian bloc. He considered that there was thus strategic advantage to be had from an understanding with Japan, perhaps even a full alliance, which would transform Britain's razor thin naval advantage in East Asia into an absolute superiority and which would as a result reduce the danger of a regional disagreement escalating into open war.³¹⁴ It was also a position the Exchequer would support, as the Chancellor Sir Michael Hicks Beach was a fiscal conservative and still outraged by the supplemental taxes and borrowing which had been necessary to fund the fighting in South Africa.³¹⁵ He welcomed any policy which stood to reduce naval expenditures. As a result Lansdowne walked into the meeting on the 16th, where he received the Japanese draft, with a reasonably clear idea of the British position.

³¹³ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 172.

³¹⁴ Steiner, *Journal of Modern History*, no. 31, (1959), 29-31.

³¹⁵ Cain and Hopkins, 373., Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 175.

Lansdowne left the meeting on the 16th and began work on a final draft treaty, which he submitted for approval on the 23rd along with a request to forward it on to the full cabinet. The draft spelled out Britain's conditions for cooperation with Japan. Its basic goal was to prevent either power from being overwhelmed in East Asia by a coalition of states, but both would be free to stand aside in the event that either signatory came into conflict with one other state. It provided that neither party would enter into any other treaties without consultation, and that there would be open communication between them on matters of mutual concern. The primary component of the treaty was naval, providing that there would be complementary operations, with shared port and coaling facilities. The naval provisions clearly favored British needs, particularly for coal, as those established in Hong Kong were inadequate. Militarily, the arrangement allowed Britain to remain neutral in the event of a Russo-Japanese conflict, but would be able to add the Japanese navy to its own if opposed by a naval coalition. From the Japanese perspective the treaty would require some caution in their diplomacy with Russia, as in the event of a conflict they would face them alone, but that was also the treaty's strength, as it would protect them from a repeat of the Three Power intervention. On the whole, this treaty addressed fundamental strategic liabilities for both states, and its authors on both sides must have anticipated that it would be rapidly accepted.

However, on 5 October the Russians made yet another effort to strengthen their control over Manchuria with a proposal to restore nominal Chinese authority in exchange for exclusive mining rights.³¹⁶ The Japanese responded with an angry diplomatic note to China, and Britain observed that the Russian request was plainly antithetical to their

³¹⁶ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 178.

stated policy goals. The timely death of the Chinese provincial governor who was working with the Russians ended the matter before it could evolve into a full-blown incident, but the episode served to underline the very real dangers an alliance with the Japanese would entail. Indeed, it is worth stating explicitly that the treaty under consideration entailed real risks in that it would commit the British to fight in East Asia, a theatre of such size and remoteness that even a successful war could prove ruinous.

Thus, although the draft Anglo-Japanese treaty was formally presented to the cabinet during the 28 October meeting, the action taken was to open a diplomatic conversation with the Russians. Lansdowne was instructed to see if Witte would consider the possibility of extending the framework of the Anglo-Russian convention on Persia signed in 1899 to Manchuria, which in practical effect would have strengthened their respective claims to spheres of influence in China.³¹⁷ The Japanese were informed of the new initiative, and the cabinet did not return to the draft of the Japanese treaty until after the confirmed failure of the Russian initiative.

After Witte rejected the proposal, the British Cabinet moved ahead with approval of the Japanese draft treaty and an updated document was passed to Hayashi on 6 November. However generous the British believed their terms to be, the Japanese had not forgotten the hated unequal treaties and proceeded cautiously. Hayashi's draft was passed first to the Japanese foreign office, where he began work on a formal counterproposal, although his revisions actually changed almost nothing. A delay of some weeks ensued, as the Japanese decision makers who had to be consulted were scattered from Paris to Hokkaido, and yet further delayed when Komura fell ill in early November. The Japanese

³¹⁷ Ibid., 180.

cabinet did not receive the treaty until 28 November, when it was rapidly approved.

