



Great Britain and the other imperial powers: Conflict over China

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PICTURES 2 & 3: EMPEROR CH'IENT-LUNG - At dawn on the 14th of September 1793, Lord Macartney was introduced to the Chinese emperor, Ch'ien-Lung. He was in Peking as the representative of King George III, who wanted to improve and expand commercial relations. PICTURE 4: LORD MACARTNEY - Macartney wore his robes of the Order of the Bath over a suit of spotted mulberry velvet. The wonders of the British export trade were displayed: a planetarium, optical and magnetic instruments, Irish poplins, Birmingham metalware and Wedgwood dishes. The embassy was received with polite condescension, taken through a succession of pavilions filled with far superior products, and then brusquely dismissed. Macartney recorded in his diary that 'Our presents must hide their diminished heads'. The emperor commended the British monarch for his 'respectful spirit of submission', but pointed out that 'our celestial empire possesses all things in prolific abundance.' He then rejected the request for the relaxation of restrictions on trade between China and Great Britain and the appointment of a permanent ambassador. Yet within half a century, for the Chinese the world had turned upside down.

The British Empire in China was of a different sort from that in India or Africa: it was an 'informal' empire, not an 'empire of rule'. One characteristic was that the region in question retained nominal independence, whilst succumbing to foreign influence; with the help of local collaborators, Britain was able to enjoy power without the costs of responsibility. Influence might stem from favourable commercial agreements with ostensibly sovereign states; it might also stem from preponderant influence in strategically vital territories, gained from diplomatic pressure and the appointment of key advisers. Both were the case with Britain in China. Behind these financial and commercial links always lurked the threat of force, of 'gunboat diplomacy', provided by the Royal Navy. And it was gunboat diplomacy which destroyed the restrictions which had shackled British trade, and opened up China to the foreign barbarians. The foreign barbarians, however, included the other Great Powers, and Great Britain soon found that she had to defend her position in China from the Powers - most of whom did want to impose an empire of rule - as well as from the Chinese themselves.

At the beginning of the 19th century, China was virtually closed to foreigners. PICTURE 5: PORT OF CANTON - This is a picture of the port of Canton. The East India Company, which had developed links with China in the 18th century, could only use the ports of Canton or Macao, and their trade was strictly controlled by Chinese officials, who supervised all trading operations and fixed all rates and service charges as high as the market would bear. Foreigners, which included non-British traders, were forced to live and conduct their business in a small area outside of Canton, and were allowed there for only a few months a year. They were not allowed to learn Chinese. They could not go into the city or into the countryside, they could not bring foreign wives, and they were subject to Chinese laws and punishment, which could be arbitrary and might involve torture. Because they were self-evidently superior to all foreigners in terms of culture and civilisation, the Chinese dealt with foreign traders and representatives of foreign governments as inferiors. Foreign delegations were considered to be tribute-bearing missions and expected to perform the ritual kowtow to the emperor, as Lord Macartney had done. (Lord Amherst in 1816 refused to do so, and thus was refused entrance to Beijing)

The main British imports from China were silk and, overwhelmingly, tea, which was fast becoming the British national drink. There was, unfortunately, very little from Great Britain which the Chinese wished to buy, bar some woollens and later some cotton textiles, and British merchants had to pay with silver.

PICTURE 6: OPIUM FACTORY IN BENGAL - However, from 1773, there was an expanding and highly lucrative export of opium from Bengal to southern China ; this is a picture of one of the East India Company's opium factories in Bengal. By the mid-1830s, over one-half of the tea exported to Great Britain was being paid for by British merchants with opium bought in Calcutta. British trading houses pressed for greater freedom in the China market, and there developed in London a commercial lobby which argued for a more assertive government policy on their behalf. The attempts by the Chinese government to stamp out the trade in opium gave them an opportunity to do so.

PICTURE 7: LIN TSE-HSÜ - Lin Tse-hsü, the governor of the Chinese province of Hu-Huang, was an accomplished administrator and bureaucrat who could get things done; he also wrote poetry in his spare time. He was a man of integrity and high morals, and in October 1838, he was summoned to the imperial court and instructed by the emperor to stamp out opium addiction in China.

