

# International Rivalry in Korea and Russia's East Asian Policy in the Late Nineteenth Century

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## Abstract

*In the last decades of the nineteenth century, every important and complex issue representing international rivalry and collaboration was played out in Korea with the country serving as a pawn in the game of power politics. Korea's strategic importance, its military weakness, its deficiency of accurate information, and a continuous flood of rumors and suspicions all contributed to its subordination by imperialistic forces. Among other things, the advent of Russia in power politics in Korea meant meaningful challenges not only for the Russophobic powers but also for Korea. This article seeks to reexamine some controversial issues on the rivalry and collaboration of the powers in Korea by providing materials never cited before, and thereby reevaluate Russia's expansionism in Korea. Its scope covers some basic chronology of events in Korea, including the opening of Korea in 1876; political disturbances before and after the treaties with the West in the mid-1880s; the decade of Chinese dominance, 1885-1894; and the Russo-Japanese rivalry and collaboration, 1895-1898. And each period in this study is characterized by the viewpoint not only of rivalry but also of collaboration in power policies.*

**Keywords:** Anglo-Russian rivalry, Russophobia, Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese rivalry, King Gojong, Queen Min, Russo-Japanese Convention, Korea's independence

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## **Introduction**

The existing order in East Asia during the last decades of the nineteenth century saw profound disturbances that culminated in imperialistic rivalry and confrontation. Since the opening of the country in 1876, Korea had been in the maelstrom as a battleground of rival ambitions. China sought to sustain and strengthen, in a high-handed manner, its vested interests in Korea. Japan, in its own continental policy, considered the Korean peninsula as a stepping stone to the Chinese mainland. Russia attempted to secure an ice-free port at the country's southeastern coast. The advent of Russia in power politics in East Asia meant meaningful challenges not only for the Russophobic powers in the Western hemisphere but also for Korea. The Korean situation toward the end of the nineteenth century was of utmost political importance and carried explosive potentialities for East Asian politics.

The study of international relations surrounding Korea warrants an undertaking that inevitably would trace back to power politics in Europe of the Bismarckian period and to the globally critical Anglo-Russian rivalry of the nineteenth century. What meaning can be made of the international rivalry and coalition surrounding Korea and what happened in the aftermath? How can we reevaluate the Russian policy in terms of Korean political turbulences? This article seeks to reexamine the rivalry and the collaboration of the powers in Korea in relation to the Russian East Asian policy, by providing original sources from the United States National Archives and Records Administration, British Foreign Office (FO), Russian archives (AVPRI, RGVIA, and GARF), Chinese newspapers, and Japanese materials. Its scope covers some basic chronology of historic events in Korea, including the opening of Korea in 1876, political disturbances before and after the treaties with the West in the mid-1880s, the decade of Chinese predominance between 1885 and 1894, and the Russo-Japanese rivalry and coalition from 1895 to 1898.

## Sino-Japanese Rivalry over Korea and Russia

The rise of Japan posed an immediate threat to China's traditional hegemony in East Asia. The Ganghwado Treaty of 1876, forced on Korea by Japan, represented not only a major institutional challenge to old East Asian world order, but also the most representative case of international rivalry and coalition over Korea. Article I of the treaty declared, "Korea, being an independent state, enjoys the same sovereign rights as does Japan."<sup>1</sup> The Japanese intended this article to be a refutation of the Chinese claim that Korea was its dependent. The Zongli Yamen 總理衙門, the Foreign Office of China, did not realize the implication of the Article (Tsiang 1933, 61). By playing up the Russian menace, Japan had induced China to acquiesce in the conclusion of a treaty by direct negotiations between Japan and Korea (Jones 1938, 134).

The Ganghwado Treaty represented not only a chapter of Sino-Japanese rivalry, but also of a more global Anglo-Russian rivalry in the nineteenth century. Sir Harry Parkes, the British Representative in Japan, worried that the opening of Korea by Japan would result in a division of the Korean peninsula by a possible Russo-Japanese accord.<sup>2</sup> It was understandable as Japan and Russia agreed to a northern frontier settlement of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands in the Treaty of St. Petersburg in May 1875. Parkes, who had the most vigilant vision to recognize the strategic importance of Korea, ascertained that the Japanese move towards Korea was the result of this understanding.<sup>3</sup> In the negotiations with Russia, the Japanese had asked permission to land troops inside the Russian frontier for an attack on Korea.

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1. See the provisions of the treaty in Korean and English, National Assembly Library (1964, 3-16); for the text of the document in Japanese, see *Nihon gaimu nenpyo juyo bunsho* (Tokyo: Gaimusho, 1961).

2. British Foreign Office (FO) 46/195, Confidential 182, December 31, 1875, Parkes to Derby; FO 363/2, January 29, 1876, The Tenterden Papers, Parkes to Tenterden; Daniels (1996, 162-163).

3. FO 46/195, no. 167, Plunkett-Derby, December 9, 1875; FO 46/194, Parkes-Derby, November 10, 1875; Jones (1938, 121, 125).

Because of Parkes' involvement, the Ganghwado Treaty could also be considered a byproduct of strategic planning by Britain, who had previously tried to counter Russia's occupation of Korea. Parkes cautioned, "[With] Korean ports in the hands of the [Russian] bear, our Shanghai trade would be lost to us."<sup>4</sup> For that reason, Parkes advised his government that the annexation of Port Hamilton (Geomundo island), an island off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula, would provide a naval base from which to mount operation in East Asia.<sup>5</sup> The Foreign Office refused to annex the island for fear of beginning a territorial scramble, but for years afterwards Parkes remained convinced of the correctness of his position.

