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# The Russo-Japanese War

## Origins and Implications

**Benjamin Mainardi**

The 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War was the first major conflict of the twentieth century and a turning point in the balance of power in East Asia. In the short term, Russia's defeat helped precipitate the 1905 Russian Revolution and the 1917 October Revolution. More broadly, the aftermath of the war informed Japan's imperial ambitions in Manchuria—the early stages of World War II in Asia during the 1930s—and continuing Russo-Japanese enmity over Sakhalin Island and the Kuril Island chain. Studying this historical conflict in terms of international relations provides valuable insights into the nature of the conflict and how the past continues to shape modern geopolitics. As a case study, the war offers important lessons in the difficulties of sustained power projection and the exigencies involved in adaptable war planning. Equally important, Russia and Japan's intractable imperial ambitions coupled with their failures to credibly communicate resolve serve as a cautionary tale on the consequences of inept diplomacy.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European great powers carved out spheres of influence in East Asia. As available territory became limited, empires seeking to expand competed against one another. While contemporaries widely regarded Russia as the dominant force in East Asia, Japanese power was rapidly growing. Both powers preyed on the ailing Qing dynasty of China. Russia steadily eroded Chinese territory in the north while Japan waged war with China for control of Korea. Sustained Russian power projection in the East necessitated access to a warm-water port. This was found at Port Arthur on the strategic Liaodong Peninsula just north of the Korean border. By the late 1890s, Russia and Japan were at odds over territorial ambitions in this region. Russian presence gradually intensified in Manchuria and began encroaching on Korea in spite of Korea's position within Japan's sphere of influence.

### **The resulting contest for domination of East Asia would become the first major armed conflict of the twentieth century.**

As this emerging security dilemma began to jeopardize Japan's foothold on the Asian mainland, tensions between Russia and Japan escalated. Unable to reach an agreeable status quo while neglecting to fully indicate its resolve on the issue of Korea, Japan prepared for conflict. In February 1904, breaching international etiquette established by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise strike against the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur prior to officially declaring war (Aldrich 2000). The resulting contest for domination of East Asia would become the first major armed conflict of the twentieth century. Examining this archetypal case study in regional power transition reveals the perils of intractability and sustained power projection.

### **Historical Background**

Understanding the origins of the Russo-Japanese War first necessitates an understanding of contemporary East Asian geopolitics. For nearly three thousand years, various Chinese imperial dynasties had been the regional superpowers of East Asia with few peer competitors. Historians largely agree that this lack of true peer-competition led to military and industrial stagnation in the later Qing dynasty (Naquin 1987, 219-221). From 1644 to at least 1800, the dynasty was the unquestioned hegemon of East Asia. Yet by 1800,

Western powers began encroaching on Chinese client-states and spheres of influence. Portugal had solidified its hold on the once Chinese-held port city of Macau, and the Dutch fostered an ever-growing presence in Taiwan and much of modern Indonesia. Meanwhile, Spain maintained control of the Philippine Islands, the British presence in India was slowly permeating throughout Southeast Asia, and friction along the Chinese northern border with Russia was intensifying (Zhao 1998, 26). However, the Chinese-led international order of East and Southeast Asia established by the Tributary and Guangzhou Systems persisted (Zhao 1998, 25).

Largely dissatisfied with these regional systems in which the Qing dynasty dominated virtually all political and economic affairs, European states gradually began to erode Chinese influence in the region. As such, the power of East Asia's traditional hegemony was supplanted throughout the nineteenth century, rupturing the unipolar order without a sufficiently powerful state to replace China. Russia and Great Britain, in particular, heavily shaped the regional dynamics of East Asia during the late eighteenth century. Frustrated by an inability to expand in the Balkans, Crimea, or Southwest Asia in the first half of the eighteenth century, Russia began to look eastward. It progressively occupied greater portions of eastern Siberia and northern Mongolia, creating tensions with China (Malozemoff 1958, 19-23). Great Britain desired ever-greater trading rights with the Qing dynasty and eventually exacted its economic ambitions through a series of conflicts known as the Opium Wars. By 1898, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia all held de facto control over large portions of the Chinese mainland (MacNair and Lach 1950, 53).