PICTURE 8: OPIUM SMOKING - The sale of opium had been illegal since 1800, but the black-market narcotics trade flourished in spite of the law, and there were an estimated 2 million addicts. On 10 March 1839, he announced that the opium trade would no longer be tolerated in Canton, and began arresting known dealers in the local schools and naval barracks; those found guilty of purchasing, possessing or selling opium were sentenced to public execution by strangling. He then moved to crack down on foreign smugglers of opium.

PICTURE 9: CLIPPER SHIP - Lin knew that the opium was brought to China in large British clipper ships, which also carried legal trade items. They sold the opium to clandestine Chinese buyers at Lintin Island in Canton Bay ; they then sailed up the Pearl River to Canton, where they bought tea and silk and sold their other, legal, goods. After a group of British merchants had attempted to prevent the strangling of a Chinese smuggler, Lin put all two hundred British merchants under house arrest in their factories, which contained their homes as well as their warehouses. Blockading the factories with thousands of soldiers, he refused to let any food supplies pass through the lines until the merchants agreed to hand over all of the opium in their warehouses and on the ships.

The British Superintendent, Captain Charles Elliot, after many days without food, promised the opium merchants that the British government would compensate them for their losses and persuaded them to turn over the opium to Lin. Chinese soldiers removed it from the factories, and Chinese sailors in war junks removed it from the ships, which were actually in international waters; it was then all poured into the sea. Lin even wrote an impassioned letter to Queen Victoria in 1840, defending his actions: 'Suppose there were people from another country who carried opium for sale to England and seduced your people into buying and smoking it; certainly your honourable ruler would deeply hate it and be bitterly aroused.'

PICTURE 10: LORD PALMERSTON - However, Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, was rather less concerned about this than about the restrictions on trade. He was in any case convinced that the Chinese actions had been provoked by the desire to protect home-grown opium, and to limit the amount of silver which was draining out of the country as payment for the imported opium. The actions of the Chinese provoked petitions to the government from over three hundred commercial firms, and in response, Palmerston in March 1840 ordered the Royal Navy to blockade the coast to force the Chinese to pay reparations for the lost opium. PICTURE 11: FIRST OPIUM WAR - At the beginning of June, a large British expeditionary force arrived, which included steam-powered gunboats and thousands of marines, including sepoys from India. Lin sent out eighty war junks, but many of them were blown out of the water. The invaders imposed a blockade on the Canton estuary, and then attacked and took control of strategically important sites along the China coast.

By the Treaty of Nanking of August 1842, the British imposed on the Chinese the first of what they were to call the 'Unequal Treaties'. PICTURE 12: HONG KONG IN 1848 - First of all, China ceded in perpetuity the island of Hong Kong opposite the approaches to Canton harbour, and this rapidly became one of Britain's most important commercial bases in Asia. The Chinese were also forced to open up five Chinese port cities, including Canton, to foreign residence as well as trade, to standardise, and lower, all tariffs, and to pay a large indemnity to recompense merchants for their losses and to pay the costs of the war. The treaty also stipulated that British officials should henceforth communicate on terms of equality with the Chinese

officials. The treaty was supplemented in 1843 with an agreement giving Britain Most Favoured Nation status - meaning that any rights and privileges conceded to other governments would automatically also apply to the British. The importance of this agreement became manifestly obvious in 1844, when the Chinese government granted to Americans the right of extraterritoriality - the right for Americans who committed crimes in China to be tried by American authorities in accordance with American laws. Thanks to Britain's most favoured nation status, this enormously important right was now extended to the British.

Occasional conflicts took place, but during the first part of the 1850s, the British were distracted by the Eastern Question, which culminated in the Crimean War from 1854 to 1856, when Britain and France defended Turkey against Russia (Florence Nightingale, and the Charge of the Light Brigade, and all that). Some of you will know that this defeat turned Russia towards the East, and the Russian Empire and the British Empire embarked on the Great Game for control of Central Asia. Russia continued east, and she soon would be Britain's most threatening competitor for influence in China. This, however, was in the future. For Great Britain, the end of the Crimean War in 1856 released British resources for the Second Opium War, fought for somewhat dishonourable reasons.

