

Great Britain and the Great Powers Rivalry in North China at the Beginning of the 20th Century¹

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For most of the 19th century Great Britain maintained an almost dominant position in the Chinese politics and trade. Although it had to compete with other Great Powers — especially France and Russia — in this period, the interests of these countries were for a long time limited to particular areas and in the key regions, they were not able to compete with Britain.² However this situation began to change considerably during the late 80s and 90s of the 19th century. The ascend of the new Great Powers in China and the strengthening of the Russian interests in northern China³ represented a serious challenge to the British position in the country.⁴ The Far East became one of the main subjects of rivalry between the Great Powers at the end of the 19th century. The unsuccessful Chinese efforts to reform the Qing Empire destabilized the land and divided the internal political scene of the country, which wasn't able to challenge the increased pressure from outside.⁵ The weakened empire became a victim of the European powers, which followed their own, mainly economic, interests. However the increased interest in China created conditions for the disagreements among them, especially Great Britain and Russia observed opposite course in their Far Eastern policy, which was demonstrated by increased Russian efforts in the question of providing loans to China.⁶ Moreover at the end of the 19th century a new power vigorously entered into the Chinese policy proclaiming its own interests in the Middle King-

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2 R. BICKERS, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire 1832–1914*, New York, London 2012, pp. 152ff.

3 A. MALOZEMOFF, *Russian Far Eastern Policy 1881–1904*, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1958, p. 36.

4 T. G. OTTE, *The China Question: Great Power Rivalry and British Isolation, 1894–1905*, Oxford 2007, p. 3.

5 To this question see D. SCOTT, *China and the International System 1940–1949*, New York 2008, pp. 117–142. Compare with OTTE, pp. 74ff. To the problem of Qing reforms at the end of the 19th century see D. TWITCHETT — J. K. FAIRBANK, *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 10, Part I, London, New York, Melbourne 1995, pp. 491ff; to the reforms in China in the second half of the 19th century see D. PONG, *Shen Pao-chen and China's Modernization in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, New York 1994.

6 To the Great Power's policy in China see OTTE, p. 80.

dom. The dynamic Japanese entry into the power policy in China and its protectorate Korea⁷ had important consequences on the international scene — especially the Russo-Japanese rivalry should have had critical impact on the evolution of the international relations.

The Russo-Japanese contention started already at the turn of the 18th and 19th century, when the Russians showed the interest in the islands north of Hokkaido — Sakhalin and the Kuriles.⁸ In 1861 (only a few years since the Japanese opened their ports to foreign vessels) Russian sailors temporarily occupied the island of Tsushima with the aim to establish a naval base.⁹ The island was returned to Japan only after vigorous protests from London, which was anxious about its own interests in the Land of the Rising Sun. This step was one of the impulses, which triggered the enmity between Japan and Russia. Another important factor accelerating their rivalry was the Russian pressure, which compelled Japan to abandon the southern part of Sakhalin, which was taken over by the Russians.¹⁰ The further Russian claims on the Kuril Islands persuaded the Japanese that the Russian pressure represented a mortal danger to the nation and that Japan had to find a way how to defend itself to Russian expansion.

One of the main problems of Japan was the fact that the country was not self-sufficient in strategic raw materials (with notable exception of coal) and agrarian production, which soon ceased to be sufficient to the Japanese population, which rose from 34 million in 1875 to 46 million in 1903.¹¹ This was the impetus of Japanese own expansion, which was triggered by the expedition to Formosa in 1874 and the annexation of Ryukyu five years later.¹² After the opening Korea to the Great Powers in 1876 the next step of Japanese expansion was clear. However the peninsula was nominally vassal of the Qing, who opposed the spread of the Japanese influence. Both states considered the situation and the position of the peninsular kingdom differently: “*Qing diplomacy in late nineteenth-century Korea is customarily viewed as a rear-guard action to maintain suzerainty over a wayward vassal state in the antiquated ‘Chinese world order,’ by contrast with the ‘modernizing’ thrust of expansionist Japan.*”¹³ The rivalry of both states eventually triggered a war in which the Chinese were soundly defeated. The ensuing peace treaty of Shimonoseki (17th April 1895) gave the Japanese the island of Formosa, Pescadores, Liaodong peninsula with an important naval base in Port Arthur. Moreover the Chinese were obliged to pay 25 million pounds of war reparations (200 million Chinese taels, which were to be paid during next seven and half years).¹⁴ This development caught most Great Powers by surprise, because it was expected

