

2 Rivalries in the Western Pacific

Between 1870 and 1914 six countries became involved in competition over economic and political influence in the Western Pacific. Three of them were old established colonial powers: Great Britain, France and Russia. The others were relative newcomers: the United States of America, Germany and Japan. The United States had entered the scene after Great Britain had recognised its independence in 1783. Germany and Japan gained economic prominence, which allowed them to look for overseas expansion, only in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was Germany, with its ambition to become a world power, complete with a mighty commercial fleet and navy and its own outposts and colonial possessions in Africa and the Pacific, that set in motion a development that culminated in the dividing up of the Western Pacific. Japan and the United States would become important players in the Western Pacific, a little later, at the close of the century. There were still other colonial powers in Asia – the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal – but, being not very powerful, they played a very minor role in the power struggle that evolved. With other countries seeking new colonies and coaling stations, their main concern was guarding what they considered rightfully theirs; with Spain being forced to dismantle its colonial empire by the end of the century.

Initially, what happened in Asia and the Pacific was partly the result of the existing coalitions and animosities between the European nations, not only brought about by their interaction in Europe itself but also in the Near East, Africa and Latin America. The relations between the powers in Asia and the Pacific were perhaps the most complex of all. While in other parts of the world only a limited number of powers were involved, in the Asia-Pacific region all of them were implicated; not just the European powers, but the United States and Japan as well. As elsewhere, along with the conflicts between the powers in Asia and the Pacific, which had the potential to change the international balance of power, came outbursts of patriotism, if not xenophobia, and a frenzied press.

The international tension, which arose out of the aim to control new territories or inflated fears about the intentions of other powers, added to existing ill feelings and prejudices and created new ones. At certain moments, it was even feared that clashes over colonies, protectorates or spheres of influence might escalate into war in Europe, if not into a world-wide conflict. Or, as one member of the British House of Commons said in 1898, 'we cannot conduct a war with a European Power in a far-distant country without having the fear of a war in Europe continually before

us'.¹ Others shared this view. Among them was the already mentioned Pickering, who warned that as Great Britain's European rivals lacked coaling stations and powerful fleets in the Far East, any armed conflict over influence in that region would be fought out in Europe (Pickering 1898: 277). Charles William de la Poer Beresford, 1st Baron Beresford (1899: 441), also a person whose opinions counted in those days, was afraid that the rivalry between the powers in China might well result in 'war between the European nations'. Though it would not come to this, such predictions formed an integral part of contemporary political considerations and analyses. Having to take into account the possibility of war also made the powers exercise constraints in pursuing their colonial ambitions.

Strategic concerns, at times bordering on paranoia, and commercial expectations which were not always borne out by the facts, played a role in the international rivalries that would come about, and would also manifest themselves in the fields of culture and the sciences. As did national pride and fervour, which perhaps were even stronger outside patria than at home. In Asia and the Pacific foreigners celebrated their national festive days and on such and other occasions national anthems, patriotic songs and *feux de joie* resounded. As one contemporary noted in the mid-1890s about the British in Asia, 'for the national Flag he cares a great deal. Loyalty is his passion; and the toast of "The Queen" is drunk with as boisterous a fervour in Far Kathay as it is at a Unionist banquet in St. James's Hall' (Curzon 1896: 420). Another traveller was struck by the fact that the French flag could be seen 'everywhere in every conceivable place' in Tonkin and in Guangzhouwan, a recently acquired concession by France in China (Cunningham 1902: 10). Germans in China, the missionaries included, raised their flags and on occasion broke into renditions of *Heil dir im Siegerkranz* and other patriotic songs (Esherick 1987: 80). Where they could, the powerful nations also tried to outshine each other in Asia in grandiose power architecture, imposing political ceremonies, and the pomp that surrounded the life of their consuls and ambassadors and of their mercantile community abroad.

In search of new markets and political influence

Where colonies or protectorates could not be won, efforts to gain political and economic influence set the powers apart. In the late nineteenth

1 Gibson Bowles in House of Commons on 1-3-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/mar/01/independence-of-chinese-territory).

century, 'sphere of influence' (in contemporary literature often written with capitals) became a popular term in international diplomacy and political analyses and speculations. Alternative terms used were 'spheres of interest' and 'spheres of influence or interest', at times even 'spheres of special interests'; and briefly, in northeast and south China, around the turn of the century, 'spheres of railway influence'. Germans spoke about *Interessen-Sphäre*, *Interessengebiet*, and *ökonomische and geographische Gravitations-Sphären*; the French about *sphères des intérêts*, *sphères d'influence* and *zones d'influence*. On rare occasions, when the claims of one or more powers were questioned, people spoke of 'spheres of pretensions'. Yet another word used was preponderance. Because he, like some of his compatriots, might not have approved of the term 'spheres of influence', the British Prime Minister Salisbury, in 1898, would talk of a 'partition of preponderance' as an alternative to actual territorial expansion (Beresford 1899: 165).

The emerging rivalries manifested themselves in conflicts over land and the recruitment of labour necessary for the cultivation of estates, in competition over mining concessions and in a race for new business opportunities and new markets for a growing industrial output at home. Big rivers, which only increased in importance as objects of international rivalry after the replacement of sailing vessels with steamships, railways and, in a less spectacular way, macadamised roads, were also part of the fray. Good roads and railways were 'the best pacificators' (Colquhoun 1902: 365). In China and Southeast Asia, where the physical terrain was often not conducive to long-distance transport over land, access to and control over navigable big rivers, which criss-crossed the region, became one of the sources of discord between Great Britain and France; also because moving passengers and freight over such waterways required no or much less investment than the construction of railways.