In October 1856, Chinese coastguards boarded a British-registered merchantman, the Arrow, in the mouth of the Canton River, arrested her 24-year-old Irish captain and his twelve Chinese sailors for piracy, and hauled down her British colours. The British Consul in Canton, the twenty-eight-year-old Harry Parkes, demanded an apology and the release of the crew, and insisted that, if charges were to be brought, he, because of extraterritoriality, was the only one with the authority to investigate them. The Commissioner for Canton released the captain and nine of the crew, but he insisted that the other three were known pirates, and he refused to apologise for insulting the British flag. The owner of the Arrow was, in fact, the leader of one of Canton's most notorious pirate gangs; he had registered her as a British ship in Hong Kong and given her a British 'captain', who had never been to sea before, simply to add an aura of respectability. The ship had thereby been able to sail close to her victims, and was one of the most profitable pirate ships in Canton harbour.

However, the hostility between the Chinese and the British in China was so deep that events soon reeled out of control. Each regarded the other as savage: the Chinese resented the arrogance and privileges of the British, whilst the British resented the fact that the Chinese refused to enforce a number of the stipulations of the Treaty of Nanking and continued to exclude British traders from several of the port cities, including Canton. When Chinese ships were known to be carrying British goods, they were frequently attacked, looted and burned, which was why the authorities in Hong Kong allowed Chinese ships to register as British. Parkes repeated his demands, the Chinese Commissioner again refused to apologise, and Parkes appealed to the Governor of Hong Kong, who sent the Royal Navy. The navy blocked the river and bombarded Canton; most of the city was set on fire. The Commissioner issued an edict calling on the people to exterminate the 'troublesome English villains', and offering a bounty for the head of any Englishman. All British factories were destroyed.

Lord Palmerston had no sympathy with the attitude of the Governor of Hong Kong, but he tried to support subordinates. Besides, it was in Britain's commercial interests to uphold the authority of the governor of Hong Kong, insist on the observance of the terms of the Treaty of Nanking, and confirm the readiness of the Royal Navy to defend the lives and property of British subjects. Britain called on France, Russia and the US to form an alliance; France joined, and the US and Russia sent diplomats to watch so that they could take part in peace negotiations and receive their share of the spoils. **PICTURE 13: CHINESE SOLDIERS** - the Chinese fighters hardly had a chance, given their primitive weapons; **PICTURE 14: CHINESE DEAD** - as this picture shows, the result was death for many of them.

PICTURE 15: THE TREATY PORTS - In January 1858, the first part of the war ended with the Treaty of Tientsin. This opened another eleven ports to trade, with the right of residence and of consuls; the governments could establish diplomatic missions in the capital, Beijing, thereby recognising the equal status of Chinese and foreign officials; foreign ships could sail up the Yangtse River, China's greatest

commercial waterway; foreigners with passports could travel anywhere in the Chinese Empire, thus allowing Christian missionaries to wander at will, and the Chinese government had to protect them as well as their converts; extraterritoriality was confirmed; and China had to pay a huge indemnity, which compelled her to borrow heavily from the West and thus gave the Western powers added economic leverage.

However, the Chinese government refused to ratify the treaty, and refused to allow the setting-up of foreign diplomatic legations in Beijing. There were various bombardments of various ports by the Royal Navy and others. Then in 1860, an Anglo-French force gathered at Hong Kong and carried out a successful landing. PICTURE 16: RUIN OF THE OLDSUMMER PALACE - On 26 September, they arrived at Peking, and captured the city in less than a fortnight. Then the forces destroyed the Old Summer Palace, an act of artistic vandalism which was justified by the British commander on the basis of the Chinese treatment of prisoners. This is a picture of the ruin. In any case, it seems to have broken the will of the Chinese government, and the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin was ratified ten days later. In addition, a special treaty with Britain gave British ships of war the right to visit 'all ports within the dominion of the Emperor of China', thus giving all of the Powers with most favoured nation status the right to use force to protect their treaty rights and commercial interests. China now appeared to be open and ripe for plunder, and although Great Britain wanted commercial access but was not particularly interested in annexing territory, other countries were not so abstemious. Over the next half-century, the Great Powers jostled for spheres of influence, with the Russian Empire, in China as in Central Asia, causing the most apprehension in Britain in the 19th century. Russia, however, was replaced by Japan in the 20th.