7 S. C. M. PAINE, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 94–95.

8 See M. B. JANSEN, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, London 2000, pp. 258–264.

9 M. R. AUSLIN, *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy*, Harvard 2006, pp. 80ff.

10 J. L. McCLAIN, *A Modern History of Japan*, New York, London 2002, p. 288.

11 R. M. CONNAUGHTON, *The War of the Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: A Military History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905*, London, New York 1988, p. 6.

12 See JANSEN, pp. 423ff.

13 W. T. ROWE, *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing*, Cambridge, London 2009, p. 228.

14 PAINE, pp. 271ff.

that the bigger and richer China will emerge victorious. Many British politicians and diplomats in the Far East however anticipated this outcome. One of them Sir Henry Norman a correspondent of News Chronicle wrote about the conflict: *“The war with China [...] will at last force foreigners to see Japan as she is. The Japanese are martial and a proud race, with marvelous intelligence, and untiring energy and enthusiasm.”*¹⁵

The Japanese victory and substantial gains on the continent was displeasing especially for Russia which own advance was hindered by Japanese seizure of Liaodong peninsula. The Russians also despised the Japanese and their newspapers claimed that *“it would be desirable that she [Europe] act with a certain unity vis-à-vis peoples reputed to be barbarian and that she form a kind of syndicate...”* to stop Japanese ambitions.¹⁶ Therefore the Russians in cooperation with France and Germany forced Tokyo to abandon the peninsula in exchange for another 5 million pounds (30 million taels) of war reparations.¹⁷ This so-called Triple Intervention caused uproar in Japan where the public felt that the land was robbed of its hard won gains and these opinion was strengthened by further Russian steps, which were aimed to gain control over all of Manchuria.¹⁸ The British were prepared to take advantage of the situation. The Foreign secretary lord Kimberley told the Japanese foreign minister Count Kato Takaaki, that *“Britain had no intention of depriving Japan of ‘reasonable fruits of her victories, although they would have much preferred no disturbance of the status quo’.”*¹⁹ London was aware of the gravity of the situation caused by the Russian policy and wanted to help Japan to stop their advance. This was of course not an altruistic policy, but an effort to gain support against Russia.²⁰

The Russians were able to utilize the weakening of China and only a year after the treaty of Shimonoseki, they made Chinese government to consent with the building of an important portion of the Trans-Siberian railway (which construction started in 1891) over the territory of Manchuria. This treaty enabled the Russians to station their troops on the Chinese territory officially to protect the construction.²¹ The Russian Finance Minister Sergei Yulyevich Witte²² stood behind all this. He was one of the most important initiators and supporters of industrialization of Russia and he saw a huge commercial potential in Manchuria. He started his political carrier on the court of the Tsar Alexander III and during next decade he gained considerable influence. The Russian diplomat Alexander Pavlovich Izvolsky said about him: *“...on account of his constant tendency to extend indefinitely the power of the state to the detriment of personal initiative and activity which was still in its infancy in Russia, one may*

15 Ibidem, p. 17.

16 Ibidem, pp. 284ff.

17 Ibidem, p. 289.

18 To the Russian expansion in Manchuria see MALOZEMOFF, pp. 69ff.

19 OTTE, p. 70.

20 Ibidem, p. 71.

21 To the Russian railway concessions in China (allower three tracks of 2,460 kilometers) see A. SKŘIVAN, *Výstavba železniční sítě v Číně do světové hospodářské krize*, in: Acta Universitatis Carolinae — Philosophica et historica 1, 1974, pp. 10ff.