The right to construct and manage railways was even more frequently disputed. Above all in China and the Ottoman Empire construction of railways was a politically highly sensitive undertaking. As symbols of economic and political penetration and allowing for the transportation of troops and for the expansion of commercial interests at the cost of rival nations, such infrastructural projects became part the strategic game. Financiers considered railways a good investment, and industry at home could profit from the production of locomotives, carriages and rails. What also played a role was the fact that gaining a concession to build a railway line pre-empted another power from doing the same, excluding the competitors being an essential element of colonialism.

One way to gain the upper hand and to get the concessions and gain markets was to control local governments by means of force or diplomacy (a lavish reception for visiting foreign rulers could also help). Additional influence was sought by sending military instructors to modernise armies and navies and civil advisers to organise or reorganise the financial sector and the customs service. Although the benefits of such adviser ships were clear – as late as 1912 the British bemoaned that German advisers had seen to it that the Chinese army was not equipped with British weapons (Lawton 1912: 1370) – even their mere appointment was already considered a coup. Often, these and other perks were an outcome of the rivalries between the powers. At times, however, the jealousies between the powers and the animosities their actions evoked in the country they were quarrelling about provided smaller European states – and even other powers – with a niche to step into.

Political and economic interests were intertwined. Consuls, sometimes with their own 'escort' or guards, and commercial and political agents had to stimulate trade, keep an eye on the activities of citizens of rival nations, or simply served as markers of foreign presence. In 1892 George Nathaniel Curzon, or The Lord (later The Earl) Curzon of Kedleston, observed about Persia that it was 'a country where commerce can be pursued with political objects, where mercantile agents are frequently diplomatic emissaries in disguise, and where the command of trade routes and bazaars is capable of being used as a preliminary to territorial acquisition' (Curzon 1892 I: 177). Persia was not exceptional. In 1906, discussing the policies of the foreign powers in China, another author noted that 'diplomacy stalks its political prey under cover of commercial and industrial enterprise, while commerce and industry strike at competition through open or surreptitious diplomatic wire-pulling' (Millard 1906: 220). Two decades earlier the situation had not been much different in the Pacific island groups. Foreign traders and estate owners assumed political roles to protect and advance their commercial interests, turning to the homeland for diplomatic and military backing. At times, travellers and explorers, ethnographers, archaeologists and other scholars took the lead. Some were at least as interested in market potentials as in the people and the natural environment of the regions they traversed. Their expeditions, in some contemporary literature referred to as politico-scientific missions, aroused much suspicion (Norman 1884: 101). The explorers might be viewed by the local population as well as by governments and citizens of rival nations, and not always incorrectly so, as trailblazers of colonial expansion, reconnoitering the terrain and collecting valuable strategic information.

Sometimes, governments were urged on or found themselves in dire straits by proponents at home and abroad of an aggressive, expansionist policy. In developing its policy in the South Pacific, London had to deal with political pressure from Australasia. People in Australia and New Zealand had their own territorial ambitions. Reports about attempts by Germany, France or, for that matter, any other nation to establish itself in the South Pacific, which often were not much more than rumours, invariably elicited strong and, at times, almost hysterical responses in Australia and New Zealand. London should not allow other powers to acquire what should be Australasian territory. Bismarck called such aspirations excessive claims (*maszlose Ansprüche*). The French author Lorin (1906: 400) dismissed the demands as bluff, full of intemperance of words and testifying of rough diplomacy, while *The New York Times* (13-6-1886) characterised them as 'rather absurd, not to say greedy'. As London was usually, at best, reluctant to comply, politicians in Australia and New Zealand tended to accuse the home government of lethargy and of losing out to other, more energetic nations. At play was a mix of territorial aspirations, economic ambitions, and fears in Australia and New Zealand; fears for unfair economic competition and the military aggression of others. In 1901 members of the Australian Federal Parliament even speculated about a combined German, French and Russian naval attack on their country (Hiery 1995: 13). Three years later, the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* wrote that Australia could not 'afford to allow foreign nations to establish themselves within a day or two's steam of Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, and the other eastern ports of Australia' (Australia 1904: 18). At that moment, with the rise of Japan, a racial element had entered the mix.

Equally expansionist – or alarmist, the two were often difficult to tell apart – in the British Empire could be members of the civil service in the colonies, the military there, and the Chambers of Commerce, at home and abroad (where they often were of an international composition). At times in Asia, they played a role comparable to that of politicians in Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific. In 1886 a Liberal member of the House of Commons, H. Richard, observed that it was 'a general fact that our countrymen, especially in the East, have a perfect passion for annexation'.

Other powers also had their overambitious civil servants and military officers abroad. In Germany, in the 1880s, Bismarck even invented a new disease, *morbus consularis*, to explain the behaviour of the German consul in Samoa. In Central Asia, an advance by Russian military officers left them without support by St Petersburg, which had to take into account its formal negotiations with London. Meanwhile, in north Asia Russian

'military chauvinists', as the British ambassador to Russia called them in 1901, complicated matters.² Their activities, coupled with the scheming of expansionist officers and politicians in St Petersburg, created an impression in London of Russian policy being extremely untrustworthy and erratic, often resulting in action that was the opposite of the guarantees given by the Russian government. In France, ambitious colonial officials had far more daring plans with regard to south China than Paris could or would afford for reasons of domestic or foreign policy. In Hawaii, a self-willed American consul, though he might have had the impression that he acted in line with what his bosses in Washington were aiming at, proclaimed a protectorate in 1893; this would later be disowned after a change in presidency.