The Chinese policy in the 1880s was to encourage Korea to conclude treaties with the Western powers, thereby creating equilibrium of commercial interests to counter the political and territorial interests of Japan and Russia (Tsiang 1933, 64, 70). Li Hongzhang, Viceroy of Chili Province and the de facto foreign minister of China, was able to convince Korea that it should conclude treaties with the Western powers "in order to check the poison with an antidote."<sup>6</sup> From the standpoint of China, the Korea-U.S. Treaty that took place on May 22, 1882 (both the negotiations and the treaty itself) could be interpreted as an episode in the Sino-Japanese rivalry over Korea (Jones 1938, 294). The Chinese regarded this treaty as an admission by the United States of their suzerain rights, although article I of the treaty in fact contained nothing corresponding to the first article of the Ganghwado Treaty of 1876.

The Korea-U.S. treaty omitted all mention of dependence on China, so it might be cited as a proof of the independence of Korea. Unjust for Korea was the clause in the treaty covering "the most-favored-nation" privileges of Article XIV.<sup>7</sup> However, Americans would

4. The Parkes Papers (Cambridge University Library), Parkes to Robertson, July 25, 1876; Daniels (1996, 158-159).

5. FO 46/192, Telegram, Parkes to Derby, July 20, 1875; Daniels (1996, 160).

6. *Nihon Gaiko Bunsho* (NGB), vol. XVII, Li Hongzhang to Yi Yu-won, August 29, 1879, 370-371.

7. For the provisions of the treaty in Korean and English, see National Assembly Library (1965, 280-305) and Dickens (1894, 206).

come to enjoy only wider privileges automatically secured through the most-favored-nation clause in British and German treaties. Article I stipulated that if other powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either government, the other will exercise their “good offices.” Koreans were never able to grasp American “good offices.” Within two years of the treaty, the United States made a diplomatic retreat by downgrading the American Ministry in Korea to a lower plenipotentiary post. One cause of the relative indifference to the fate of Korea shown by the State Department was the insignificant size of American trade with the country. American interest in Korea was mainly commercial; however, its stake was so small.<sup>8</sup>

In June 1882, Admiral G. O. Willes concluded a Korea-Great Britain treaty, which was more or less a copy of the Korea-U.S. treaty. For Great Britain, the Korean peninsula meant not only a base for checking Russian advances but also an opportunity to penetrate the economic market. German minister von Brandt also concluded with Korea an agreement identical to that of Great Britain.

In retrospect, the period of the treaties with the imperialistic powers proved to be the calm before the storm that would erupt in Korea in the 1880s. The discontent aroused among Koreans at the conclusion of the treaties was compounded with the distress caused by draught and famine in the country. Infuriated Korean troops rioted in Seoul and anti-Japanese parties attacked the Japanese Legation in July 1882. After subduing the Korean soldiers’ revolt in September, Li Hongzhang forced upon Koreans “The Regulations for Maritime and Overland Trade.” As the preamble of the document stated, Li’s objective was to ensure the commercial as well as political predominance of China in Korea. But Li ultimately failed, partly owing to the un-sleeping vigilance of Parkes.

Parkes did not believe that Great Britain should support Chinese claims to suzerainty in Korea.<sup>9</sup> Since August 1883, Parkes had repeatedly met the young Korean progressives who recommended that

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8. *U.S. Consular Reports*, no. 154, July 1893, p. 314; Jones (1938, 518n1).

9. FO 46/285, Parkes to Tenterden, June 21, 1882; Jones (1938, 314).

Britain should ratify her treaty with Korea, so as to help throw off the Chinese grip. Parkes, as the new Chinese Minister at the time, had begun his mission in Korea at the close of October. And in just one month, he negotiated and concluded a new satisfactory and unilaterally beneficial treaty and went back to Chefoo (Dickens 1894, 207).

The Parkes Treaty, signed on November 26, 1883,<sup>10</sup> was a newly reworked agreement with Korea. It contained no specific mention of Korean independence, and with the accompanying new trade regulations and tariffs, the treaty fully remedied the deficiencies of the one concluded with Admiral Willes. The tariff rate of the Parkes Treaty was unprecedentedly low—5-7.5% compared to the 10-13% set in the Willes Treaty and the 8-10% tariff established in treaties with other powers (Lee 1988, 63). On the same day of signing the treaty, Eduard Zappe, the German minister, also concluded with Korea an agreement identical to the one championed by Parkes. Thanks to the practice of the most-favored-nation privileges, every treaty power including China, Japan, and even the United States (having already sanctioned the Treaty of 1882), concluded with Korea new treaties modeled on that of Parkes.

On the other hand, a treaty with Russia the following year had quite different implications. The Korea-Russia Friendship and Commerce Treaty signed on July 7, 1884 followed the example of the other powers but concluded with its own distinctive aspects. It should be noted that the treaty was meant to serve as a counterweight to the Russophobia in Korea that had been fueled by the other vested powers and to transform the direction of Korean diplomacy afterwards.

Russian documents have revealed that the Foreign Office had been considering a treaty with Korea whenever the agreements with other powers began.<sup>11</sup> But until the mid-1880s, Russia had maintained a cautious “wait and see” approach to Korea mainly because Russia’s main interests had been in West Asia (the Near East) and

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10. For the all provisions of the treaty in Korean, Chinese, and English, see National Assembly Library (1996, 308-370).

11. Russian State Military History Archive (RGVIA), f. vua, op. 1, d. 52, ll. 1-31; Park (2002, 603).

Central Asia, not in East Asia. Russian interests in Korea largely began with strategic considerations to take advantage of China's diplomatic predicament in its war with France. When the shadow of Sino-French conflicts over Annam and Tongking loomed over East Asia, Karl Ivanovich Weber, the Russian Consul in Tianjin, came to Seoul on June 24, 1884 and quickly concluded a Korea-Russia treaty within two weeks.