22 To Witte's personality see S. HARCAVE, *Count Sergei Witte and the Twilight of Imperial Russia: A Biography*, New York 2004.

say, that for some ten years he was the real master of the 160 million inhabitants of the Empire."²³ Witte's primary project was the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was constructed in order to boost the economics of backward Asian parts of Russia and to serve as instrument of spreading Russian political influence to the Far East. However Witte's interests in Manchuria were primarily economic and therefore he used primarily means of business to gain influence in this area. Therefore Witte's main instrument of his Far Eastern policy was the Russo-Chinese Bank founded at the end of 1895.²⁴ On the other hand although Witte followed mainly commercial goals, the political importance of the railway was clear for the British, who wanted to limit the Russian gains.²⁵

The Russian expansionists and military opposed Witte's political course and planned gradual seizure of Manchuria. They saw its importance in totally different way — as a starting stage for further expansion. Especially the port of Port Arthur was seen as a key base for the Russian Pacific Fleet. The Russians decided to act in this question after the Germans occupied the port of Qingdao (which they later leased from the Beijing government) and gained a sphere of influence on the Shandong peninsula. Therefore the Russian navy entered Port Arthur in December 1897 and spent the winter there. Only a few month later Russian army units entered the city.²⁶ Although Witte opposed this course, because he was anxious about the British reaction,²⁷ other members of the Russian cabinet gave their consent with these steps. The powerful finance minister was anxious that this step would lead to a clash with other powers especially Japan. After the cabinet meeting he told prophetic words to the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich: "*Your Highness, remember this day; you will see what disastrous results this fatal step will have for Russia.*"²⁸

The seizure of Port Arthur compelled the Russians to build a branch of the Trans-Siberian railway leading to the south from Harbin, securing and supplying the new base.²⁹ The task of this railway was also to strengthen the Russian influence in southern Manchuria.³⁰ This however caused anxiety among the Japanese and other Great Powers, which saw the Russians as dangerous rivals in the struggle for the Middle Kingdom. Many British politicians viewed the Russian territorial encroaching on China as a dangerous development. The British High Commissioner in China and one of the most experienced diplomats in the Far East Sir Ernest Mason Satow warned,

23 J. A. WHITE, *The Diplomacy of the Russo-Japanese War*, Princeton 1964, p. 15.

24 MALOZEMOFF, pp. 71-73.

25 OTTE, p. 82.

26 Ibidem, p. 139.

27 Ibidem, p. 95.

28 WHITE, p. 18.

29 The Russians were however not only penetrating Manchuria, but also Korea, which was seen as dangerous in Tokyo. On the other hand the Japanese were aware of the fact, that Great Britain had no special interests in this so much important country. The National Archives Kew (henceforth only TNA), PRO 30/33/16/1, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, May 4, 1896.

30 The Russians gained the concession for South Manchurian Railway on 6th July 1898. MALOZEMOFF, p. 112.

that China could not be ruled as a colony of any of the western nations, but also pointed out one of the weakness of the government in Beijing — that the Middle Kingdom, which according to his opinion “*was not a centralized state like France but a group of loosely federated satrapies*”,³¹ which of course gave an opportunity to the Great Powers to seize control of their objects of interests. The local population, which was hostile to the spread of foreign influence in China, also opposed this Russian step. The foreigners and local Christians were attacked all-over the country since the beginning of 1899. This unrest culminated in Yihetuan Movement (Boxer Rebellion) in 1900, which was defeated by the expeditionary forces of the Great Powers, which entered Beijing in August 1900 where the rebels were sieging the embassies of the Great Powers.³²

The Boxer movement had also its reflection in Manchuria, where several uprisings occurred during which the foreigners were hunted and killed. One British correspondent wrote that “*the Boxer movement was as violent in Southern Manchuria as anywhere in China, and the symptoms were identical: railways destroyed, foreign houses burned and foreigners murdered*”.³³ To keep order in the Manchurian provinces St. Petersburg increased the number of troops guarding its railways from 4,500 to 11,000 and later called more army units to the Far East, which brought peace to Manchuria. These steps led to an anxiety on the part of the other Great Powers, which Russia tried to calm down. Therefore St. Petersburg issued a note in the summer 1900, in which it said that Russia had special rights in Manchuria, but did not intend to harm the interests of other lands in the area. It also stated that the influx of new units into the area had the purpose of controlling the rebels. The note had only a limited effect and didn't hinder other Great Powers in strengthening their position in the Far East by military reinforcements. The Russians therefore decided to secure their position by a treaty with China, signed on 26th November 1900 by Russian governor of Mukden (soon a governor of whole Russian Far East) Admiral Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev who was an illegitimate son of Tsar Alexander II. The treaty allowed the Russians to establish a military presence of Manchuria for so long they needed.³⁴