The first conflicts in the Pacific, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, centred on the island groups in the south and involved Great Britain and Germany. That such a confrontation lay in store became visible after 1874, after Great Britain had annexed Fiji and German settlers complained in Berlin about the unfair way they were treated by the British. A decade later, when Germany staked out its first overseas claims, the efforts by Berlin to gain recognition in London of its rule in the territories it had acquired turned into a full-scale diplomatic conflict with Great Britain. In the end Berlin got what it wanted. Then, and later, the British need for support against pressure from Great Britain's traditional rivals, France and Russia, in Egypt and Afghanistan, presented the opportunity to gain concessions from London. London found itself hard pressed, as it would so often. In 1884 Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone confided to his Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Derby, that Germany could do 'extraordinary mischief to us at our one really vulnerable point, Egypt' (Kennedy 1985: 92). Three years later, his successor, the Marquess of Salisbury, used the word blackmail (Lowe: 1990: 57). The conflicts between Germany and Great Britain over Fiji, Samoa and New Guinea were bitter ones. The German historian Walter Nuhn (2002: 12, 67) even singles out the Samoa conflict as an important impulse for Berlin to aim at a navy that could compete with the British one, and thus as an early impetus to the Anglo-German naval race, but he could have mentioned Fiji and New Guinea as well.

Already having huge colonial possessions, and facing the danger of over-extension, Great Britain was a more hesitant and more selective coloniser than Germany. Successive British governments did not look forward to new Crown Colonies, new annexed possessions or new protectorates. When they could, they confined themselves to trying to prevent others from taking

2 Scott to Lansdowne 11-7-1901 (PRO FO 800 140).

hold of such territories. Apart from its conflicts with Germany in Africa and the Pacific, Great Britain quarrelled with France over North Africa and the New Hebrides. In Asia, French and British interests were at odds in southern China and Thailand. British politicians and the British public watched with apprehension how Russia expanded south, into the Caucasus and Turkistan, as well as in north Asia, threatening British interests in the Middle East and China and, it was feared, ultimately in British India; the colony that took centre stage in British strategic considerations in Asia.

There was a British alternative to territorial expansion. British economists, of which those of the Manchester School – in Germany known as *der Manchesterliberalismus* or *das Manchestertum* – were most prominent and influential, had begun to regard colonies and protectorates as an economic burden, with ‘free trade’ offering better perspectives (Legge 1958: 16). Free trade, as opposed to the imposition of discriminatory or ‘hostile’ tariffs and custom duties, became such a dogma, and the suspicion of evil intent of the other was so great, that the British even saw quarantine measures to prevent the spread of the plague as a mercantile manoeuvre, deviously instituted by their economic rivals (Echenberg 2007: 99). An additional argument used in Great Britain, first with regard to the South Pacific and later on in relation to China and Afghanistan, was that establishing a protectorate or occupying territory inevitably implied keeping the local population in check, and required a costly and difficult military presence.

British politicians in the Colonial and Foreign Office tended to concur, though power rivalries might induce London to decide on colonial aggrandisement. The British, as their politicians never tired of lamenting in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, had a lot on their plate. Great Britain was a country with a vast empire, vast global commercial interests, and thus vast problems.³ To the British public, and also to the politicians, it must have appeared that around the globe Great Britain was moving from one instant ‘crisis’ or longer-lasting ‘question’ to another. Once a compromise or stalemate had been reached about a conflict in one spot in the world, complications arose elsewhere. New territory was added to the Empire in Asia and the Western Pacific, but in some cases only hesitantly so and in others in reaction to the perceived threats by other powers. Or, as Colonial Secretary Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby, phrased it in the House of Lords in 1883, when the taking control over New Guinea was at stake: ‘Speaking generally, I should say – and I think it is the general

3 Sir E. Grey in House of Commons 5-4-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/apr/05/far-east).

feeling of this country – that our responsibilities are already heavy enough, that our Possessions, scattered as they are, over every part of the world, are sufficient to require the utmost care and vigilance, and that it is not desirable to increase either the one or the other’.⁴

At that moment, in the mid-1880s, the word annexation had a negative connotation in Great Britain. Colonel Edward Bosc Sladen, an officer in the Indian Army and a passionate advocate of the occupation of Upper Burma soon to take place, complained at that time that it was considered ‘an offensive term and [that] the policy which advocates it is condemned as unjustifiable and out of date’ (Browne 1888: 111). International developments contributed; ‘annexation was a word foreign to the English language, it was invented by the Americans to make that which was wrong to appear to be right’, Lord Stanley of Alderley – almost certainly having American plans for Hawaii in mind – was to state in the House of Lords in 1883.⁵

Ten years later, when the gravity of Pacific rivalry had shifted to the north, to China and continental Southeast Asia, not much had changed, except for the fact that British public opinion at home cared more about the British position in the Far East than in the South Pacific. In October 1893 the then Secretary of State for India, Lord Kimberley, struggling with the problem of how to keep the French out of Thailand, complained about ‘the enormous increase of our responsibility which goes in every quarter of the world ... [and] ... an indisposition to maintain the forces necessary to uphold our rule’.⁶ A similar remark was made about defending spheres of influence in China. Beresford (1899: 441) pointed out that ‘defending and administering huge sections of a country with bad roads, teeming with a population absolutely hostile to foreigners, and foreign domination’ would involve huge costs. He foresaw an even greater danger. A partition of China in spheres of influence could only mean disaster: the creation of ‘gigantically expensive European military frontiers in the Far East, with no strong Chinese buffer between them’ and thus ‘war between the European nations’ (Beresford 1899: 441-2). A buffer in those days being the panacea to keep European powers in Asia from each other’s throat. This was the answer Great Britain had found to protect India; the creation of buffer states, keeping the armies of the enemy, Russia and France, as far away as possible.