PICTURE 17: MAP OF RUSSIAN EXPANSION INTO CHINA - From the 1820s on, Russia resumed and accelerated her 17th and 18th century movements into territory that the Chinese considered their own sphere of influence. A treaty between China and Russia in 1727 had established a boundary between the two empires and assigned the Amur Valley and the greater part of Mongolia to China. Russia then turned to central Asia, into what became known as Russian Turkestan - which alarmed the British in India - and to the north, pushing steadily through Siberia to the Pacific and further to Alaska. Between 1825 and 1867 they withdrew from North America, not least because the colonies there had not been profitable, and at the same time accelerated their advance into East Asia. Following the British success in the First Opium War, the Russians once again pushed forward in the region of the Amur River. In May 1858, they took advantage of the Chinese preoccupation with a widespread domestic upheaval, the Taiping rebellion, and the Second Opium War to browbeat the Chinese into ceding to Russia the immense region north and west of the Amur River and to accept Russian joint sovereignty over the territory between the Amur and Ussuri rivers and the Pacific. Russia then joined with the other Great Powers in imposing the Treaty of Tientsin on China. She also imposed a separate treaty on China in 1860 which gave her sole sovereignty over the region between the Ussuri and Amur rivers, which they incorporated into their newly established Maritime Province. They also founded a city at the southern end of the Maritime Province, which they called Vladivostok, or 'Ruler over the East', a name which suggested Russia's ultimate ambitions. Russia also attempted to annex the eastern part of Turkestan, but here the Chinese fought vigorously for ten years and expelled the Russians. The reason for this response, which differed from their response towards the sea coast territories, was that it was from inner Asia that the great invasions into China had come in the past, whereas there had never been a threat from the sea. Three years later, China made Chinese Turkestan an integral part of the Chinese Empire as the province of Sinkiang, or New Dominion.

PICTURE 18: MAP OF BURMA BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA - Whilst the Russians advanced into territories claimed by China in the west and north, the British and French advanced in similar fashion in the south. Briefly, since the early 19th century, the British had been advancing from India into Burma, over which the Chinese claimed suzerainty, and whose government paid a tribute every ten years to the Chinese emperor, although it had never been under effective Chinese control. In a succession of wars with Burma, the British gradually extended their control, and by 1886 had taken over the entire country. The Chinese recognised a British protectorate over Burma, with the face-saving agreement that the Burmese would continue to send its tribute-bearing mission to Peking.

PICTURE 19: MAP OF FRENCH CONQUEST OF INDO-CHINA - The French made substantial inroads into territory in the easternmost part of southeast Asia. Most of the territories had come under the control of the emperor of Annam in the early 19th century, and like the rulers of Burma, they recognised the suzerainty of China and paid tribute. There was a succession crisis in Annam, and France became involved, backing one of the claimants to the throne. By 1867, she had gained control over Cochin China and annexed it to France. She also moved to gain control of Annam, fighting a long and costly conflict; in 1883, in fact, China sent troops to aid the Annamese soldiers and the guerrillas still fighting. But, largely due to superior sea power, France won, and in an 1885 treaty, China recognised French suzerainty over Tonkin and Annam; in exchange, France restored Formosa and the Pescadores Islands to China, and promised to respect China's frontier with Tonkin. In 1887, France united them all, including Cambodia, into French Indo-China. In 1893, she took Laos from the Siamese, and in 1900, she forced China to give her a 99-year lease to territory surrounding the Bay of Kwangchow, halfway between the frontier of Tonkin and Hong Kong.

PICTURE 20: JAPANESE EMPIRE - In the 1870s, Japan began to join the Great Powers in encroaching on territories over which China claimed suzerainty. She took over the Ryukyu Islands, an archipelago between the southernmost islands of Japan and the Chinese island of Formosa, now Taiwan. In 1876 she signed a treaty with Korea, opening her up to Japanese trade, as she had herself been forced to open up to trade with the US and other powers in 1854. In the same treaty, she recognised the independence of Korea, thereby denying Chinese suzerainty. Soon both countries sent troops into Korea, but an agreement in 1885 provided for their withdrawal. In 1894, however, rebellion broke out in Korea, and the rival factions appealed to China and Japan for aid - always a risky thing to do. Both responded to the appeals, and on 1 August 1894, the two went to war over Korea. **PICTURE 21: JAPANESE PICTURE OF THE WAR** - Most observers expected that China, with vastly superior resources, would defeat Japan, but Japan easily defeated China on both land and sea. The war came to an end with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed on 17 April 1895. China was obliged to recognise the independence of Korea, which became a Japanese protectorate, and to cede the island of Formosa, the Pescadores Islands just west of Formosa, and the strategic Liaotung Peninsula, with its important harbour of Port Arthur. She also had to give Japan significant commercial advantages, concede more treaty ports, and pay her a large indemnity. The Japanese had won a notable victory, but, unfortunately for her, the Great Powers were not to allow her to retain all of the spoils.