Russia's main concern in the treaty with Korea was not in trade and commerce, as some Korean-Russian historians assume (Pak 2001, 133-134; 2009). Rather, the point lay in the strategic provisions in Articles IV, V, VII, and VIII about the use of port and anchoring of Russian battleships.<sup>12</sup> It seems particularly significant that in Article VIII the treaty provided warships of either country the right to visit any port of the other signatory country, irrespective of whether a particular port was open or closed, for the Korean government had not granted such a right to any of the other signatory powers. It can be proved that the treaty made no appreciable difference in Russo-Korean trade relations for years afterwards.

Clearly, by granting exclusive rights to Russia, the Korean government meant to encourage the Russian government to establish close relations with it, an idea that was largely encouraged by Paul Georg von Möllendorff. The German-born vice-president of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Möllendorff acted as an intermediary agent in the course of concluding the treaty, with the aim of drawing in Russia to mitigate the Sino-Japanese rivalry in Korea. Möllendorff's role should be explained. Originally recommended by Li Hongzhang in 1882, he worked as a diplomatic and financial advisor in Korea for Chinese politico-economic interests, but he began to exercise independence from Li. It is still disputable whether the German Foreign Office might have been a behind-the-scenes influence. According to Möllendorff's diary, he was ordered from Wilhelmstrasse through O. G. Zembsch, the new German Representative in Seoul (Möllendorff

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12. For all the provisions in Korean, Chinese, and English, see National Assembly Library (1964-65, vol. III, 1-54); RGVIA, f. 283, op. 766, d. 23, ll. 1-110.

and Möllendorff 1987, 77). It seems evident that the pro-Russian role of Möllendorff in the process of concluding the Korea-Russia treaty was “to lure the Russian bear to Far Eastern pastures” (Tsiang 1933, 88) for the safety of the German Empire in Europe. Viceroy Li came to distrust Möllendorff, concluding that he acted largely out of personal motives.

### **Chinese Ascendancy and Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Korea**

The outbreak of the Sino-French War in the summer of 1884 rapidly changed the East Asian situation swirling in the Korean peninsula. Li Hongzhang had withdrawn half of the Chinese army from Korea, leaving 1,500 troops in Seoul; this created a power vacuum and serious consequences for Korea. On December 4, young Korean progressives formed a conspiracy to overturn the government and remove Chinese suzerainty with help from Japan. Working with Korean reformers also provided Japan with the opportunity to further its ambitions in Korea.

However, Chinese suzerainty over Korea was exercised more firmly than ever because the Chinese troops repressed the coup and blocked the Korean progressives from taking power. Fearing an imminent clash between China and Japan, Korea's King Gojong had appealed for the use of American “good offices.” At the same time, the king sought protection from Russia, resulting in the so-called rumor of a “Korea-Russia secret agreement” in the mid-1880s (Lensen 1982, vol. 1, 34-35; Pak 2001, 84). Here again, the key person in the middle of these schemes in Korea was Möllendorff.

The outline of the rumor had it that in the middle of December 1884, Möllendorff suggested, through the Tsarist consul in Nagasaki, that Russia should assume a protectorate over Korea. He requested the dispatch of Russian warships to Jemulpo (present Incheon) and the sending of 200 sailors to guard the King.<sup>13</sup> When news of the

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13. RGVIA, f.SPb. Glaveneoi Arkiv, 1-1 Sekretnaya telegramma A. P. Davydova iz Tokio ot 2(14) dekabrya 1884g, d. 13, l. 26; Pak (2001, 82).



coup in Korea reached St. Petersburg, the First Secretary of Legation in Tokyo, Alexis de Speyer, a future Russian Minister to Seoul, was sent to Jemulpo on January 11, 1885 to keep an eye on developments. Apparently, Speyer, a strong advocate of Russian expansionism into Korea, pushed rather aggressively (Tsiang 1933, 90-91; Malozemoff 1958, 30) and tried to get the Korean government to adopt Möllendorff's plan. In compensation for its protection, Möllendorff offered to grant Russia the ice-free Unkovski Bay (Yeongilman) or another harbor on the east coast of Korea under the guise of a lease to a Russian firm or merchant (Lensen 1982, vol. 1, 34).

Since Russian and Korean documents about the secret treaty are not in existence, it is impossible to speak conclusively about the treaty itself. But notwithstanding this, it cannot be denied that King Gojong appealed for protection from Russia several times, and the Russian government had denied more than once the existence of the secret treaty. Those patterns were recurrent in the relationship between and Korea and Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is likely that the information from circumstantial evidences is substantially correct.

In spite of Gojong's appeal for protection and the rumor of a "secret agreement," Russia still had not made a formal move. Giers, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote in his memorandum on January 29, 1885: "Russia should not give a positive word to Korea to have an expectation from Russia . . . and no power takes paramount influence in the Korean peninsula, where ever exist the possibilities of the conflict between China and Japan."<sup>14</sup> What Russia meant by Korean independence was that Korea should not belong to a power other than itself, be it China or Japan.

Meanwhile, the rumors of a secret agreement between Russia and Korea, the mighty shadow of the Anglo-Russian rivalry on the Afghan border, and the reported move to Port Hamilton resulted in a complete reversal of the policy of Japan in Korea. The Japanese govern-

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14. Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), f.kitaiskii stol, Vsepoddanneishaya dokladneoi 1885, d. 3, l. 4-6; Pak (2001, 85).

ment felt it had no choice but to cooperate with China in order to check Russian encroachment. The Tianjin Convention signed between Li Hongzhang and Ito Hirobumi on April 18, 1885 had two intentions for Japan: to avoid a conflict with China while maintaining Japanese influence in Korea and to check Russian encroachment.

The main thrust of the Port Hamilton incident was that the British government had practically decided on war with Russia over the Afghan boundary. Moreover, with rumors that the Russians were about to seize Port Lazareff (Songjeonman), the British acted without hesitation. On April 15, Vice-Admiral Sir William Dowell was ordered to “occupy Port Hamilton and report proceedings,” and he immediately sent a squadron to perform the task.<sup>15</sup> The British favored occupying Port Hamilton as a means of controlling the Straits of Korea and blockading the thoroughfare of Russian warships from Vladivostok.