At the same time, Japan was emerging from nearly two centuries of self-imposed isolation under the recently overthrown Tokugawa Shogunate. The new Meiji government recognized that nations not poised for offense were likely to be dominated by those that were. After observing the gradual erosion of Chinese territory by the West and being subjected to unequal trade treaties, the Meiji government's chief priority was modernizing Japan's industry and military. Prior to 1850, however, Japan's economy was still primarily based on subsistence agriculture; military technological development had largely stagnated since the founding of the Tokugawa regime in 1603 (Tuan-Hwee and Moriguchi 2014, 464). Extraordinarily, the Meiji government was able to modernize effectively using Japan's existing political infrastructure and posture as a great power. Still, to truly accede to great power status, Japan needed to expand territorially as the others had.

Soon after Western powers began forcing Japan to normalize its foreign relations in 1853, Japanese leaders sought to expand their fledgling empire. The logical first step towards expansion onto the Asian mainland was the takeover of the Korean Peninsula. However, Korea had traditionally been a Chinese vassal-state, and despite the Western powers eroding its influence, the Qing dynasty had been able to maintain effective control. In 1876, Japan forced the Korean kingdom of Joseon into an unequal trade treaty in spite of Chinese objections.

## **This expanding Russian sphere of influence began to directly conflict with Japanese interests.**

Continued Japanese efforts to assert itself into Korean politics heightened tensions in Sino-Japanese relations. Yet after China and Japan signed the peace treaty, the terms were forcibly altered by the Tripartite Intervention of Russia, Germany, and France, ostensibly to maintain the stability of East Asia. Russia was the primary agent behind the intervention; it sought both to assert its own influence in East Asia and to secure its borders along Manchuria against the seemingly powerful China, as evidenced by the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (Malozemoff 1958, 27). Russia particularly objected to the Japanese acquisition of the harbor city of Port Arthur since it hoped to establish it as its own warm-water port in the East (Kowner 2006, 375). Japan agreed to altered terms of peace in the face of the three great powers, whose combined naval capabilities outmatched Japan's.<sup>1</sup> The terms imposed by the Tripartite Intervention prevented Japan from acquiring the Liaodong Peninsula and Port Arthur in exchange for an additional 30 million taels of silver to be paid by China. This intervention by the Russian diplomatic coalition humiliated Japan and created a deep sense of suspicion towards the Russians. In turn, Japan began further investing in its machine industry and military while also signing an alliance with Great Britain to counterbalance Russia (Burton 1990, 100).

Japanese suspicions were confirmed when Russian forces occupied Port Arthur and the Liaodong Peninsula in 1898. Following the fortification of Port Arthur, Russia

<sup>1</sup> Kowner's *Historical Dictionary of the Russo-Japanese War*, 375 records the local naval power disparity during the 1895 intervention as being thirty-eight allied Russian, French, and German warships with a displacement of 95,000 tons compared to thirty-one Japanese warships with a displacement of 57,000 tons.

progressively began encroaching on both China and Korea, gaining a number of economic concessions. This expanding Russian sphere of influence began to directly conflict with Japanese interests. Should Japan not have contested Russia's rising power, the island nation itself would have been cut off from expansion onto the Asian mainland. As such, Japanese leaders became increasingly convinced conflict with Russia was necessary (Zhang 1998, 53). Similarly, Russia was apt to resist Japan's rising power because reducing efforts to supplant China as the hegemon of East Asia was counter to its interests and investment in eastern territories. The breaking point came when, in spite of their assurances they would not do so, Russian forces continued to occupy the Chinese region of Manchuria and initiated the construction of railways connecting the region to its territory after the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901 (Katō 2007, 101).<sup>2</sup> Entering negotiations over these actions, Japan sought to establish a status quo whereby Russia acknowledged its control of Korea and Japan acknowledged Russian control of Manchuria. When this proposal was rebuffed, Japan understood that Russian actions indicated an even greater desire for eastern territory. Another attempt at negotiations to demilitarize the area also failed as the lack of trust between the two states and concern over the emerging security dilemma thwarted compromise (Malozemoff 1958, 246). Thus, Japan would need to check Russian expansion by force if it was to expand.