PICTURE 22: NORTH CHINA - Great Britain reacted calmly: the fact that more treaty ports were open to Western trade was good, and she also appreciated that Japanese control of the Liaotung Peninsula meant that there was now a buffer between British and Russian interests. Russia, however, reacted angrily, since she had had her own eye on Korea for some time. Vladivostok was ice-bound a third of the year, but Korea, further south, had many ice-free ports. Furthermore, as a high Russian official stated, both geography and power determined that Korea would be an integral part of the Russian Empire. However, the Royal Navy had prevented Russia from grabbing a Korean port. Now she was blocked. She was also upset about the Japanese take-over of the Liaotung Peninsula and the harbour of Port Arthur, which had been selected as a terminus for the Trans-Siberian Railway. She wanted to compel the Japanese to disgorge her gains, but she didn't want to risk war with Japan. Therefore, she sought diplomatic support for revision of the treaty, and Germany responded.

Germany believed that she should become a world power, and many Germans believed that this required a stake in east Asia. Indeed, given China's surprise defeat by Japan, many western imperialists, and not just the Japanese, thought it was the prelude to the collapse of the Chinese Empire, and wanted a share; her support of Russia would give Germany a claim. Germany wanted to exploit the situation to achieve a foreign policy victory. She was also keen to undermine the Franco-Russian Alliance, which had been signed in 1894: German support of Russia would, she surmised, somewhat dim the attraction. It would also force France to add her support, or risk losing the alliance.

Therefore, six days after the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed, Russia, Germany and France told Japan that its possession of the Liaotung Peninsula 'would be a constant menace to the capital of China, would at

the same time render illusory the independence of Korea, and would henceforth be a perpetual obstacle to the peace of the Far East.' Japan wiggled, but a fortnight later she agreed to retrocede the peninsula, in exchange for a larger monetary indemnity. This indemnity forced China to raise a loan, which was provided by France and Russia. Russia guaranteed the loan, which meant that if China defaulted, Russia would gain the concessions required.

This loan was the first step in what became a European scramble for concessions. Russia's principle interest was not Korea, but the concession for constructing the Manchurian link in the Trans-Siberian Railway and for control over all other railways in the province; this would allow her to project her power in the Pacific area. This was agreed in September, but China refused to agree to allowing it to run to the Liaotung Peninsula. Russia made unmistakable military threats, and was then allowed to extend the railway to the Liaotung Peninsula and thence to Port Arthur on the Yellow Sea.

Germany wanted a coaling station and naval base in east Asia, and in November 1897, she occupied the territory surrounding the Bay of Kiaochow on the Shantung Peninsula. This jutted into the Yellow Sea, and was territory on which Russia had planned to put a terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Russia was furious, but was not able to risk war with Germany: her main ally France was in the throes of a domestic crisis, as well as being in conflict with Great Britain in Africa.

In June and July 1899, Great Britain signed two treaties with China. The first gave her a 99-year lease to the Kowloon Peninsula on the mainland opposite Hong Kong, while the second gave her a lease to Wei-hai-wei, a harbour city on the northeast shore of the Shantung Peninsula opposite Port Arthur. This lease was to run as long as the Russian lease to Port Arthur. PICTURE 23: PICTURE OF WEI-HAI-WEI - This is a picture of the British fleet at Wei-hai-wei.

The Americans had viewed all of this with some anxiety. During 1898, they were involved in a war with Spain, the successful outcome of which gave them title to the Philippine Islands, and this brought them directly into East Asian affairs, although Americans had long been privately involved in China as traders and missionaries. In view of the carve-up which was taking place, John Hay, the Secretary of State, issued in September 1899 the first of the so-called 'Open Door' Notes, which called for equality of commercial opportunities in all of China, and for the Powers to guarantee China's political and territorial integrity. The British had proposed a joint appeal, since Britain did allow free trade in her own sphere of influence, the Yangtze River Valley. However, Hay decided to go it alone. The actual results were, shall we say, minimal.