The other Great Powers (especially Great Britain) were quite concerned by this turn of events, which imperiled their interests. At the end of 1901 Beijing was full of the rumors of Russian intentions to annex the northern part of Manchuria including Harbin through which the constructed Trans-Siberian railway led.³⁵ Satow even claimed that the Russians aimed to gain dominance in the whole China at the cost of Great Britain.³⁶ Already the end of 1900 Satow declared that Russia established a non-official protectorate over northern Manchuria³⁷ and at the end of 1901 the situ-

31 TNA, PRO 30/33/16/4, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, October 8, 1901.

32 J. KOČVAR, *Boxerské povstání v Číně, 1899–1900*, in: *Historický obzor*, Vol. 19, No. 9/10, 2008, pp. 194–205. Cf. R. BICKERS, pp. 337ff.

33 WHITE, p. 5.

34 MALOZEMOFF, pp. 153–155; according to British diplomats the treaty made Manchuria in reality a Russian protectorate. See I. NISH, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, London, New York 1985, pp. 91–93.

35 TNA, PRO 30/33/16/4, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, October 25, 1901.

36 Ibidem.

37 TNA, PRO 30/33/16/4, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, December 14, 1900.

ation became even more serious, because some of the Manchus were convinced that Russia was their best friend.³⁸ The British therefore tried to force the Russians to declare; that they will evacuate Manchuria, after the security of their residents in the area was secured.³⁹ The Russians therefore prepared a treaty with Beijing about the withdrawal, but its terms were proposed in such a way, that the Chinese could not accept. The Russian proposals had fourteen paragraphs concerning the situation in Manchuria. In the first seven of them Petersburg promised to cooperate with Chinese authorities and to evacuate their forces after the order was restored. On the other hand the Chinese government should promise that it will remove every officials with whose appointment the Russians would not agree and that it would not accept any foreign military advisors. The other half of Russian conditions ought to correct the Sino-Russian relations, but in reality were proposed in such a way that would eventually mean control of the Chinese policy by the Russians. The Russians for example demanded, that China did not grant any the mining rights in Manchuria to any other power. Simultaneously Russia with its ally France issued a statement in which it supported the independence of China and Korea and promoted the idea of free trade with those countries. Although the Russians signed a treaty with China which obliged them to withdraw their troops in eighteen month, they conditioned it with a term, that this evacuation would be conducted only *“provided that no disturbances arise and that the action of other Powers should not prevent it”*,⁴⁰ in effect making a dead letter out of the agreement. Although the Russians conducted the first stage of the withdrawal, others did not follow under made-up pretexts.

The Russian's strengthening of their position in Manchuria was observed especially carefully in Japan, because it was directly connected with the question of Korea, which was in the past viewed as a dagger poised at the heart of Japan.⁴¹ To secure its influence in Korea Japan started the war with China in 1894 and now it faced the prospect that its dominant position there would collapse under Russian pressure. Although Tokyo and Petersburg concluded a treaty concerning equal rights in Korea on 9th June 1896, the Japanese leaders viewed the Russian guarantees as vague.⁴² Tokyo therefore started next round of negotiations and made the Russians to issue a statement that they did not intend to interfere in the evolution of Japanese economic relations with Korea. The Japanese tried to utilize this new Russian obligation to strengthen their grip over Korea — in several next years, they were able to dominate Korean trade and gain a concession to build a railway from Pusan to Soul and overtook an American railway-project of the Soul-Incheon (than called Chemulpo).⁴³ As the Japanese interests and investments in Korea rose, the Japanese anxiety of Russian intentions increased. The greatest concern to Japanese statesmen became Russian activities along the border of Manchuria and Korea (along the Yalu River),