The British seizure of Port Hamilton for two years was, as a newspaper at the time reported, the product of a “honeymoon” relationship with China that was intended to check Russian influence in the Korean peninsula.<sup>16</sup> In August 1886, Viceroy Li received through N. F. Ladygensky, the Russian Charge d’Affaire in Peking, the Russian government’s assurance that it would not occupy Port Hamilton after the evacuation of the British fleet from the island (Narochnitskii 1956, 394-395). Both Russia and China took on the obligation to abstain from encroachment on the integrity of Korea. This obligation was not given in a final written form because of the insistence of Peking on the insertion of an explanation guaranteeing the vassalage of Korea towards China (Narochnitskii 1956, 394). For their part, the British evacuated the island in February 1887 after hearing from Li of the Russo-Chinese verbal exchange at Tianjin on the integrity of Korea.<sup>17</sup> In retrospect, it would seem that the chief person to make

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15. FO, China Telegram, Admiralty to Dowell, April 14, 1885, no. 3, China no. 1, 1887. Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton, March 1887; *North China Herald*, April 29, 1887.

16. *North China Herald*, April 29, 1887.

17. National Archives, FM 134, no. 50, Confidential, Rockhill to Secretary of State, January 22, 1887.

gains from the Anglo-Russian rivalry and the British seizure of Port Hamilton was Li Hongzhang, often termed the Chinese Bismarck.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian government was to keep pursuing a cautious policy, which would be better defined in 1888. A conference held that year in St. Petersburg on May 8 to determine the first official policy of Russia on the Korean peninsula accepted the views of Baron Korf, the Governor-General in Amur province, and I. A. Zinovieff, the chief of the Asiatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The submitted Report of the Committee declared the future Russian policy that the acquisition of Korea by Russia was undesirable as the country was difficult to defend, far from the main centers of Russian strength; any attempt to occupy it would arouse the hostility of England, China, and Japan (Popov 1932, 55-56).

It is apparent that the Russian policy established at this conference between Korf-Zinovieff was made in sympathy and friendship with Japan. The memorandum presumes that Japan had been content with the provisions of the convention with China of 1885, that the direction of Japanese policy was completely in agreement with Russian views, and that Russia intended to cooperate as far as possible with Japan to keep China in check (Popov 1932, 56, 61). But this proposition would prove to be a miscalculation on the part of the Russians. The Japanese were profoundly suspicious of Russian designs; therefore, close cooperation with Russia was hardly feasible. On January 1889, Marshal Yamagata Aritomo, the founder of the Japanese modern army, brought forward a memorandum for the large-scale expansion of armaments, designating the Korean peninsula as an indispensable front for Japanese national interests. In the following years, the memorandum would be emboldened in Japanese military and political circles which had great economic as well as political and military interests in Korea.

From the time of 1885 until 1894, both China and Japan abstained from outward hostility toward each other. In this truce, the

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18. National Archives, FM 134, no. 47, Confidential, Rockhill to Secretary of State, January 13, 1887.

nine years when, Yuan Shikai, Li's agent, resided in Korea saw the ascendancy of Chinese influence and the decline of Japanese influence in Joseon. Japan could only watch Chinese predominance closely and chose to refrain from countermeasures until a propitious time.

### The Sino-Japanese War and Great Britain and Russia

Finally, Japan's time arrived in July 1894. When the Donghak Peasant Rebellion, aimed at driving out the influence of Westerners in Korea, erupted, King Gojong called for Chinese intervention. When he sent in troops, Li stated that Japan would not act. However, Japan proved not only to be ready but willing to launch its own plan. The Japanese troops entered the capital and occupied the palace by force on July 23.<sup>19</sup>

The repression of the rebellion merely provided a pretext for the outbreak of war between Japan and China. Japan refused to withdraw its troops and demanded that radical changes be made in the domestic administration in Korea,<sup>20</sup> desisting to evacuate until adequate reforms had been put in place. The *Japan Daily Mail*, reporting from the perspective of the government, stated that the war resulted from "China having refused to cooperate with Japan to prevent Japan from itself undertaking the necessary reforms in Korean administration."<sup>21</sup> China, on the contrary, favored the simultaneous withdrawal of the forces of both sides and then addressing the need for internal reform in Korea.<sup>22</sup>

It was obvious that Japanese policy was to oust the Chinese influence in Korea by force (Mutsu 1982, 148; Palmer 1963, 7). In the

19. National Archives, Despatches from US Ministers to Japan, roll. 64, no. 133, Sill to Dun, July 26, 1894; no. 133, Dun to Gresham, August 4, 1894; no. 146, Allen to Secretary of State, September 18, 1895.

20. FO, no. 423, O'Connor to Kimberley, Peking, July 28, 1894, Inclosure 3 in no. 423, Memorandum handed in by Japanese minister; Mutsu (1982, 32-39).

21. Cited in *North China Herald*, August 10, 1894.

22. FO, no. 408, O'Connor to Kimberley, Peking, July 24, 1894; National Archives, FM 134, Telegram, Gresham to Sill, July 9, 1894.

impending war at the end of June, Japan argued that China was to blame since, in defiance of the Li-Ito Convention of 1885, it had sent troops to Korea to put down the rebellion and did not give formal notice of her intention to Japan until the troops were already there.<sup>23</sup> Japan finally attained its aims in Article I of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 1895, stipulating that China recognize the full and complete independence and autonomy of Korea.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that China was the only power that meant to recognize the independence of Korea.

Japan's victory changed the face of international relations and created a shift in the basic outline of the great powers' policies regarding East Asia. British and American East Asian policy was evidently switched to check off Russia by cooperation with Japan, not China.