## **Capabilities and Strategies**

On the eve of war in 1904, there was a great disparity in potential capabilities between Russia and Japan. The 1904 total population of Russia was roughly 125,000,000 whereas Japan possessed a population of only 67,273,000 (Keltie 1904, 1022-92; 855-75). This massive population difference was equally present in military personnel. Pre-war Russian military strength was approximately 1,160,000 men while Japanese forces only numbered 218,000 (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Furthermore, the Russian navy possessed sixty-four warships while the Japanese navy only totaled thirty-four (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). And while Japanese military expenditures in 1904 far outstripped Russia's, US \$89.5 million to US \$66.9 million (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Russia exceeded Japan in industrial production.

<sup>2</sup> The Boxer Rebellion was a reactionary uprising in Chinese society in the face of increasing Westernization. Between 1899 and 1901, to expel foreign influence from China, Boxer rebels and Chinese imperial forces engaged the Eight-Nation Alliance that included Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States. The conflict resulted in a decisive victory for the colonial powers, but marked a general decline in direct intervention in China save for Japan, Russia, and the United States. For more information on the Boxer Rebellion, see Silbey, *The Boxer Rebellion*; Esherick, *Origins*; or Bickers, *The Scramble for China*.

Russia produced 2,766,000 tons of iron and steel annually as of 1904 while Japan produced only 60,000 tons (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Overall, the Correlates of War Project scored Japan's 1904 composite national capability as 0.0545 and Russia's as 0.1132 (Sarkees and Wayman 2010).<sup>3</sup> This scoring represents that in 1904, Japan possessed 5.45 percent of world material capabilities while Russia accounted for 11.32 percent.

While Japan was certainly outmatched by Russian material capabilities, its greatest advantage was geography. At its shortest distance from the home island of Kyushu, Japan was positioned approximately one hundred miles away from the Korean Peninsula (Cooling 1994, 455). In contrast, the distance by rail from Moscow to Port Arthur was almost five thousand miles (Asakawa 1904, 64). Complicating the issue posed by this vast distance was the fact that the Trans-Siberian Railway had only one track and was not yet fully completed. This created an inherent operational disadvantage which was further compounded by the concentration of Russian ground forces in Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia. As such, Japan's army was able to face Russian forces with relative parity in numbers. Similarly, almost two-thirds of Russian warships were located in either the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea. Russia's Pacific Fleet was also divided between the recently acquired Port Arthur and the traditional eastern base of Vladivostok. Any Russian reinforcements would have to travel by ship and sail around the Cape of Good Hope, a voyage of several weeks (Koda 2005, 22). Equally devastating to Russian field capabilities was the lack of an efficient communication network that reached East Asia.

### ***This unstable foundation for military operations represented a failure in Russia's grand strategy.***

Military strategist Carl von Clausewitz emphasized the necessity of focusing on the enemy's center of gravity (von Clausewitz [1832] 2004, 687). This was Japan's second greatest advantage, as Russia had virtually no capability to both protect its recent gains in Manchuria and also strike mainland Japan. Its forces were limited in tactical mobility and had to maintain a responsive posture to Japanese movements. Furthermore, since Russia would largely be

<sup>3</sup> The Correlates of War Project is an academic effort to analyze and study the facets of conflict since 1816. Correlates of War datasets incorporate a number of variables that factor into national military and industrial capabilities using quantitative data. For more information, see [correlatesofwar.org](http://correlatesofwar.org).