4 Derby in House of Lords 2-7-1883 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1883/jul/2/motion-for-papers).

5 Stanley of Alderley in House of Lords 2-7-1883 (hansard.millbanksystems.com.lords/1883/july2/motion-for-papers).

6 Kimberley to Lansdowne 5-10-1893 (Chandran 1977: 96).

To avoid conflict, ideally territory won by different powers should be a good distance away from each another, and visits of foreign warships to nearby waters or foreign economic enterprise in adjacent regions were viewed with much distrust. The French did not want the Germans in Hainan, near the concession the French had gained in southern China. Great Britain did not want the French in Portuguese Macau (Macao), near Hong Kong; not to speak of having Russia advance in Afghanistan or Tibet or the French in Thailand or Burma.

While the powers in the South Pacific contesting each other's island groups were mainly Germany, Great Britain and France, the initial players to the north in Asia were Great Britain, France and Russia. Russia's colonial expansion brought the country into conflict not only with Great Britain but also with Japan, a country where feelings of patriotism ran at least as high as they did elsewhere. Russia and Japan first fought a diplomatic battle and then a real war to decide to whose sphere of influence Manchuria and Korea belonged; the Japanese successes were greeted by Japanese at home and abroad with 'Bansai celebrations'.

Almost until 1900, the United States played a less belligerent role in the Pacific. The United States had its advocates of territorial expansion in the Pacific, but for most of the nineteenth century it was as reluctant to acquire new territories in the Pacific as Great Britain was, and partly for the same reason, the costs and efforts involved. There had been some exceptions, making the country an active participant in the Pacific rivalry. Washington had as early as 1842 warned other nations that they should stay away from Hawaii. The United States also became caught up in the Samoa crisis, which at certain moments bordered on open warfare. As the headline in *The New York Times* of 24 February 1899 read, the 'Powers Were Near Warfare'. What it aimed at was 'annexation of trade', as Secretary of State James G. Blaine phrased it in a speech in 1890 (LaFeber 1998: 106). At times, and especially with regard to Hawaii and Samoa, Washington had not precluded annexations, but invariably opposition in Congress proved too strong.

The great Russian-French combination

Russia's moving forwards in the direction of India, Persia and China was partly motivated by territorial ambitions, and partly by the intention to forestall the presumed territorial ambitions of the British (Soroka 2011: 2). It was also leverage for Russia in its conflicts with Great Britain over the Ottoman Empire, hoping to tie down British troops in India. 'To keep England

quiet in Europe by keeping her employed in Asia', Curzon concluded in 1889, was 'the sum and substance of Russian policy' (Berryman 2002: 3). Antipathies and distrust of the intention of others were mutual. In Russia, Anglophobic sentiments and apprehension about British colonial intentions matched anti-Russian feelings and fears in Great Britain. Russia would, the British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey observed in retrospect, 'trouble the Indian frontier on the one side', while its government was always afraid the British 'were going to obtain some advantage towards their frontier'.⁷ Animosities became so intense that in 1901 the British ambassador in St Petersburg, Charles Stewart Scott, could write about a 'strongly cemented wall of distrust & suspicion' among the public in both countries.⁸ In 1902, discussing the situation in Persia, his counterpart in London told the British Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, that both countries were 'in the habit of becoming needlessly excited about comparatively trivial incidents in that and other parts of the world'.⁹

The Russian move into Central Asia caused much anxiety in Great Britain, but it was Russia's advance in north Asia in particular, viewed by the British with a mixture of awe and admiration, which was the immediate cause for Great Britain's search for allies at the close of the nineteenth century. More to the east, the French thrust into continental Southeast Asia, inspired by a combination of economic motives, efforts to regain the status of a power after 1871, and the desire to seek compensation for the British preponderance in Egypt, was a development viewed with apprehension in Great Britain. It only added to the mutual distrust and animosities that coloured Franco-British relations as much as they did Russo-British ones. Frenchmen recapitulated how much damage the British had done to their overseas interests in the past; alarmist Britons were sure, as one of them formulated it, that '[j]ealousy of England's commercial supremacy' was 'a national trait of the French character' and that, of old, French policy had been inspired by the desire 'to damage English trade and to ruin English commerce' (Norman 1884: 2-3).

The combined Russian-French threat was considered the greater after Paris and St Petersburg, both with ambitions in Asia, had – on French initiative – started talks in 1891, culminating in the Dual Alliance of 1894. Though the Alliance was a defensive pact against European adversaries,

7 Grey in House of Commons 27-11-1911 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1911/nov/27/sir-edward-grey-statement).