The British policy of nonintervention was a crucial factor whenever Japan decided to take an action. By mid-July 1894 when the Japanese government took the precaution of sounding out Britain, the power most directly concerned, the London government declared that they would refuse to tolerate any actions that infringed upon their own interests in China or upon the integrity and independence of Korea. Japanese government clearly recognized that the British statement was basically unwilling to take decisive action to restrain the Japanese (Mutsu 1982, 53). When the war situation became gradually advantageous to Japan in September, British public opinion became conscious of Japanese naval power in Asia and recognized it as the only power to check Russia's southward advance (Remmey 1964, 53-58). By April 1895, when Britain had been invited to participate in the anti-Japanese Triple Intervention led by Russia, Germany, and France, the British Cabinet decided not to intervene against Japan.

With regard to the United States, it could be said that its policy during this period was somewhat contradictory and double-dealing. It

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23. *North China Herald*, June 28, 1894.

24. See the provisions of the treaty in Chinese and in Japanese, National Assembly Library (1965, 148-172); FO, Denby to Gresham, April 29, 1895, Inclosure no. 2206.

allowed Japan to accelerate the commencement of the war. Acting in a duplicitous way, then U.S. Secretary of State, Walter Q. Gresham, in early July 1894, initially declared to Japan his country's disappointment at an "unjust war,"<sup>25</sup> but on the same day assured the Japanese Minister in Washington of America's neutrality (Lee and Patterson 1986, 42). At the same time, Gresham flatly told the Korean Minister in Washington who repeatedly requested "good offices" that the American Government could not intervene forcibly.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, at the end of July, John M. B. Sill, the American Minister Resident and Consul-General in Seoul, in cooperation with Russia, France, and England, urged the simultaneous withdrawal of Chinese and Japanese troops from the Korean territory.<sup>27</sup> Gresham and U.S. President Cleveland agreed that forceful intervention against Japan would be contrary to the traditional American policy, which was to avoid any alliance and participation in guaranteeing the independence and integrity of distant states, and that the negligible American economic interest in Korea (less than 0.01% of America's foreign trade between 1894-1904) would hardly warrant the administration's breaking of that tradition (Lee and Patterson 1986, 22, 40).

Russia's policy toward Korea, on the verge of the war, was still based on the Korf-Zinovief "wait and see" approach in 1888. The special conference of Ministers on August 21, 1894 came to the conclusion that Russian interests would not be served by active interference in the Sino-Japanese War (Popov 1932, 66-67). Russia could not be assured of who would win the war and did not see any urgency requiring a change of policy (Popov 1932, 62-67).

Russian policy also changed a lot as Japanese victory seemed clear. The success of Japan and its repercussions were a shock for Russia. The special conference on February 1, 1895 summarized that

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25. National Archives, FM 134, no. 23, Gresham to Sill, July 9, 1894; no. 52, Dun to Mutsu Munemitsu, July 9, 1894; Munemitsu (1982, 54-55).

26. National Archives, FM 134, Ye Sung Soo to Gresham, Legation of Korea, Washington, July 5, 1894; Gresham to Sill, July 9, 1894.

27. National Archives, FM 134, no. 33. Sill, de Kehrberg, Lefevre, and Gardner to Yuan Shi Kai and to K. Otori, July 25, 1894.

their principal aim was the maintenance of the independence of Korea and that they should form an agreement with Great Britain and other European powers in regard to collective action against Japan (Popov 1932, 73-74). The special conference on April 11 made some important decisions, which became a cornerstone for the future Russian East Asian policy. Russia informed the powers that it had no intentions of annexing any territory, but, as the following condition was vital to Russia's interests, it was necessary for Japan's hold on southern Manchuria to be relinquished (Popov 1932, 80, 83). The Russian Minister of Finance Sergei Witte's suggestion at the conference stressed the importance of Manchuria. He proposed, "The hostility of Japan was directed principally against us . . . . We could allow Japan as a victorious nation to take Formosa, the Pescadores, even Port Arthur and, in the extreme case, the southern part of Korea, but not Manchuria" (Malozemoff 1958, 65; Popov 1932, 83). Consequently, the Triple Intervention on April 23, established to push Japan to disgorge some of the spoils of victory, was a triumph of Witte's East Asian policy (Mutsu 1982, 203; Pooley 1915, 85-86), and was in fact Russia's first proactive policy in East Asia.

### **Russo-Japanese Rivalry in Korea**

The Triple Intervention of 1895 had far-reaching effects especially on Korea. Russia ousted Japan from the suzerainty of Korea which Japan had assumed after its war with China, with the result that the Korean peninsula became the site of Russo-Japanese confrontation. Nevertheless, at least until 1898, it was mainly by resorting to diplomacy that Japan had increasingly brought Korea into its sphere of influence. Some historians interpret that the Triple Intervention was designed to remove a source of Russo-Japanese tension in Korea and to set the stage for a general rapprochement.<sup>28</sup> This view of the

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28. For this evaluation of the effect of Triple Intervention from Russian standpoint, see Lensen (1982, vol. 1, xiii).

Russo-Japanese relationship would be somewhat persuasive if one considered it within a longer time span beyond 1898 and beyond the territories of Manchuria and China.

If we were to place a microscopic spotlight on the Korean peninsula, the scene would be seen quite differently. The Triple Intervention increased Russo-Japanese tension and paved the way towards Japan's evacuation of Korea. The assassination of the Korean Queen Min by the Japanese in 1895 and the King's refuge at the Russian Legation in Seoul for over one year from 1896 to 1897 created "the first Russo-Japanese war without bullets and without declaration" (Choi 2004, 2006). For Koreans, the most humiliating incidents in their history occurred immediately succeeding the Triple Intervention.