Katsura then began the tiresome job of consulting other stakeholders in the Japanese state, a process completed in early December.³¹⁸

The counter-draft arrived in London on 12 December, and direct negotiations began, continuing up to the British cabinet meeting on the 19th. Debate centered around the Japanese desire to limit the scope of treaty geographically, confining it to East Asia. Japan wanted to avoid being pulled into Britain's future imperial adventures such as the one so recently concluded in South Africa. The Japanese also wanted to add a new provision which would have asserted their positive right to conduct military operations in Korea.³¹⁹ On the whole, the disagreements were over minor details; the widespread general agreement on the broad strokes of the agreement must have been encouraging to both sides. Britain backed down and agreed to limit the geographic reach of the treaty, but stood firmly against giving Japan free reign to adventure in Korea. One of the main Japanese goals for the treaty was some sort of international sanction for its ambitions in Korea. As this was obviously one of the major attractions for the Japanese, the British had to address the matter but Lansdowne insisted on inserting language making clear that Britain was not about to be drawn into a war with Russia because Japan lost its patience over Korea.³²⁰ The final matter to be discussed was the naval contributions each side would make. The British had not included any specific figures in their first draft, but the Japanese had inserted language which required both powers to maintain fleets larger than that of any other power in East Asia. As a central purpose of the treaty for the British was

³¹⁸ Warner and Warner, 131.

³¹⁹ Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 209.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212-3.

to reduce their naval commitment to the region this was not going to be acceptable, and the matter addressed with vague language that both powers were able to interpret as supportive of their own position.³²¹

³²¹ Corbett, 22., The official English language text of the agreement is reproduced in Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 216-7., Warner and Warner, 131.

CONCLUSION

The 1902 treaty began a long strategic partnership between Britain and Japan which only ended when the British were forced to choose between Japan and the United States over a naval treaty in 1922. Ultimately, they did not choose Japan. In the short term however, the Anglo-Japanese alliance successfully in achieved Britain's strategic goals in China specifically and East Asia generally. In Britain's *Official History of the Russo-Japanese War*, the alliance is described as an agreement:

...actuated solely by a desire to maintain the *status quo* and general peace in the extreme East, being moreover especially interested in maintaining the independence and territorial integrity of the Empire of China and the Empire of Korea, and in securing equal opportunities in those countries for the commerce and industry of all nations.³²²

While this statement of British motives is accurate so far as it goes, it glosses over the wider strategic dimensions of the treaty. The British hoped to solidify another front in their global struggle with the Russians, while Japan sought a protector as it pursued its goal of carving out a regional empire.

Still, Britain and Japan did not have entirely convergent agendas in East Asia. Considering the original terms of the 1895 Shimonoseki agreement, the British must have understood what the Japanese meant when they committed to Korean "neutrality." For its part, Britain had formally acknowledged the de-facto Russian position in Manchuria. The Japanese had not, and continued to debate precisely how much influence the Russians should be permitted to maintain there.³²³

³²² *Official History (Naval and Military) of the Russo-Japanese War*, 9.

³²³ Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, 130.

In short, East Asia remained a territory with significant, and fairly obvious, sources of potential future conflict. Historians such as A.L. Galperin have argued that the Anglo-Japanese treaty was in fact a diplomatic instrument which encouraged, even enabled, Japan to conduct the 1904-5 war against Russia. Many Russians had become convinced by 1904 that this was precisely the purpose of the agreement, coming to believe that British policy had worked to encourage the Japanese to fight Russia in East Asia.³²⁴ However, as Britain had already demonstrated their willingness to accommodate a Russian presence in East Asia, historians writing in this vein go too far.

The treaty also brought East Asia fully and openly into a global security framework which Britain pledged itself to defend. While the British expectation was that this commitment would have a powerful deterrent effect, the treaty could easily have transformed any future war in East Asia into a global conflict. While containment of Russia in East Asia had long been a goal of British Foreign policy, the treaty with Japan was a significant departure in that the British declared they would use force to contain the Russians in Manchuria. Unsurprisingly, the agreement served to significantly curtail adventurism in the region. After 1902, Japan could be reasonably confident that any war between themselves and the Russians would not end with another menacing coalition of European states arising to frustrate their regional ambitions. If the British did not prod the Japanese to fight, they certainly did not object to making it possible for the Japanese to fight as their proxy.