38 TNA, PRO 30/33/16/4, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, November 25, 1901.

39 MALOZEMOFF, pp. 168ff.

40 WHITE, p. 10.

41 Therefore the Japanese initiated negotiations about possible neutralization of Korea. NISH, pp. 97ff.

42 MALOZEMOFF, pp. 86ff.

43 WHITE, p. 79.

where Russian company led by Julius Ivanovich Briner gained an important mining concession.⁴⁴

However Briner did not have enough capital to start the mining, he turned to the Russo-Chinese Bank for credit.⁴⁵ Witte, who controlled the institution, did not want to contribute to the deterioration of the Russo-Japanese relations instructed the bank director A. I. Rothstein to deny the loans to Briner who tried to find support at the court in St. Petersburg. In the Russian capital the opposition against Witte gradually strengthened. At its head was Alexander Mikhailovich Bezobrazov, who did not have any official function, but had an important influence on the Tsar Nicholas II. Bezobrazov intended to weaken Witte using the question of the Briner's concession.⁴⁶ On several occasions he therefore criticized Witte's Far Eastern policy and claimed that Russia could spare itself of many problems if it would pursue more assertive policy. Thanks to his agitation a Russian company, which would mine raw materials in the Yalu basin, was created. Witte was obliged to follow Bezobrazov lead and to support Russian mining companies in the area. This of course had negative impact on Russo-Japanese relations.

After they gained mining concessions along the Yalu River, the Russians could take less regard of China and expanded their influence in Manchuria. The Russian intrusions on the Korean territory fueled the anxiety of the Japanese of the direct Russian military involvement in Korea. The evidence seemed to be clear — at the end of 1902 Russian military garrisoned 2,000 men in the city of An-tung on the Chinese bank of Yalu.⁴⁷ The Russians then (on the 18th April 1903) demanded in Beijing that China would not cede any of its territory to foreign country without Russian consent and to recognize Russian "special rights" in Manchuria. Although the Chinese government strictly declined such claims four days later, it was clear that the Russians strengthened their position in Manchuria to the point, that if anything unexpected happened, their presence would be permanent.⁴⁸

At this point St. Petersburg tried to improve its relations with Japan and avert a possible clash by appointing Baron Roman Romanovich Rosen, who was instructed to present the Russian political stance as gently as he could.⁴⁹ Despite of this St. Petersburg came to a conclusion that it must prepare for a possibility of a war. The War Minister Aleksey Nikolayevich Kuropatkin therefore opposed any idea of evacuation of Manchuria, because according to his arguments Port Arthur would be undefendable without secure hinterland. He also insisted that Russian Army prepared the defense of Russian concessions on the Yalu River. Bezobrazov concurred and called for reinforcement at the ministerial conference in Tsarskoe Selo on the 20th May 1903.⁵⁰ Witte was forced to agree, although he claimed that if Russia tried to hold the Yalu River boarder, it would be defeated. Bezobrazov only used his arguments to achieve a transfer of two additional brigades to Manchuria.

44 NISH, p. 155; MALOZEMOFF, pp. 89, 177.

45 MALOZEMOFF, p. 181.

46 On the weakening of Witte's influence. *Ibidem*, pp. 177ff.

47 WHITE, p. 44.

48 MALOZEMOFF, p. 217.

49 NISH, p. 133.

50 MALOZEMOFF, pp. 218ff.

While the Russians were slowly strengthening their position in Manchuria, the politicians in Tokyo came to a conclusion that the negotiations with St. Petersburg are hopeless and the only chance to secure the safety of Japan was to drive Russia from Manchuria by force. Despite of this Ito Hirobumi, Yamagata Aritomo and other Japanese statesmen realized that Japan was not able to challenge Russia without support of other Great Power. Therefore they tried to find help on the international scene, which would be able to back up Japan diplomatically and financially if not military. With regard to the fact that France and Germany in the Far East often supported Russia, Japan had to look at Britain and United States as possible allies.⁵¹ Both states appreciated Japanese support of the principle of the opened doors to China, which was threatened by Russian policy. Especially Britain negatively viewed the fact that Russia utilized British problems in South Africa during the Boer War in order to enforce its interests in Manchuria. The British therefore welcomed Japanese probes in London.⁵² This was not only due to the fact, that Japan had almost no colliding interests with Great Britain and observed the open-door policy in China, but also because Japan was viewed as a natural ally of Great Britain because of commonly shared interests — especially that of stopping Russia. Already in the middle of the 90s the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs John Wodehouse, 1st Earl of Kimberley claimed, that “[Japan] will no doubt have a powerful fleet, but that will be a counterpoise to the Russians & so far a distinct advantage to us. Our policy must be to make her our ally”.⁵³