As the retrocession of Liaodong became an established fact, Japanese influence in Korea dropped suddenly with the speed of a stone rolling down a precipice.<sup>29</sup> But Japan's reckless policy was fatally flawed just after they assured that the common action of the Triple Intervention was almost broken in early July 1895 owing to the feud over the Chinese reimbursement to Japan; it would no longer be an obstacle in the path of the Japanese (Choi 2006, 152-157, 162-165). It was Inouye Kaoru who swiftly and skillfully turned this changed international environment into a favorable opportunity for the Japanese cause.

Count Inouye, as a member of the most influential group of elder statesmen (*genro* 元老) and as the former Foreign and Interior Minister, was the expert most familiar with the Korean situation. Evidently accepting a position below his status, the powerful figure Inouye came to Seoul as a minister in October 1894, on the condition that he was granted the authority to exercise the "right of full decision and power" in setting Japanese policy toward Korea (Choi 2006, 152-156; 2005). The *carte blanche* meant that Inouye's decisions dictated the Japanese government's policy in Korea. He demanded an urgent reformation in Korea to block in advance Russia's encroachment

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29. *North China Herald*, February 28, 1896.



before the Russian Trans-Siberian railway was completed.<sup>30</sup> As the *North China Herald* on November 1, 1895 reported, Queen Min, who had drawn Russian influence into the Korean Court, was the great obstacle to Count Inouye's plans of reforms in Korea, and he had become convinced that the noxious influence of the Queen must be permanently removed. Hence, the fact that Inouye recommended an immature warrior, Miura Goro, as his successor meant the Japanese policy was directed towards militarism.

The massacre occurred only 38 days after Miura's arrival in Seoul as Minister on September 1, 1895. On the night of October 8, Minister Miura directed a coup with a mob of Japanese intruders and barbarously murdered Queen Min and the members of her family, who she had brought to power in an anti-Japanese movement.<sup>31</sup> King Gojong had to yield "in panic" to all Japanese demands.<sup>32</sup> Nine days after the massacre, Miura was recalled and tried at Hiroshima by a Japanese court and, despite admission of guilt, was soon released in January 1896.<sup>33</sup> Count Inouye, who had left Seoul on September 19, 1895, was sent back to Korea on October 31 as a special ambassador in order to restore Japan's position.<sup>34</sup>

According to the Foreign Representative in Seoul at the time, "Count Inouye was simply acting a farce . . . as if these terrible acts were planned by Viscount Miura."<sup>35</sup> On November 21, the *North China Herald* also pointed out: "In a private letter from Seoul we are told that . . . Count Inouye is the real author of the plot, and that Viscount Miura was only a scapegoat." Recently uncovered private correspondences among members of the Japanese power elite group—Yamagata, Mutsu, and Saionji—clearly reveal the process of deci-

30. AVPRI, f. 191, op. 768, d. 51; Park (2002, 362).

31. National Archives, FM 134, no. 156, Allen to Olney, October 10, 1895; AVPRI, f. 150, op. 493, d. 6.

32. National Archives, FM 134, Telegram, Sill to Olney, November 9, 1895.

33. FO 405, Confidential, 6817, part VII, no. 84, Satow to Salisbury, January 28, 1896.

34. National Archives, FM 134, Telegram, Sill to Olney, October 26, 1895; no. 173, Sill to Olney, November 20, 1895.

35. National Archives, FM 134, R-61, no. 156, Allen to Secretary of State, Olney, October 10, 1895.

sion-making in the conspiracy of Inouye and the Japanese government to assassinate Queen Min (Choi 2006). The letters provide crucial clues that the motive and the plotting behind the massacre did not originate from Miura, but actually Inouye and the Japanese government.

From the Russian standpoint, the murder of the queen and her entourage was the beginning of an undeclared war by Japan. A Korean counterrevolution on November 28 failed to free King Gojong, a virtual prisoner of the Japanese-led army group.<sup>36</sup> The Russian Charge d'Affaire Alexei Nikolaevich Speyer reported on January 22, 1896 to his government the king's wish for a direct Russian intervention.<sup>37</sup> In St. Petersburg, there was no objection in principle for supporting the king and the anti-Japanese forces in Korea (Lensen 1982, vol. 2, 581). However, Speyer's proposal for the dispatch of Russian troops was rejected for fear of possible complications. The Foreign Minister Lobanov warned Speyer that Russia did not want to provoke new complications in the Far East (Nikhamin 1948, 187; Lensen 1982, vol. 2, 580-581).

On February 2, Gojong sent a note to Speyer about his intention of voluntary flight to the Russian Legation.<sup>38</sup> According to the report by Speyer to Lobanov, Speyer said that, after discussion with Weber, the former Russian Minister, made the decision to protect the king.<sup>39</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry approved the plan and Tsar Nicholas decreed that a large Russian warship be sent to Jemulpo.<sup>40</sup> Speyer in his letter on February 6 asked Admiral Kornilov, stationed at Jemulpo,

36. FO 405, Confidential 6817, part VII, no. 15, Hillier to Salisbury, Inclosure 1 in no. 15, Hillier to Beauclerk, November 27, 1895; Inclosure 2 in no. 15, November 29, 1895; Inclosure 3 in no. 31, Hillier to Beauclerk, December 4, 1895; *North China Herald*, February 28, 1896.

37. Lensen (1982, vol. 2, 580); FO 405, Confidential 6809, part VIII, Hillier to Mr. Beauclerk, February 8, 1896.

38. AVPRI, f. 150, no. 493, d. 5; Nikhamin (1948, 191); Lensen (1982, vol. 2, 583).

39. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 568, op. 1, d. 145, ll. 1-51; Park (2002, 733); AVPRI, f. 150, no. 493, d. 5; Nikhamin (1948, 191); Lensen (1982, vol. 2, 583).