The new alliance also had European consequences. The French correctly appraised the new situation in East Asia as a raising of the potential stakes. If the British

³²⁴ Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, 130.

were prepared to risk global war to maintain the status quo in East Asia, the French were not eager to be drawn into a deeper commitment to the increasingly tense region. The Russians had developed a reasonably good working relationship with the French in East Asia, but 1902 proved to be a turning point. After the Anglo-Japanese treaty, the Russians were eager for allies of their own in the East, but they were not to find one in the French. Despite St. Petersburg's efforts to extend its European alliance into East Asia, the French began to back away from Russia and actually began to pursue a closer relationship with Britain in the coming years.³²⁵

So the alliance began to tip the European balance in Britain's favor, but it goes too far to suggest that Britain actively hoped to promote a Russo-Japanese war. That said, the practical effect of the treaty was to make such a war winnable for the Japanese. It did this because the language of the treaty meant that such a war could be localized in East Asia, and probably fought over Russian influence in Korea or Manchuria. It would be a conflict which would achieve wider British policy goals even if, as the British well realized, the Japanese were motivated to check Russian aggression in hopes of one day supplanting them.

Whatever the British had intended, a war was what they got. The Japanese had never really stopped the armament program that carried them into their war with China in 1894. Following the Boxer rebellion, there were some over-eager voices calling for war with the Russians as early as 1902, but delay was more likely to favor Japan than Russia and conflict was postponed. While the Japanese continued to pursue a diplomatic agreement with the Russians, they accelerated their preparations for a military

³²⁵ Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, 132.

confrontation with them. Tellingly, Japanese bargaining positions after 1902 hardened perceptibly, and the government also stepped up Japanese settlement programs in Korea, landing 30,000 new settlers in 1903 alone.³²⁶

However, the Russians were no more prepared to make significant concessions in the early 20th century than they had been in the late 19th, and Japanese diplomats grew increasingly frustrated until February of 1904 when Japan's British built navy, under the command of its British trained officers, attacked the Russians at Chemulpo and Port Arthur and began a war that would culminate in the Battle of the Tsushima Straights, probably the most one sided naval victory of the modern era.

The Russo-Japanese war was everything the British could have hoped. The Japanese undertook all of the heavy lifting, and most of the risk. The alliance with the British successfully isolated the Russians from potential continental allies and contained the fighting in East Asia, avoiding a Great Power free-for-all played out across China or a general war in Europe. Few could have anticipated the scale of Japanese success. On land, the Russians proved able to move large numbers of troops and supplies to East Asia, despite the fact that the last link of the Trans-Siberian railway around Lake Baikal was not yet completed. Still, the Japanese were able to land troops at strategic points and, if an assault on Siberia was still beyond their resources, they managed to operate successfully against the Russians in Korea and across Russia's Chinese possessions.

Even greater success was achieved at sea, where local naval dominance was rapidly achieved and facilitated to a large extent Japan's success on land. The complete destruction of Russia's Eastern fleet, and then the subsequent destruction of the Baltic

³²⁶ Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, 134.

fleet after it had steamed the long way round Africa as Britain denied them the use of the canal at Suez, cemented not only a Japanese victory but transformed a war which could still be portrayed in St. Petersburg as a series of tactical reverses into a significant strategic defeat.

The Russians were finally forced to sue for peace when domestic revolt threatened to topple the monarchy, and Russia was forced to turn its energies inward to regain control over its own territory and people. If the British could have scripted the Russo-Japanese war, they could hardly have done better. The Tsars were terminally weakened by the 1905 revolt, and it would be a generation before a new Russian government, informed by a very different set of organizational principles, rediscovered the imperial game. In Europe, Britain and France became increasingly close, driven to understandings and agreements to face the perceived threat of an increasingly aggressive German state. In East Asia, the treaty permitted the British to maintain the status quo for several more decades until their erstwhile Japanese allies emerged as a new and vigorous threat to the territorial integrity of China and the stability of the Pacific theatre.

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