PICTURE 25: THE DOWAGER EMPRESS OF CHINA - After the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese had to watch what they called the 'carving up of the Chinese melon'; the result, of course, was ferocious anti-foreign sentiment. This was shared by the imperial court, and the Dowager Empress gave aid to various secret societies. Traditionally, these societies had been formed in opposition to the imperial government, but given the hatred of foreigners of all types and nationality, she hoped that they would be constitute the vanguard in a military expulsion of foreigners. This policy reached its climax in 1900 with the Boxer Rebellion.

PICTURE 26 - A LEADER OF THE BOXERS - This is one of the leaders of the Boxers. The Boxers, or 'The Righteous and Harmonious Fists', were a violent and anti-authority religious society who practiced a magic of rituals and spells which they believed made them impervious to bullets and pain. They also believed that the expulsion of foreign devils would magically renew Chinese society and usher in a new golden age. The rebellion erupted in north China in the summer of 1900, although it was controlled elsewhere, since many of the regional rulers resisted the violence and disruption they caused. PICTURE 27: A BOXER SOLDIER - This is a picture of a Boxer soldier. One focus of these soldiers was Christian missionaries and their converts, which were scattered all over the countryside, since their passports gave them the legal right to travel all over China. PICTURE 28: MISSIONARY FAMILY - This, in fact, is a picture of one of the missionary families who were killed. PICTURE 29: THE GUNBOAT HMS KINSHA - The

British government managed to rescue some of its subjects by getting them onto this gunboat and taking them down the Yangtze River to safety. The rebellion, however, was concentrated in Beijing. On 13 June a Boxer army entered the capital, massacred Chinese Christians, pillaged and burned foreign property, and laid siege to the foreign diplomatic legations, where the majority of foreigners and Christian converts had sought refuge. PICTURE 30: DEFENCE OF THE BRITISH LEGATION - This is a painting showing the defence of the British Legation, PICTURE 31: AMERICAN MARINES DEFENDING THE AMERICAN LEGATION - and this is another painting showing American marines defending the American legation. On the 20th of June the German Minister was shot on his way to discuss the situation with Chinese officials, and on the following day the imperial government, under pressure from Boxer leaders, declared war on all foreign powers. The western response was swift and severe. An international force captured and re-occupied Beijing, and forced the imperial government to agree to the humiliating terms of the Boxer Protocol: the Powers gained the right to maintain military forces in the capital, required government officials to be punished for their role in the rebellion, suspended all arms imports, and required a huge indemnity to be paid to the Powers for the losses they had suffered.

PICTURE 32: SPHERES OF INFLUENCE AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY - This map shows the spheres of influence of the Powers at the end of the 19th century. Russia profited greatly from the Boxers, because the government used it as an excuse to send an army into Manchuria in July 1900, and rapidly came to control the whole region. Britain sought support from the other Powers, including Germany, in an attempt to halt the Russian advance in East Asia. Germany proved a weak reed, however, since she could not jeopardise her relationship with Russia, who was, after all, part of an alliance which threatened her borders. Britain then turned to the Japanese, who were, if possible, even more eager to halt the Russians. The result was the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902. PICTURE 33: PHOTOS CELEBRATING THE ALLIANCE - These photographs constituted a special publication celebrating the alliance: at the top are the Emperor and Empress of Japan; the middle left photograph is of the chief negotiator for Japan, the Marquis Ito, whilst the one on the right shows a celebratory banquet for Ito at the Mansion House; the final photograph shows the Japanese battleship Mikasa, apparently the largest war vessel afloat, entering Portsmouth Harbour. The alliance called for the independence and integrity of China and Korea, but it also recognised the special interests of Britain in China and of Japan in both China and Korea. If there was a war, the other would remain neutral, unless the partner was attacked by two or more enemies, in which case they would join together to fight. They would co-operate in time of peace, and would maintain naval strength in the 'extreme east' superior to that of any third power.