unable to resupply or communicate with its eastern forces by land, any concerted campaigns would require substantial planning. Thus, Japanese war planners were able to exercise more freedom in the campaigns. What resulted was a strategy of denial and targeted operations. First, destroying the Russian Pacific Fleet would cripple Russian mobility and constrict supply lines (Westwood 1986, 38). Second, campaigns undertaken with naval superiority in specific zones of operation would give Japanese land forces the tactical edge needed to overcome Russian numbers (Westwood 1986, 52). In contrast, Russia's eastward expansion severely hampered its logistical capabilities, since it lacked proper lines of communication and transportation from the industrial heartland. Such expansion almost completely drained Russia's financial reserves, leaving the country dependent on borrowing large sums from France and Germany (Hunter 1993, 146).

Overall, this unstable foundation for military operations represented a failure in Russia's grand strategy. Conversely, Japan's grand strategy was distinctly more calculated. Japan followed the British example and focused on naval development, constructing the fourth strongest fleet in the world by 1902 (Evans and Peattie 2012, 89). As such, Japan was able to effectively transport forces to the Asian mainland with greater ease than any other contemporary great power. Furthermore, Japanese efforts to gain support from foreign powers in the form of loans would eventually account for almost 40 percent of its wartime expenditure (Hunter 1993, 151).

In contrast, modern observers generally find Russian preparations for conflict in the East against Japan surprisingly lackluster. These plans were predicated on the notion that Japan would never be the instigating power (Jukes 2002, 18). In fact, Russian Viceroy of the Far Eastern Fleet Admiral Alekseev expressed an overwhelming confidence in Russian military dominance declaring in 1903 that "our plan of operations should be based on the assumption that it is impossible for our fleet to be beaten, taking into consideration the present relationship of the two fleets, and that a Japanese landing is impracticable" (Westwood 1986, 37). Yet such a cursory look at Russian strategy in the East neglects the realities of being the world's largest land power. As Nicholas Papastratigakis (2011) observed in *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power: Military Strategy and the Build-Up to the Russo-Japanese War*, the Russian military apparatus faced no less than three major theaters of operations of which the Pacific had been deemed the least precarious. The Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, positioned significantly closer to the capital at St.

Petersburg and Russia's industrial heartland, both presented theaters with greater numbers of rivals that appeared to pose a more significant threat to Russia's national security. As a result, the protection of Russia's holdings in the East would rely primarily on defensive naval positioning to prevent landings close to Port Arthur, forcing the Japanese into a ground war in which vast territories and superior Russian numbers could exhaust the small island nation (Patrikeef and Shukman 2007, 56). Indeed, in his book on the Russian army prior to and during the war with Japan, Commander in Chief Aleksey Nikolaevich Kuropatkin noted that the Japanese navy outnumbered Russian naval strength in the region, relegating the Far Eastern Fleet to a tool of deterrence and his ground forces to defensive operations (Kuropatkin 1909, 27). Kuropatkin therefore argued that his elastic line of defense had allowed troop concentrations to retire when pressed and nearby garrisons to flank and attack Japanese forces (Kuropatkin 1909, 28).