8 Scott to Lansdowne 18-4-1901 (PRO FO 800 140).

9 Lansdowne to Scott 10-5-1902 (PRO FO 539 81).

Germany and Austria-Hungary, the treaty did have its implications for the relations between the powers in Asia. The new-found cooperation gave France the political and indirect military backing for its adventures in Southeast Asia and south China. It offered Paris, in the words of one French author, himself a proponent of an active colonial policy, the chance to accelerate the creation of its colonial empire, and thus also the opportunity to enhance its status as a great power (Lorin 1906: 488). For Russia, the Alliance provided some backing for its moving forwards into Central Asia and north China, which in Great Britain made for the doom scenario of a concerted encroachment on India by Russia from the West (and perhaps from the North) and by France from the East, from their expanding possessions in continental Southeast Asia. As an opposition Member of Parliament described it, the danger loomed of 'a double-barrelled opposition to the progress of the British Empire in the East'.¹⁰

To some British opinion makers, Great Britain's rivals seemed intent on striking at the very existence of the British Empire. Its prosperity depended on Asia. Great Britain, to use the words of its Prime Minister, Disraeli, was more of an Asian than a European power (Kennedy 1985: 80). Disraeli's statement mirrored a wider held view by the British, also expressed by Curzon (1892 I: 4), that the future of Great Britain would not be decided in Europe, but in Asia, and especially so in India. Four years later, and now also with threats to British interests in China in mind, Curzon (1896: 414) would again argue that Great Britain was 'before anything else an Asiatic dominion'.

There was also China to consider. Great Britain had gained a dominant position in the China trade, but the share of other powers was increasing. China was viewed as a potentially immense market. It became the prize to win, except for the British, who thought they would lose out if other powers gained control over parts of it. Losing part of the Chinese market might bring ruin and mass unemployment at home. With their inflated egos, Pickering (1898: 260-1) and other Britons were sure that British expansion over the world was 'for the benefit of every other nation', while rival powers were out for territorial gain 'as a weapon against the prosperity of British trade – that is, the existence of the inhabitants of these islands'. Pickering (1898: 261) also sketched the implications of such a selfish Russian, German or French policy; testifying to a latent anxiety, brought to the fore in times of crisis when people worried about the loss of colonies or export markets:

10 R. Temple in House of Commons 30-3-1894 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1894/mar/30/france-and-siam).

‘While every extension of our empire means food and clothing for the working men of the British Isles, every appropriation of territory by any other nation means the shutting out of manufacturers from that market’, not to speak of the falling away of the imports of foods and raw materials Great Britain needed (*ibid.*: 269).

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, the encroachment of the powers upon China, with Russia active to the north and France to the south and with Germany demanding its share, worried the British, especially those who foresaw the demise of British might in the world. In the Far East, Great Britain was ‘confronted by the powerful opposition of Russia and France, combined with the jealousy of the Germans’, Pickering (1898: viii), a vowed opponent of foreign – that is, non-British – spheres of influence in China, wrote. He saw in Russia and France a real menace: ‘[A]t every point where our expansion of empire for the vital interests of our people is concerned, Russia and France are ready to thwart us’ (*ibid.*: viii). Worse, as he had written earlier in the *London and China Telegraph*, they were ‘checkmating’ Great Britain ‘in every part of the world, from Abyssinia to Washington, from Bangkok to Herat’ (*ibid.*: 267). In Russia and France similar observations were made, but with Great Britain in the role of the menacing villain.

In Great Britain there was no shortage of pessimistic or alarmist observations in books and speeches about the deplorable position of the Empire and the threat new German, Russian and French acquisitions posed, or could pose, to British trade and thus prosperity. In March 1898, E. Ashmead-Bartlett, an outspoken Conservative Member of Parliament, gave an overview of the failure of the Liberal governments of Gladstone and the Earl of Rosebery vis-à-vis what he called ‘the great Russo-French combination’. He presented a gloomy picture of what had transpired:

Sir, it must have occurred to everyone that, during the past five years – since 1893 – this country has been steadily pushed down-hill in many parts of Africa, in Asia, and in other quarters of the globe. ... I need only mention Africa – West, Central, East, and South – Madagascar, Siam, Tunis, the North-Western Frontier of India, China – North and South – the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean. Everywhere there has been British retreat and British repulse.¹¹

11 Sir Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett in House of Commons 1-3-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/mar/01/independence-of-chinese-territory).

He did not mention the eastern north coast of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, which had fallen to Germany a decade earlier. Such assessments were enduring. In 1912 a British journalist, Lawton (1912: 1311), wrote in an exhaustive survey of the international complications in China that the British government was 'always accused of pursuing a policy of acquiescence towards claims of other Powers in the Far East'.

The progress Russia made in Asia reaped admiration elsewhere in Europe. In 1899 one German observer wrote that Russia had slowly but steadily gained the upper hand over Great Britain in Central and East Asia: 'All the time Russia succeeded to sooth England through diplomatic negotiations and to move forward inexorably on its way' (Krahmer 1899: 186-7, 200). His evaluation of Great Britain's policy was less positive. It was 'indecisive and in no way energetic ... here as well as there, always bending to Russia's will, "bravely" retreating for its ambitions' (Krahmer 1899: 199). Some even foresaw the end of the British empire. In Java, the newspaper *De Locomotief* predicted that the British days in the Far East were numbered. It would only be a matter of time before the Russian army would march into British India (Handelingen 1877-8 II: 704, 715).