40. AVPRI, f. 150, no. 493, d. 5; Nikhamin (1948, 191); Lensen (1982, vol. 2, 583).

for assistance, mentioning that the king would soon make his flight to the Russian Legation.<sup>41</sup> On the ninth, Russian sailors under the command of Captain Molas were landed and rushed to Seoul, reinforcing the legation guards to over a hundred men.<sup>42</sup>

The question still arises in Korean academic circles whether Gojong made the flight to the Russian Legation on February 11 at his own initiative or whether it had been inspired by Speyer. According to the dispatches of Speyer and Weber, their role had been passive. Yet the Russian historian V. P. Nikhamin voices the suspicion that the diplomats had downplayed their participation because it had been in violation of their instructions not to interfere in Korean internal affairs (Lensen 1982, vol. 2, 587). French Minister George Lefevre's testimony also substantiates Nikhamin's suspicion of Speyer's initiative (Lensen 1982, vol. 2, 587; Research Foundation of Korean Church History 2008, 35-39). It seems certain that Speyer and Weber, who still had not left the legation after his replacement, initiated the project.

Though there are conflicting interpretations of the terrible incidents caused by the Russo-Japanese rivalry in 1895-96, Queen Min's murder and King Gojong's flight to the Russian Legation have some common elements. The two incidents involved both the former and acting ministers of Japan and Russia. Gojong's exile was led by Speyer in response to the extreme action of the Japanese against Queen Min. Speyer repeatedly took his own course of diplomacy, but the Russian government never reprimanded him either during or after the king's asylum in the Legation in Seoul. A parallel can be seen in the lenient treatment of Miura by the Japanese government.

### **Russo-Japanese Coalition over Korea**

During the year-long period of Gojong's asylum in the Russian Lega-

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41. AVPRI, f. 191, op. 768, d. 365, ll. 1-86; Park (2002, 423).

42. *North China Herald*, February 21, 1896.

tion, Russia was placed in an extraordinarily favorable position for influencing a pro-Russian orientation of Korean affairs. It was through the Russian minister that the rights to mining natural resources, such as gold, coal, and timber, as well as to building railways, were extended to other foreign powers, allowing them to reap immediate gains in Korea.<sup>43</sup> Since Russia's power was ascendant in Korea, Japan lost her influence, but since neither country could resume a war at the time, they worked out a temporary compromise. From 1896 to 1898, Russia and Japan made three agreements regarding Korea, which are still open to interpretation. Two agreements were concluded during the time that King Gojong was still at the Russian Legation in Seoul, simultaneous as the coronation of Nicholas II in Moscow.

The Seoul Protocol of May 14, 1896<sup>44</sup> between Weber and the new Japanese Minister Komura was, in reality, a Russian victory. The convention was an illusionary one in view of the great disparity of Japanese and Russian interests in Korea. As a *North China Herald* article on March 12, 1897 published, "The point in this convention of most importance to Japan is the stipulation that Korea shall be left to organize her army and her police 'without recourse to foreign aid,' whereas Russian officers have been engaged for some time and are still engaged in reorganizing the Korean army and drilling her soldiers."

The Moscow Protocol of June 9, between the Russian Foreign Minister Lobanov and Marquis Yamagata, was more or less an extension of the Seoul Protocol at a higher level. The Lobanov-Yamagata Convention provided that neither Russia nor Japan could send troops into Korea unless the other nation gave its consent.<sup>45</sup> The Russian newspaper *Novosti*, on February 13, 1897, interpreted that the convention for the dual control of Russia and Japan and the two contracting powers had a common objective: to remove both Russian

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43. FO 405, Confidential 6809, part VIII, Hillier to Mr. Beauclerk, March 24, 1896.

44. AVPRI, f. 150, op. 493, d. 192; National Assembly Library (1965, 173-178); NGB 29.458: 789-792; *North China Herald*, March 12, 1897.

45. AVPRI, f. 150, op. 493, d. 192; *North China Herald*, March 12, 1897.

and Japanese soldiers from Korea.<sup>46</sup> The convention appeared to be a mutual agreement to maintain the independence of Korea, as the Sino-Japanese Convention of Tianjin in 1885, but in reality denied Korea's independence.

There are more reasons why these agreements of 1896 cannot be regarded as the beginning of an amicable Russo-Japanese relationship. Lobanov, with the able assistance of Witte, was already pledging to preserve the territorial integrity of Korea in secret negotiations with China. Six days prior to signing the Protocol with Japan, Lobanov had concluded a secret anti-Japanese alliance with China known as the Li-Lobanov Treaty. And almost in the same breath, Tsar Nicholas II violated the Russo-Japanese agreement by entertaining the Korean envoy to the coronation and promising him financial aid and military support in training the royal guards.<sup>47</sup> The Tsar's reply on July 2 to the proposals of the Korean envoy can be interpreted to emphasize the independence and autonomy of Korea on the back of the Japanese government.<sup>48</sup> In short, the assurances by Russia to Japan, China, and Korea all contradicted each other.

The military part of the Russian program was immediately put into effect after contact with the Korean representatives attending the coronation.<sup>49</sup> Three Russian officers and ten drill instructors were sent out and an army of over four thousand men was organized. Russian influence was ascendant in Korea, but it regarded Korea only as a buffer zone for penetration into Manchuria. This Russian position must have been disconcerting to Gojong. Disappointment followed the triumph of his return to the palace on February 20, 1897 and subsequently amplified Gojong's mistrust of Russia. The Japanese newspaper *Kokumin* asserted on February 23 that the return of

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46. FO 405, Confidential 7041, part X, no. 48, O'Connor to Salisbury, Received March 15, 1897, Enclosure in no. 48, Precis of Article in the *Novosti* of February 13(25), 1897.

47. FO 405, Despatch Satow to Salisbury, March 1, 1897.

48. FO 405, Confidential 6809, part VIII, Hillier to Mr. Beauclerk, March 13, 1896; no. 72, O'Connor to Salisbury, St. Petersburg, June 15, 1896.