PICTURE 34: THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY - Meanwhile, the Russians rushed to complete the Trans-Siberian Railway and to consolidate their power in Manchuria. PICTURE 35: RUSSIAN SOLDIERS IN MANCHURIA IN 1904 - This is a picture of Russian soldiers in Manchuria, taken just before disaster struck. PICTURE 36: THE TWO EMPERORS IN THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR 1904-5 - This is a picture of the two emperors of Russia and Japan. Japan remained fearful of Russian activities in and future plans for East Asia, but was also fearful of Russian power. The Russians shared this perception of their overwhelming power, with documents making it abundantly clear that they looked down on the Japanese as inferiors who would be crushed like insects if they were foolish enough to challenge the Russian colossus. However, with the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the Japanese attitude towards Russia began to change; they also decided that they could not wait for Russia to build up her military and economic power in East Asia, if they hoped to secure their own interests and, indeed, the safety of their home islands.

Dispensing with a declaration of war, in February 1904 the Japanese launched an attack on Port Arthur, the most strategic naval base from which Russia might have attacked the Japanese; furthermore, the greater part of the Russian Pacific Fleet, including all the Russian battleships, was stationed there. In their initial attack, the Japanese severely damaged seven of the vessels, and by blockading the narrow entrance to the harbour, they effectively bottled up the entire Port Arthur squadron. This gave Japan naval supremacy in the Pacific, which allowed them to transport troops to the mainland and keep them reinforced and supplied. When in August the undamaged vessels attempted to break out of Port Arthur, they were intercepted by a Japanese fleet and almost totally destroyed. The Russians attempted to regain naval supremacy by sending their Baltic Fleet to the Pacific, but it was met by a Japanese fleet in the Straits of Tsushima between Japan and Korea, and was destroyed as completely as had been its predecessors. On

land the Russians fared little better, being defeated in a whole series of battles.

By this time, both Russia and Japan were staggering: revolution was spreading in Russia, and Japan was reeling from the human and monetary costs of the war. They accepted the invitation of the American President, Theodore Roosevelt, to mediate, and the Treaty of Portsmouth was drawn up with some dispatch: both belligerents were under pressure from their allies to come to an agreement, because France and Great Britain had themselves signed an agreement in 1904, settling their outstanding imperial conflicts, with the result that they had been in uncomfortable diplomatic positions during the war. Russia recognised the paramount Japanese position in Korea, which Japan would in fact annex in 1910; in addition, Russia ceded to Japan the southern half of the island of Sakhalin, and transferred to Japan its lease on the Liaotung Peninsula, including the harbour cities of Port Arthur and Dairen, and its rights to the South Manchurian Railway. Both were to withdraw their troops from Manchuria, and to restore the region to the administrative control of China. In 1912, however, whilst China was in the grip of revolution, Russia established a de facto protectorate over Outer Mongolia.

The outcome of the Russo-Japanese War signalled the end of Russian expansion in East Asia, and she turned her attention back to Europe. But this had an important result for Great Britain as well. From the beginning of her activities in China, her most threatening competitor had been Russia. This was now changed, and it was Japan who increasingly posed the greatest threat to British interests in China, helped by the fact that the outcome of the First World War also eliminated Germany as a player in the 'Far Eastern Game' (Osterhammel), although the threats from the two were to reappear in the 1930s. France retained a considerable interest in Chinese property, but her focus was Indo-China. The US increased its activities and influence, although it was more in the cultural realm - religion and education - and commercial interests than in political and military control.

Japan, however, took advantage of the war to expand her 'empire by rule'. In 1915 she issued Twenty-One Demands in an attempt to turn China into a Japanese protectorate, but was unsuccessful. But there was an increasing challenge to Britain's economic and strategic position, with mounting competition in many economic sectors. There soon developed an uneasy coexistence between the two informal empires. Japanese informal imperialism had a built-in tendency towards territorial domination, since it needed external resources and manpower to compensate for deficiencies at home, and this threatened to explode into the British-dominated treaty port system.