Japanese ambassador in London Count Hayashi made the first concrete proposal during his negotiations with Secretary of State Lord Lansdowne in April 1901, when he stated that it was necessary for Great Britain and Japan “to make a permanent agreement for the maintenance of peace in the Far East”.⁵⁴ The talks continued in October after the fall of the Ito’s government, which was replaced by the cabinet of Katsura Taro. The Japanese Foreign Minister Komura Jutarō made serious proposals to the British, who were also interested in the possible alliance with Japan, which promised a limitation of the Russian influence in Asia. Therefore the British prepared their own proposals of a treaty between both states. This was discussed on 7th December by Japanese elder statesmen and on the 11th Tokyo sent its counterproposal to Britain. After further negotiations, both states reached an agreement signed on 30th January 1902.⁵⁵ The alliance of Japan and Great Britain guaranteed that if one of them entered war with other power, the second would remain neutral. If another state entered the hypothetical conflict with the allied power, its partner would enter the war. Although some of the British diplomats were convinced, that the alliance is only loose and its

51 On the other hand London was aware of the possibility, that if they did not help Japan, it would have to come to terms with Russia at any cost. Britain would be then isolated in the Far East. OTTE, p. 286.

52 To the Japanese negotiations about the alliance with Great Britain see I. NISHI, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires, 1894–1907*, London 1966.

53 OTTE, p. 71.

54 A. M. POLEY (Ed.), *The Secret Memoirs of Count Tadasu Hayashi*, Vol. 2, New York 2002, p. 121.

55 The terms of the treaty see at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/anglojapanesealliance1902.htm>, [2014–08–11]. Cf. POLEY, pp. 323ff.

main goal is to keep check on the Russians in Manchuria,⁵⁶ the British era of “Splendid Isolation” ended.⁵⁷

After they gained British support the Japanese could concentrate on their negotiations with Russia. Tokyo therefore sent several proposals concerning the situation in Manchuria and Korea to St. Petersburg, but every settlement was rejected. This strict Russian attitude towards Japan mirrored the rise of Bezobrazov’s clique in Petersburg. Russia however considered the situation as serious and therefore sent general Kuropatkin to Manchuria, from where he continued to Japan,⁵⁸ where he arrived on 12th June 1903 and talked with Japanese War Minister Terauchi Masatake, who declined the Russian aspirations in Korea. Kuropatkin also met the Emperor Mutsuhito and prominent Japanese statesmen, however his negotiations with Prime Minister Katsura and Foreign Minister Komura were fruitless. Kuropatkin told the Japanese that according to the Russian government it was impossible to evacuate Manchuria, because it would endanger the railways to Vladivostok and Port Arthur.⁵⁹ After he returned to Petersburg he participated on a ministerial conference, whose attendants were also Bezobrazov, Admiral Alekseyev and Russian ambassador in Beijing P. M. Lessar and the representatives of the Russo-Chinese Bank. The participants agreed that Russia had to secure its interests at any cost. They therefore agreed on sending additional reinforcements to the area and assigned 30 million rubles for the strengthening of defense of Manchuria. One of the results of this conference was the appointment of Admiral Alekseyev to the post of the governor of Manchuria under whose responsibility fell also the command of all military units in the area.⁶⁰ This step eliminated all Witte’s influence on the situation in the Far East. His position weakened by Bezobrazov clique with which sided Grand Duke Alexander Michaylovich and the minister of the interior Pleve, whose aim was Witte’s fall. Tsar dismissed Witte on 28th August 1903 and replaced him with the governor of the Russian Bank E. D. Plesko.⁶¹ After that Russia entered a political course of confrontation with Japan, which was soon recognized in Tokyo.