For a long time, British politicians had considered it out of the question that Great Britain would ally itself with another power. In May 1898, the Earl of Kimberley, a former Foreign Secretary, could still express his dismay over the prospect that Great Britain was 'to abandon the principle ... of not engaging in what are commonly called entangling alliances with other powers'.¹² He expressed his displeasure over the prospect that London might have to go in search of formal allies shortly after Germany and Russia had forced the Chinese to lease them land in the north of the country along the Pacific coast. On 6 March 1898, Germany had leased the Bay of Jiaozhou (Kiaochow, Kiautschou) with its harbour Qingdao (Tsingtao, Tsingtau) on the coast of the Yellow Sea. Later, in the same month, Russia acquired the Guandong (Kwantung) Leased Territory, including Port Arthur (Lüshun, present-day Lüda).

In a sense, Russia had been pushed in this direction. After the Crimean War of 1853-56, when the Black Sea was 'neutralised' and its warships were no longer allowed to sail it (a condition of force until 1871), Russia reversed its aim of moving deeper into Ottoman territory. Writing about the international consequences of the war, one recent study asserts that Russia 'would withdraw from great power politics for the foreseeable future' (Steinberg 2011: 129). In fact, what St Petersburg did was to look for other

12 hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1898/may/17/occupation-of-wei-hai-wei.

directions of expansion, in Central and East Asia, remaining a power to be reckoned with and giving others, especially the British – who had tried in vain to continue the war exactly to prevent this – a lot to worry about. Its role in Asia became even more pronounced after May 1897 when Russia and Austria-Hungary agreed to preserve the status quo in the Balkans. In 1899, in St Petersburg, the Minister of War, General Aleksey N. Kuropatkin, bluntly told the British envoy, Scott, that Russia intended to strengthen its military presence in Central Asia for defensive as well as offensive purposes against India; although he added, with regard to the latter possibility, ‘God forbid it’.¹³ To the north, Beijing became a ‘substitute’ for Istanbul (Taylor 1971: 302).

In particular, the Russians taking possession of Port Arthur and the direct threat it posed to China made a great impression in the rest of the world. With a naval station near Beijing, and its troops along the north border of China, Russia might have acquired a unique position enabling it to put pressure on the Chinese government. Port Arthur also gave Russia a vantage point in its conflict with Japan over who would become the dominant power in South Manchuria and Korea. How necessary it was to strengthen its position there had become evident in 1895 when Russia, not yet capable of making a fist of its own in Manchuria, needed all the diplomatic support it could muster to deny Japan in China the foothold it had gained on the Liaodong Peninsula during Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. St Petersburg sought and won German and French support against Japan. The resultant Tripartite Intervention or ‘Far Eastern Triple Alliance’ forced Japan to give up its territorial gains. On the question of forcing Japan out of the Liaodong Peninsula, the British Prime Minister Rosebery declined to side with Russia, but he also did not come out in support of Japan.

To counterbalance the German and Russian leases and to save face, Great Britain, which up to then had always presented itself as the champion of the territorial integrity of China, leased Wei-hai-wei, almost directly opposite Port Arthur. Soon after, the French would follow suit, leasing Kwangchow in south China. The United States, as much an advocate of free trade in China as Great Britain was, refrained from demanding a territorial concession in China. Instead, it established a firm footing in the Far East by annexing Hawaii in August 1898 and replacing Spain as colonial ruler in the Philippines a few months later.

13 Scott to Salisbury 12-7-1899 (PRO FO 539 81).

China's Open Doors

The land leases put the question of free trade at the centre of public attention. A new term entered the political vocabulary: the Open Door. In 1899 Beresford (1899: 1) observed that the 'British and American public have been quite bewildered by the controversy which has raged during the last year over the relative merits of the "Open Door" and the "Sphere of Influence"'. Colonies and spheres of influence gave a power special commercial privileges, to the detriment of the trade of others; and 'an Open Door' in China – or, as the wider phrase ran, 'an Open Door to all the world' – was the logical choice for countries reluctant or unable to gain such concessions for themselves. The American journalist Millard (1906: 182) even suggested that the British had invented the phrase to protect their large and still dominant mercantile interests in China. Free trade was also the avowed policy of the United States, that is to say, where it concerned the Far East. Latin America and the United States were a different matter (LaFeber 1998: 30, 48-9). In commercial circles in the United States, Russia, Germany and France were depicted as protectionist colonial powers, and thus a threat to American trade in China (LaFeber 1998: 375-8). What London and Washington wanted

Figure 2 Charles Beresford



Source: Beresford 1899

to forestall were higher customs tariffs and higher railway charges for their products, special harbour dues for their ships and unfair competition where it concerned investments – railways were a particular source of concern – in those parts of China that had come under the control of another power.

Alarmed British merchants in China warned that the falling of Port Arthur into Russian hands might be the beginning of the end of the Open Door policy, the end of free trade in China, which they and other Britons were not tired of repeating, had been the British aim since 1842, since the First Opium War, when Great Britain had been the first to force China to open sea and inland ports to foreign trade. It was asserted in Great Britain that once Russia or France – Germany was less frequently mentioned – got hold of new territory they would install protectionist tariffs or would take other measures to close the region to British trade. People expressing such worries may well have had the practice of European nations in Africa in mind; and with respect to Asia, French policy in Indochina. It could also not be excluded that trade would be monopolised. Only a few years earlier, in 1893, the French government had instructed its administrators overseas to buy, if possible, all the products they needed in France.

The great champion of the British mercantile campaign in favour of free trade in China was Beresford, promoted in 1898 to rear admiral. He was the voice of an important pressure group, the British Associated Chambers of Commerce. In August 1898, the association invited him as ‘an officer of naval or military experience’ to investigate in China how effective the protection was that the Chinese government could provide British merchants.¹⁴ The book Beresford published about his mission, *The break-up of China*, went further. It was a 500-page plea in favour of an Open Door, so arranged that it gave the impression that he voiced the opinion not only of the British merchants active in China, but also of the entire foreign business community in China and of the Chinese engaged in foreign trade.