49. *The Independent*, October 24, 1896.

the King of Korea had assisted the Korean independence.<sup>50</sup>

Successful in concluding treaties of Weber-Komura, Lobanov-Yamagata, and Li-Lobanov but frustrated by efforts to penetrate into Manchuria by the sly old politician Li Hongzhang, Russia temporarily changed its direction and expanded further into Korea. For economic penetration into Korea, Minister Witte supported the establishment of the Russo-Korean Bank and decided to send his agent, Kyril Alexeev. On Alexeev's arrival at Seoul early in October, Speyer maneuvered an agreement naming Alexeev the Chief Superintendent of Korean Customs Service for an infinite period.<sup>51</sup> Russian power in Korea appeared to have reached its climax at the end of 1897.

But just at this time, beginning with German occupation of Kiao-chaw in November, a sudden feverish scramble for concessions flared up in Manchuria and North China. These upheavals forced Russia and Japan to act cautiously and pushed them toward a compromise on Korea. On April 25, 1898, Baron Rosen, the Russian Minister to Tokyo, and Nishi, the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed a convention regarding Korea known as the Rosen-Nishi Convention.<sup>52</sup>

Differently from the previous two protocols, the convention represented a division of influences over Korea by the two powers. The tradeoff of the right to dispatch Russian military advisors and the right to send Japanese financial advisors to Korea was a quite realistic coalition of the two countries. It meant a clear transformation of Russian East Asian policy whereby priority is given to Manchuria after the Lease Treaty of Port Arthur and Dalianwan (alternately Talienwan) on March 17. The withdrawal or partial eclipse from Korea was important for Russia to preserve its friendship with Japan until the completion of the Trans-Siberian railroad.<sup>53</sup>

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50. FO 405, Confidential 7041, part X, no. 54, Inclosure 1 in no. 54. Extract from the "Kokumin" of February 23, 1897.

51. AVPRI, f. 150, op. 493, d. 58; *North China Herald*, November 12, 1897; December 3, 1897; FO 405, Confidential 7165, part XI, no. 99, Jordan to Salisbury, April 9, 1898.

52. NGB 31.164: 182-185.

53. National Archives, no. 2901, Denby to Sherman, April 1, 1898.

There is so much dissension and equivocation about this convention. But it cannot be denied that this was the first recognition of Japan's interest, particularly in the economic development of Korea rather than its political interest, resulting in putting aside the Japanese objection to the Russian occupation of Port Arthur and Dalianwan. In the course of these negotiations, Marquis Ito suggested an agreement by which Russia would recognize Japan's freedom of action in Korea, and in return, Japan would regard Manchuria as lying outside Japanese interests. Russia, although it withdrew its military and financial advisors from Korea, did not commit to a definite promise of surrendering its interests there.<sup>54</sup>

On the surface, it appeared as though Russia was relinquishing its ascendant role in Korea. Russia beat a hasty retreat of their military drill masters and financial advisors from the country and seemed in fact to give up political ascendancy in Korea. In March, the British MacLeavy Brown was reinstated into the Chief Superintendent of Korean Customs Service and Russian economic penetration into Korea was frozen by the close of the Russo-Korean Bank. At the highest point of imperialism in China and Manchuria, Korea came to relative tranquility for a brief time of change in masters. Now only the Japanese continued relentlessly to extend their interests in Korea.

## Conclusion

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, every important and complex issue representing international rivalry and coalition was played out in Korea with the country serving as a pawn in the game of power politics. Korea's strategic importance, its military weakness, and a continuous flood of rumors and suspicions all contributed to its subordination by imperialistic forces. Self-ruling in theory but controlled alternately by one or another power in reality, Korea had to relinquish any claim of real authority over its own sovereignty. King

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54. AVPRI, f. 150, op. 493, d. 198; AVPRI, f. 191, op. 768, d. 110; Park (2002, 379).

Gojong's attempts to find trustworthy partners with Korea's best interests in mind (be it the United States, Japan, Russia, or France) continuously failed. The evaluation of Gojong's politics of survival-oriented dependency and naïve trust of the super powers is still vigorously debated in Korean Studies.

In Korea, China and Japan hated and suspected each other far more than they each feared the European powers. As Asia's emerging modern power, the Japanese had great ambitions, but knew that it was politically astute to collaborate with China from 1885 to 1894. The independence of Korea was not of vital interest to China and Japan. The game of power politics between the two countries and the resulting schemes in Korea mainly concerned their mutual fear of Russia and determination to prevent its advance southward.

Russophobia was not exclusive to the Asian nations. Anglo-American support for China or Japan as an anti-Russian bloc had very important leverage on the balance of power in Korea. The British considered the Korean peninsula as a buffer state for their strategic defense against Russia. With the momentum of the Sino-Japanese War, British policy shifted to make Japan an ally in order to keep a check on Russia's southward advance. America aligned itself with the British to counter Russia's threat and also favored Japanese predominance in Korea. The U.S. official policy of indifference, in contrast to the friendly and benevolent but unofficial attitude displayed by official American diplomatic agents stationed in the field between 1882 and 1898, added to the political unrest in the Korean government without any solutions to a highly complex problem.

Russia was, most of all, afraid of becoming embroiled in war with Great Britain and feared that an aggressive policy in Korea might provoke China and Japan. Russia's policy of caution basically derived from an awareness of the empire's geopolitical weakness in East Asia—physical magnitude and strategic vulnerability. Russia's East Asian policy in the late nineteenth century can be characterized generally by its caution and restraint, as previously stipulated by outstanding scholars who mainly focused on Manchuria and China, such as P. A. Romanov, A. V. Ignatiev, George A. Lensen, and Andrew



Malozemoff. Yet Russia's decidedly lukewarm and noncommittal strategy was no other than a smokescreen of expansionism and in result left a serious aftermath in the Korean situation. It serves as a case in the studies of imperialism of how the great powers' policies should be reevaluated on the basis of more specific local factors.

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