China after 1916 descended into political turmoil and disintegrated into semi-autonomous territories run by warlords. This meant that there was no central authority which could be negotiated with, or held responsible for, local incidents, and this put informal empire in jeopardy. The treaty powers did maintain considerable naval forces in Chinese waters: during the 1920s a minimum of 15 British, 10 Japanese, 8 American and 5 French gunboats regularly patrolled the Yangtze River, whilst there were two British Army battalions garrisoned at Hong Kong, with another at Tientsin. The rising nationalism of the Chinese also added another factor, since it had no coherent doctrine and no unified political movement; in due course the Kuomintang emerged as the most important organised movement, headed from 1925 by Chiang Kai-Shek. The British expatriates were sometimes hysterical about Chinese nationalism as the ravings of Communist-inspired mobs, and called for massive retaliation. In Shanghai, for example, they had never before been exposed to popular mobilisation, and many did not know how to cope with the disappearance of docility and deference and the techniques of economic warfare.

PICTURE 37: AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN - 'Realistic observers, however, recognized the sober and respectable face of élite nationalism and conceded the validity - before law, political judgement, and common sense - of many Chinese grievances.' (Osterhammel) Austen Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary, produced in 1926 the December Memorandum, changing British strategy from adamant opposition to Chinese nationalism to cautious sympathy and co-operation with its moderate wing. However, it was vague and offered no concessions to China; rather, it offered to negotiate the main issues. But things worsened considerably in 1927: China had four governments, and there were bloody fights between

the Communists backed by Soviet advisers
PICTURE 38: CHIANG KAI-SHEK - and the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-Shek, whose picture this is.

The British position over the following 14 years gently drifted, although not steadily, downhill. Britain attempted to retain the substance of her interests by conceding less important privileges and rights - e.g., the territory leased at Wei-hai-wei was restored to Chinese rule in October 1930. She supported the new government established at Nanking, since collaboration with the Chinese became more important than ever to safeguard her economic and commercial positions; as well, the new government emphasised development, and wished to modernise China with the aid of private British capital. This was an attractive proposition. In 1935, Sir Frederick Leith-Ross led a mission to China with the intent of coming to agreements to associate British finance with the modernisation programme, an attempt to support business by providing it with government support. Therefore, on the eve of war, Britain's cautious political retreat from the less important positions of privilege and dominance and the slow erosion of informal empire were not accompanied by the erosion of British business - quite the reverse. It was not so much the export market that thrived - not with American, Japanese and German competition - as the expatriate businesses on the spot. Indeed, the 1930s were rather good for British business in China.

PICTURE 39: SINO-JAPANESE WAR 1937 - The Japanese sweep down the Chinese coast in the second half of 1937 presaged the impending end of the British informal empire - but not quite yet. Particularly in Hong Kong and the two International Settlements at Shanghai, there were new opportunities for British business: because of their non-combatant status, they were the only economic centres on the China coast untouched by the undeclared Sino-Japanese War. When Japanese naval artillery bombarded the residential quarters of Shanghai, they carefully aimed their shells so as not to hit the International Settlement and the French Concession. After the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, there were even more opportunities for British business in the Pacific region and in Africa. But without much support from the US, it was difficult for the British government, which found it increasingly problematic to uphold a neutrality that implied sympathising with China, the victim of aggression, without angering the Japanese, the strongest power in the region. For example, from the early days of the war, Hong Kong harbored Chinese refugees and hosted a number of Chinese government agencies. Japan was incensed that the British Concession at Tientsin was sheltering Chinese resistance fighters, and it was put under blockade. Japan increasingly demanded that Britain surrender various revenues to its own banks, and Britain had little choice but to comply. In 1940, when the two seemed on the brink of war, a settlement was reached which saved Britain's face but sacrificed Chinese interests: Japan was now allowed to interfere with British policing in the Concession. The residual Western privileges no longer rested on the Unequal Treaties or on Anglo-American power on the spot, but on Japanese tolerance.

The long-awaited attack on Hong Kong came on 8 December 1941, the day following the attack on Pearl Harbor ; the colony surrendered on Christmas Day. **PICTURE 40: JAPANESE CONTROL OF SHANGHAI -** On the same day, the Japanese invaded the International Settlement at Shanghai and the British Concession at Tientsin. Both enclaves ceased to exist when the Japanese took over their administration and interned all British nationals, about 6,000 people in Shanghai alone. The picture shows Japanese control of Shanghai. It is significant, because after almost precisely a century, the informal British empire in China came to a decisive and unmistakable end. One may point out that the British retrieved Hong Kong and the New Territories after the war, but, somehow, it was just not the same. And, again after a century, China regained control of her own territory and her own destiny.

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