Beresford did not only travel to China. Afterwards he visited Japan and subsequently the United States, which in the closing years of the 1890s had established its dominance in South America and viewed China as an attractive potential new market (LaFeber 1998: 100, 379). Beresford found support in both countries. In Japan, he gained the impression that ‘the political as well as the commercial classes are determined to maintain an “Open Door” in China’ (Beresford 1899: 421). In the United States, where he did his best to propagate some sort of Anglo-American alliance, businessmen

14 Stafford Northcote, President of the Associated Chambers of Commerce to Beresford (cited in Beresford 1899: 448).

were ‘unanimously’ in favour of free trade in China (*ibid.*: 432). As it had done in Great Britain, the Bay of Jiaozhou and Port Arthur had made a great impression in the United States. Newspapers were full of speculation about what the implication for American trade would be (LaFeber 1998: 352, Beresford 1899: 427). The developments in China gave rise to much reflection and a rethinking of foreign policy. Relations with Russia, previously cordial, cooled. In November 1896, about a year before a Russian squadron would sail to Port Arthur, the American ambassador in St Petersburg had already gained the impression that the Russian government had lost any interest in preserving friendly relations with the United States (LaFeber 1998: 323). Washington turned away from Russia and towards Great Britain, with whom its relations had been cool for most of the century, and Japan.

International tension over developments in China was building to such an extent that people began to speculate about a world war involving the major powers of those days. In 1898 a British Member of Parliament, T. Sutherland, ventured that a dismemberment of China could well result in a war his generation would not see the end of: ‘The struggle would be gigantic’.¹⁵ In the same year, Edward Grey warned that Great Britain ‘could not have war in China and peace in Europe’. He called ‘the question of China’ the most important of the problems faced by Great Britain in the world. The disputes between the powers over Africa, which up to then had taken pride of place over entanglements in the Western Pacific, would not lead to war. China might.¹⁶ China far outshone the commercial importance of Africa. No matter how much the powers might be quarrelling over the partition of Africa, the economic value of this continent remained of little significance. One who vented this opinion was Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval historian whose work had influenced strategic thinking and naval build-ups all over the world. ‘In regard of commerce, the fewness and backwardness of its inhabitants’, Mahan (1900: 160) wrote, Africa was ‘a field of minor importance’. In Africa, one member of the British House of Commons remarked in 1898, ‘the people do not wear clothes, and where people do not wear clothes, there is very little you can sell to them’.¹⁷ In France a similar opinion was vented. A Chinese needed more goods than an Arab or people from Africa (Chambre 1898a: 450). On top of this came the Samoa

15 Sutherland in House of Commons 10-8-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/aug/10/appropriation-bill).

16 Grey in House of Commons 8-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1898/feb/08/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most-gracious-speech).

17 T.W. Gibson Bowles in House of Commons 1-3-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/mar/01/independence-of-chinese-territory).

crisis two years later, involving the British, American and German navies. All this made one Dutch author predict in a military magazine published in the Netherlands Indies that a 'Great War', an 'enormous struggle, which will stir the whole world', was probably only weeks and certainly not more than a few months away (X 1900: 239). Others shared this acute sense of pessimism, predicting serious international complications over China and the wider Pacific. In 1902 the British author Colquhoun wrote that in the Pacific 'the future of more than one Great Power would be decided'. There, 'the great struggle of the twentieth century' would take place (Colquhoun 1902: vii). Elsewhere in the same book, he called 'the question of the Pacific' the 'world-problem of the twentieth century' and presented the Pacific as the 'new theatre in which the world drama is to centre' (*ibid.*: 27).

Port Arthur formed the catalyst of a fundamental change in London's foreign policy. Russia leasing Port Arthur was seen as the ultimate proof of its stealthy encroachment on the British interests in Asia, though for some British politicians the comforting thought was that Russia's designs in northern Asia would relieve pressure on India, Afghanistan and Persia. Prospects looked all the more gloomy because in the closing decades of the nineteenth century Russia was still considered to be a powerful nation commanding an impressive fleet and a mighty army. Great Britain had a strong fleet, but a weak army. British land forces were undermanned. At the time of Port Arthur, the British army suffered from a lack of troops, making it difficult for army command even to man the British garrisons at Malta and Gibraltar. There were doubts that the British army could perform well in a land war; an impression that seemed to be confirmed at the turn of the century by the poor performance of British troops in the initial phase of the Boer War. It was feared that the British army would never be able to stem a further advance of Russia, which was essentially engaged in an expansion over land. To make matters worse, at sea, the British fleet in the Far East might not be able to take on the combined fleets of Russia, which already by 1893 commanded the world's third largest navy (and after the Sino-Japanese War in anticipation of a confrontation with Japan would strengthen its Pacific Fleet), and France with the second most powerful fleet in the world (and in the worst scenario also that of Germany), without redirecting warships from Europe, and the risk this entailed for the British naval position at home in Europe (Berrymen 2002: 5; Padfield 2009: 66, 73).