While it was quite clear that Japan and Russia were on a collision course, both states started preparations for war. The Russians were frantically trying to complete unfinished portions of Trans-Siberian Railway, transporting additional troops and supplies to Manchuria and above all strengthening the Russian Pacific Fleet. The Japanese were meanwhile preparing their war plans and establishing espionage net in

56 TNA, PRO 30/33/16/5, Ernest Mason Satow Diary, February 12, 1902.

57 C. J. LOWE, *The Reluctant Imperialists: British Foreign Policy 1878–1902*, London, New York 1967.

58 The choice of Kuropatkin for a mission to Japan was a mistake (in the case Russia meant the negotiations seriously) because he was one of the proponent of the military solution of the situation in the Far East. D. WARNER — P. WARNER, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905*, London, Portland 2005, p. 118.

59 To the Kuropatkin’s Far Eastern journey see WHITE, pp. 63ff.

60 *Ibidem*, p. 72.

61 For the first hand account of Witte’s fall see S. Y. WITTE, *The Memoirs of Count Witte*, London 1990, pp. 312ff. Tsar commented Witte’s fall laconically in his diary: “Now I rule.” MALOZEMOFF, p. 226.

the anticipated theatre of war. Major general Iguchi Shogo, who argued that Japan should start the war to achieve a moment of surprise and to utilize its short supply lines, presented the Japanese war plan to the Japanese General Staff. The seizure of the initiative would according to young Japanese officers enable Japan to defeat relatively weak Russian forces in the Far East before they would be reinforced from the European part of Russia.⁶²

Despite of this the Japanese tried to reach peace settlement, which would hinder the armed clash, which was viewed as risky in the Japanese political circles. Therefore the Japanese supported by the United States demanded that Russia evacuated Manchuria during next eighteenth month. However the Russians did not even send an answer to this initiative and instead dispatched more troops to Vladivostok, which was to become another Kronstadt. The Russians also presented new demands in Beijing on 6th September in which they conditioned their withdrawal from Manchuria by such strict demands that the Chinese had to decline them on 15th September.⁶³ Meanwhile Russian ambassador in Tokyo Baron Rosen continued negotiations. However after he declined the Japanese demands for Russian guaranties of independence of China and Korea these talks got stuck in a dead end. Rosen tried to propose an establishment a neutral zone in north part of Korea, but rejected the Japanese counterproposal to neutralize both sides of Yalu River. This was rejected by St. Petersburg on the 11th December, which was a clear signal that Russia was not prepared to yield.⁶⁴ The Japanese statesmen therefore met on an Imperial conference on the 28th, where they agreed that the war was inevitable.⁶⁵ They agreed that it was necessary to secure favorable stance of Great Britain and the United States from which they expected financial backing because they realized that Japan was not financially strong enough to endure the burden of protracted war.

Meanwhile the negotiations continued. On the 6th January 1904 Komura discussed the situation with Rosen inconclusively. On the 12th the Japanese government prepared final draft of demands in the talks with Russia.⁶⁶ Their main goal was to move the Russians to publicly give up any aspirations in Korea. However the Russians considered the Japanese war preparations as a tool of political pressure and declined the Japanese demands.⁶⁷ Tokyo therefore decided to recall its ambassador from St. Petersburg Kurino on the 4th February 1904 and three days later to sever diplomatic relations.⁶⁸ A stage for war, which began by surprise Japanese attack on the Russian base in Port Arthur was prepared.

It can be undoubtedly stated that the Japanese won the war especially due to the British support, which was demonstrated by the prewar cooperation on constructing

62 To the Japanese war plans see E. J. DREA, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*, Lawrence 2009, pp. 100-104. Cf. D. C. EVANS — M. R. PEATTIE, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy 1887-1941*, Annapolis 1997, pp. 84-92.