## Resolution and Aftermath

Successive Japanese victories throughout 1904 shocked the Russian regime, but Russia was ultimately unwilling to sue for peace. This unwillingness to accede to proposed Japanese terms for peace was in large part due to the influence of Tsar Nicholas II's concern for prestige, but also because the vast majority of Russian land forces remained intact (Westwood 1986, 157). Regardless, the war progressively evolved into a stalemate following the Japanese capture of the Liaodong Peninsula. Declining offers for an early armistice, Tsar Nicholas II sent the majority of Russia's Baltic Fleet eastward in late 1904 via the Cape of Good Hope. This relief force was decisively defeated in the 1905 Battle of Tsushima. In the battle, Russia lost eleven battleships, four cruisers, six destroyers, and twenty-seven auxiliary ships while Japan lost only three torpedo boats (Regan 1992, 178). Again, in spite of severe losses, Tsar Nicholas II wanted to escalate the conflict, but rising domestic tensions coupled with Russian revolutionary gains forced him to enter into negotiations in August of 1905 (Connaughton 1992, 342).<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, Japanese losses on land had been mounting, and leaders contacted President Theodore Roosevelt to help mediate a peace agreement (Connaughton 1992, 272). In its entirety, the Russo-Japanese War lasted from February 8, 1904 to September 5, 1905. Over the course of nineteen months, roughly 2.5 million men had been mobilized and upwards

<sup>4</sup> Beginning in January of 1905, massed socio-political protests emerged in much of Russia largely due to severe social and economic inequality as well as a growing discontent with the Russo-Japanese War. Much of the unrest was suppressed using military force as typified by "Bloody Sunday," but the disruptions caused by the revolution were severe. For more information about the 1905 revolution see Salisbury, *Black Night, White Snow*; Ascher, *Revolution of 1905*; or Surh, *1905 in St. Petersburg*.

of two hundred thousand were killed or wounded in action (Dumas and Vedel-Peterson 1923, 57-9).

## The zero-sum nature of the Treaty of Portsmouth would perpetuate strained relations between the two states.

Even after agreeing to enter into negotiations to end the conflict, Russia and Japan hotly contested the negotiation planning in an effort to save some level of prestige (Trani 1969, 62). Delegates on both sides took stark positional approaches centered around territorial changes. Ultimately, the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed on September 5, 1905. It stipulated that Russia must recognize Korea as part of Japan's sphere of influence and establish exclusive Japanese control over Korea ("Text of the Treaty of Portsmouth," 1905). Further, Russia was required to withdraw from Manchuria, cede the southern portion of Sakhalin Island, and transfer the leasing rights of Port Arthur and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan ("Text of the Treaty of Portsmouth," 1905). Yet this resolution failed to address the underlying issues of conflicting Japanese and Russian interests in the region. Russia had been denied access to a significant warm-water port and lost control of part of its homeland, the southern half of Sakhalin Island, which ultimately curtailed eastward expansion. The zero-sum nature of the Treaty of Portsmouth would perpetuate strained relations between the two states that continued through the decline of the Russian Empire in 1917 and into the Soviet period.

Japan's decisive victory crippled Russian international prestige and power projection capability. Additionally, the substantial loss of face by the Russian regime contributed to the rise of the 1905 Russian Revolution and the 1917 October Revolution. In crippling Russia, whether intentionally or not, Japan had effectively removed its sole rival in East Asia while also gaining large portions of territory. Yet victory came at a cost of a forty-fold increase in the national debt with an annual interest accounting for roughly a quarter of the Japanese budget (Oyama and Ogawa 1932, 252). In turn, East Asia's new hegemon began developing a regional system of direct political and economic imperialism that would come to be known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

## Theoretical Explanation

Due to the decline of Chinese power, the East Asian region lost its hegemony that had guaranteed international stability

for centuries. The ensuing power vacuum evolved into a semi-multipolar system whereby major European states effectively divided East Asia among themselves. It should be noted that Britain and Russia were distinctly more able to project power to the region. However, Britain primarily sought to further economic ties while Russia sought actual territorial gains and the assertion of its own rule. By the end of the nineteenth century, the only two states that possessed significant forces in the region were Japan and Russia. Despite both actors cooperating in the suppression of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion and engaging in some trading enterprises, this dyad was ultimately unable to establish a status quo suitable to both parties.