To alert the British government merchants in Yingkou (Newchwang), Beresford wrote a letter home in December 1898 setting out the dangers posed by the Russians pressing forward into Manchuria: '[S]hould Manchuria pass into the hands of that Power, not only would this "door" be "closed" but

British interests in China would be seriously menaced, and the unopposed absorption of these provinces, with the hardy and spirited peasantry, would inevitable be the prelude of a successful march southwards towards India' (Beresford 1899: 51). In view of the distance between Manchuria and India, the fear of Russian gains in north Asia seems far-fetched, but it was coupled with the belief that Russians were masters in turning people in the regions they had conquered – whether it was in China or in Central Asia – into excellent soldiers, fighting new wars of expansion for them (a practice the British in India were well familiar with).¹⁸

Great Britain's search for an ally

Being aware that the rival forces infringing on its position in Africa and Asia had become too strong for Great Britain to stand on its own, politicians in London went in search of allies. They did so on the European continent and elsewhere in the world, where Japan and the United States were the most likely candidates for such a partnership. On the European continent, it appeared, allies were not easy to find. There the British reputation, as Prime Minister Salisbury observed in February 1898, was 'by no means pleasant, and by no means advantageous'.¹⁹

Russia, redirecting its attention to the Far East, brought London a new partner. In January 1902, Great Britain signed its very first defence treaty ever. It did so with Japan. It was the best ally to halt a Russian advance in north Asia; and was even seen by some as Great Britain's 'natural ally'.²⁰ In particular, the strong fleet Japan was building made an impression. A pact with a naval power suited London well and had already been contemplated for some time. A naval power, in the words of Lord Kimberley, former Secretary of State for India and former Foreign Secretary, would 'always be of more consequence as a friend to this country in that quarter of the world than any other Power'.²¹ Friendly relations with Japan, Curzon (1896: 413) also argued, would assure Great Britain 'the continued command of

18 Only rarely was an opposite scenario suggested: a British-led Chinese army withstanding the Russian threat to India from the north (Browne 1888: 451).

19 Salisbury in House of Lords 8-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1898/feb/08/the-queens-speech-reported-by-the-lord-chancellor).

20 E. Ashmead-Bartlett in House of Commons 27-3-1896 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1896/mar/27/france-and-siam).

21 Kimberley in House of Lords 17-5-1898 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1898/may/17/occupation-of-wei-hai-wei).

the ocean routes'. The accord provided Japan with the freedom to engage Russia in a war in northern Asia. With the new Anglo-Japanese Alliance it was unlikely that Russia's Dual Alliance partner, France, would come to the assistance of Russia and declare war on Japan, as this would provoke Great Britain to join in.

Contrary to London, Tokyo was prepared to go to war. It wanted revenge for the humiliation by the Triple Intervention of 1895, had its own plans for Manchuria, and feared that the ultimate aim of the Russian expansion was Korea, a country that Tokyo regarded as falling within Japan's sphere of influence and as being essential to its own defence. The American author Millard (1906: 27) wrote that, around 1900, he had heard 'Japanese officers of high rank' speak of a Russo-Japanese war 'as a certainty of the near future'. British politicians were well aware of the belligerent mood in Japan. In April 1901, the Japanese ambassador in London, Baron Hayashi Tadasu, told Lansdowne that Japan would 'certainly fight' to prevent Russia from taking control of Korea (Massie 1993: 339). In France the prospect of a Russo-Japanese War made Paris recoil from its Dual Alliance commitment; among other reasons, because naval experts were not sure that the badly-led and -trained Russian navy would perform well in a sea battle (Padfield 2009: 88). Paris opted for an *Entente Cordiale* with Great Britain, where politicians wanted to have some of their international problems out of the way. Taylor (1971: 417) even writes that 'The Far East, and the Far East alone, caused the Anglo-French entente'. In April 1904, both countries settled their long-standing colonial differences.

On 8 February 1904, the Japanese navy attacked the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur and in Korea. Though victorious at sea, Japan could not press on on land. A stalemate developed and, as Japan's leaders had feared, the country could not financially sustain a war that showed signs of dragging on. In September 1905, peace was concluded. The war drastically changed power relations in the Pacific. Russia ceased to be a major player in the Far East, though it remained a menacing force. Japan's role in Asia and the Pacific only became more prominent, ushering in a third phase in the relations between the powers in the Pacific. At stake was control over the Pacific, with the United States and Japan as the main protagonists; and also at odds over the dominant position Japan had gained in Manchuria after the Russo-Japanese War. The possibility of a confrontation between the two made for doubts about London's wisdom of aligning with Japan and created a new focus of conflict between Great Britain and its largest Pacific colonies. In Australia and New Zealand, fear of Japanese aggression and unmistakable anti-Japanese racial feelings tended to dominate public

opinion, finding their expression in clear sympathies for the United States where such sentiments were also manifest.

For the European powers, the centre of gravity shifted back to Europe (with the Near East and the north coast of Africa again gaining prominence in the struggle between them for political influence and territory); leaving it to the United States and Japan to determine which one of them would become the dominant power in the Pacific. The main reason for the shift was growing tension in Europe. There, Germany prepared for war with Great Britain, not in Asia; perhaps this is the reason why public enthusiasm for Germany's adventure in Asia, if it had ever existed, evaporated (Wertheimer 1913: 132). Another reason was that Germany's Pacific adventure could hardly be called an economic success. The fact that the South Pacific had been divided up, and that in the Far East the European powers no longer had much to win, facilitated the moving back to Europe. Treaties involving Great Britain and its position in Asia and Africa also contributed: the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and what would become known as the Triple Entente: the Entente Cordiale of April 1904, in which London tried to settle its colonial disputes with Paris, and the Anglo-Russian Convention of August 1907, dealing with Central Asia.