63 WHITE, p. 104.

64 Ibidem, pp. 105-108.

65 NISH, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War*, p. 200.

66 Ibidem, p. 207.

67 Ibidem, pp. 208ff.

68 WHITE, p. 128.

the Japanese fleet,⁶⁹ but mainly by generous financial backing of “The City”, which bought Japanese war bonds and provided necessary loans, without which Japan would not be able to wage the war or even win it.⁷⁰ This investment was of course quite advantageous for the British, because they were able their most dangerous opponent in the Far East without going to war with him. But this success was not without its drawbacks: “Japan’s victories over Russia at sea and in Manchuria had profound implications for Britain and the other Powers. Within the Far Eastern subsystem of international politics, Satow noted somewhat uneasily, ‘[t]he rise of Japan has so completely upset our equilibrium as a new planet the size of Mars would derange the solar system’; while Maurice Paléologue, sous-directeur for political affairs at the Quai d’Orsay, likened Tsushima to the defeat of Philip II’s ‘Invincible Armada’, and ‘a marqué la fin de la domination russe en Asie’.”⁷¹ Even during the war the British-Japanese relations were not without problems. One was the question of the property of the British residents in China affected by the war.⁷² One of the cases solved with the help of the British government was a Japanese seizure of a British vessel Sishan in October 1904,⁷³ but this and similar cases did not much to influence the overall good British-Japanese relations.

However these individual cases did not affect the overall British policy and position in China. Great Britain continued to be a dominant player in Chinese trade with total value of 840.91 million taels in 1904.⁷⁴ However for the future Britain had to continue to pursue a friendly policy towards Japan. The Anglo-Japanese alliance enabled Britain to withdraw a considerable part of its Far Eastern Fleet to home waters in order to challenge the emerging the German threat and the British interests in the Far East were for the future dependent on the relations with the Japanese: “Without a renewal of the 1902 compact, Britain ran the risk of losing influence in the Far East to a more assertive Japan.”⁷⁵ The result of the Russo-Japanese war therefore considerably changed the position of Great Britain in the Far East. Although it still preserved its position in China, the era of its dominance was already gone despite of the fact that the greatest of the British rivals was seriously weakened and its influence in the Far East was considerably limited. This paradoxical situation was caused by the ascend of Japan as a Great Power, the strengthening commercial ties of the USA, Germany and other powers with China and by the fact, that with the more and more complicated situation in Europe, Britain had less resources to enforce its interests in China. It can be therefore said, that although Britain was able to secure its interest in China

69 EVANS — PEATTIE, pp. 60ff and 65ff.

70 E. S. MILLER, *Japan’s Other Victory: Overseas Financing of the Russo-Japanese War*, in: J. W. STEINBERG — B. W. MENNING — D. SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAND DER OYE et al., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, Leiden, Boston 2005, pp. 470ff.

71 OTTE, p. 322.

72 For example only in Port Arthur the British subjects left goods and property worth more than 3,000 pounds for which they claimed compensation. TNA, FO 46/678, W. G. Davidson to British Consul-General in Shanghai, March 20, 1904.

73 TNA, FO 46/677, British Vice-Consul in Shanghai Pitzipios to the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Komura, July 5, 1905.

74 TNA, FO 371/26, Commerce extérieur de la Chine pendant l’année 1904.

75 OTTE, p. 323.

in the middle of a heated Great Power struggle at the beginning of the 20th century and scored a diplomatic victory against its main foe, it came weakened out of this contest. This weakness did not show up immediately, but the first decades of the 20th century were to show a gradual decline of British interests in China. Although this trend was much more complicated and caused by a lot of external factors, its roots lay at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, when the situation and Great Powers balance in China changed considerably.

ABSTRACT

At the end of the 19th century Great Britain had to cope with new problems in the Far East. During the 90s the position of its international rivals — especially Russia — rose considerably. This was quite apparent in the northern part of Qing Empire — Manchuria. Britain therefore tried to utilize the deepening of the Russo-Japanese rivalry. After new Russian advances after the Boxer revolution, London started direct negotiations with Tokyo. Their result was the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which ended the era of British “Splendid Isolation”. Thanks to this development and naval and economic cooperation of both countries, Japan was able to defeat Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. This was a clear success of the British diplomacy, which was able to stop its main opponent without going to war itself. On the other hand the rise of Japan as a Great Power meant, that the Land of the Rising Sun became a key factor in the British position in China.

KEYWORDS

Great Britain; China; Japan; Russia; Diplomacy; International Relations; Russo-Japanese War

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