This inability to compromise on delineating spheres of influence was largely due to the overwhelming expansionary ambitions of both states. Progressively, Russia attempted to fill the power vacuum left by China's decline through a series of territorial expansions and treaties with the ailing Qing dynasty. Japan, however, was dissatisfied with the emerging Russian supremacy in East Asia (Zhao 1998, 52). Yet when accounting for certain variables, both states had relative parity in military capabilities. In turn, as Lemke and Werner (1996) argued in *Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War*, conflict was highly likely as both actors possessed similar capabilities and competed for the same position in the regional hierarchy. As such, Japan engaged in conflict with Russia to challenge Russia's rise to power in East Asia. Likewise, Russia was unwilling to yield to Japan's demands, as doing so would hamper the ability to impose a system favorable to its own ambitions.

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The outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War can be attributed to the contiguity of competing expansionary ambitions. The zero-sum game of territorial acquisition was a driving factor in the outbreak of war. For Russia, expansion in the East, especially in Manchuria and Korea, offered an unparalleled economic opportunity (Katō 2007, 101). Russia had largely been contained in the West by European interventions and could not allow itself to be closed off in the East as well (Geyer 1987, 192). Similarly, Japan lacked the prestige and

power of the other great powers due to its recent entrance onto the world stage and small territorial holdings. As an island nation, Japan needed to establish a foothold on the Asian mainland. Yet any expansion or military buildup by one of these powers inherently required a reciprocal response.

**Incomplete information and lack of compromise prevented the peaceful resolution of conflict, making war the rational choice.**

The intractability of Russian and Japanese expansionary ambitions is evidenced by their inability to negotiate. Japanese leaders sought Russian assurances that they would not interfere in their de facto control of Korea. Likewise, Russian leaders wanted Japanese recognition of their exclusive economic control of Manchuria. What doomed negotiations was the linkage of Manchuria to Korea. Indeed, for either state, Manchuria represented potentially massive economic gains as a populous, resource-rich region (Katō 2007, 101). However, Russia needed to maintain a warm-water harbor at Port Arthur to effectively reap the benefits of controlling Manchuria. For Japan, Port Arthur represented a historical grievance against Russia and presented a direct threat to its control of Korea. Furthermore, the potential loss of trade with a region as large as Manchuria would be severely detrimental to the Japanese economy that relied heavily on trade. Bargaining over these issues was strained by Russia's severe underestimation of Japanese capabilities and overestimation of its own. Indeed, Russian Viceroy of the Far Eastern Fleet Admiral Alekseev publicly expressed such ideas (Westwood 1986, 37). Most importantly, Tsar Nicholas II genuinely believed that Japan would yield in the face of Russia's perceived superiority (Jukes 2002, 18). This misconception regarding Japanese intentions was, in part, the fault of the Japanese government as it failed to indicate its resolve to go to war over the question of Korea (Katō 2007, 102). As such, incomplete information and lack of compromise prevented the peaceful resolution of conflict, making war the rational choice.

**Conclusion**

With the effective subversion of its traditional hegemony throughout the nineteenth century, the East Asian region quickly devolved into systemic anarchy. Hoping to fill the void left by China's weakness, Russia and Japan sought to expand territorial control in the region. The Russian need for a warm-water port in the Far East was crucial to establishing a

strategic base in the region. Likewise, Japan lacked a foothold on the Asian mainland and needed to secure its sphere of influence in Korea. Thus, limited options for expansion placed both actors in opposition to one another's interests. Japan's defeat of Russian forces shocked contemporary observers and effectively marked its ascension to regional hegemony over East Asia. This drastic shift in the balance of power would be a major contributing factor to Japanese expansion into China and the South Pacific throughout the next several decades. As a case study in competing ambitions of great powers, the Russo-Japanese War offers an exemplary instance of an external security dilemma and regional power transition.

## Author's Note



Benjamin E. Mainardi ('20) double-majored in International Affairs and Public Policy and Administration and double-minored in Political Science and History. His areas of study include great-power competition and military history. Mr. Mainardi will continue his education with a master's in Security Studies starting this fall. He hopes to pursue a career in the defense and intelligence communities.

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