

British Imperial Defence Strategy and Russia: The Role of the Royal Navy in the Far East, 1878–1898

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The Global Setting

The contest between the largely sea-based British Empire and the land power of Imperial Russia, the largest state on earth, an asymmetric geostrategic rivalry which extended from the Baltic right round to the North Pacific, was a central feature of the international system for most of the century preceding 1914. Although the global pre-eminence of the Royal Navy placed limits on the access to the high seas by the Imperial Russian Navy (IRN), and ruled out any direct sea-borne challenge by Russia to the homeland security of Great Britain, the chief problem the Admiralty faced was the limited purchase of sea power in dealing with the continental power of the Russian Empire.¹ As the First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord Walter Kerr complained in 1904: ‘Russia’s geographical position is such that she is very unassailable [sic] to a sea power with a small army’.² The conclusion reached within the Admiralty was that Russia could be attacked by sea directly and to some purpose primarily through the Baltic or the Black Sea. Naval operations against the northern and far eastern flanks of the Russian Empire were, by contrast, seen to have only a diversionary value within a global strategy of containment. In response, St Petersburg calculated that it could best keep Britain at bay by means of strong coastal defence forces and fortifications in the Baltic and the Black Sea, alliances with other powers, or by posing its own diversionary threats to the British Empire, most notably in India.³ This paper briefly reviews the leverage exercised by the Royal Navy in the Far East as an instrument of Britain’s imperial defence policy in the Anglo-Russian crises of 1878 and 1885, before examining more closely the limits of British sea power in the confrontation with Russia in the Far Eastern crisis of 1897–98.

The Crimean War and After

Anglo-Russian rivalry generated the one Great-Power war Britain fought between 1815 and 1914, misleadingly titled the ‘Crimean War’ of 1853–56.⁴ For Russia, the war at sea brought little but humiliation as superior British and French fleets assumed the offensive in the Baltic and, especially, the Black Sea. In particular, British and French sea power in the Black Sea proved capable of sustaining expeditionary forces in the Crimea with greater logistic ease than the Russian Empire could supply and reinforce its army there.⁵ Meanwhile, thanks to the technological inferiority of its sailing fleets, large Russian forces were tied down to protect Russia’s Baltic shores and the approaches to St Petersburg from the threat posed by the Royal Navy’s screw-driven ships-of-the-line.⁶ Indeed, the threat of a fresh offensive in the Baltic by the Royal Navy in 1856 helped induce the Russian leadership to accept the allied peace terms.⁷ The pivotal role of superior Anglo-French sea power in the Black Sea

and the Baltic in securing the allied victory was therefore fully recognised in St Petersburg.⁸ Apart from allied naval operations in the Baltic and Black Sea, however, Britain and France mounted naval assaults on the northern and eastern flanks of the Russian Empire. In contrast to the allied operations in the Black Sea and the Baltic, these small-scale raids in the White Sea and the North Pacific exerted little influence on the course of the war.⁹

Defeat in the Crimean War signified the failure of Russia's policies in Europe and designs on Turkey and encouraged St Petersburg to switch its attention to Central Asia. The architect of this 'Asia-first' policy was the able Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Gorchakov. For the next two decades Russia's steady advance southwards towards the borders of India provoked mounting alarm in London.¹⁰ Rejecting the passivity of her defensive naval strategy during the war, after 1856 Russia embraced the offensive concept of the *guerre de course* and oceanic cruising squadrons were despatched to the Mediterranean and Pacific to establish forward coaling bases for commerce raiding operations against British shipping. Although the British government failed to block Russia's use of Sardinian coaling facilities at the Bay of Villafranca in the Mediterranean between 1858–60, the sharp response of Britain and Japan in 1861 to the arrival of a Russian squadron at Tsushima Island between Korea and Japan so alarmed the Russian Foreign Ministry that it was withdrawn.¹¹ Russia subsequently focused on the purchase and construction of ironclad shallow-draught monitors and other coast defence vessels to protect her vulnerable Baltic and Black Sea coasts against naval bombardments and amphibious assaults and for a period Russia was the sole exponent of a naval policy that combined coast defence and commerce warfare.¹² Her concerns were not misplaced since the mobilisation by Britain of coast assault fleets in the Anglo-Russian crises of 1878 and 1885 were the only occasions between 1856 and 1914 when Britain prepared for such operations against a European power.¹³ On both occasions Britain sought to use the global leverage of its sea power to check the advance of Russian armies in the Near East and Central Asia. Indeed, Niall Ferguson has suggested that: 'If there was a war which imperialism should have caused it was the war between Britain and Russia which failed to break out in the 1870s and 1880s'.¹⁴ Why, then, did the Anglo-Russian crises of 1878 and 1885 not result in open conflict and what leverage was exercised in both crises by British sea power in the Far East?

The 1878 Crisis

The outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877 saw the advance of Russian armies in Caucasia and the Balkans, and by January 1878 a Russian army stood outside Constantinople. To signal her determination to preserve the Ottoman Empire and check Russian ambitions in the Near East, Britain despatched 7,000 Indian troops to Malta, called up the reserves, and mobilized a powerful coastal assault fleet for operations in the Baltic. In addition, the vulnerability of the extended new Pacific coast of Russia's Maritime Province, acquired from China only in 1860, was not overlooked and the Royal Navy's China Squadron was instructed to prepare to use Chinese and Japanese ports as forward bases for naval bombardment of points along

Russia's new far eastern salient. It was envisaged that the focus for these operations would be Vladivostok, since 1872 the isolated new base of the Pacific Fleet of the IRN.¹⁵ Meanwhile, having been ordered through the Dardanelles only to be recalled to Besika Bay on two humiliating occasions, on 13 February 1878 the twelve ironclads of Vice-Admiral Hornby's Mediterranean Squadron were finally despatched through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmora to threaten the bombardment of Constantinople should Turkey open the city to the Russian army – a risky tactic but one which has nonetheless been characterized as a classic manifestation of naval presence.¹⁶

To divert British attention, Russia despatched 20,000 troops to the Afghan and Pamir borders and sent a military mission to Kabul under General Stotielov to sign a secret agreement with the Amir of Afghanistan.¹⁷ However, concerned that Turkish reinforcement of its defences might rule out an easy seizure of Constantinople, and aware of the absence of naval flank support in the Black Sea, the Russian commander held back an attack on the city.¹⁸ The subsequent hostile reaction of the powers to the terms of the Treaty of San Stefano convinced St Petersburg that, without any effective ally in Europe, by forcing the issue Russia might find herself at war with a hostile coalition. Fearful that a general war could be ignited by the continuing confrontation between the British fleet and the Russian army before the walls of Constantinople, a financially and militarily exhausted Russia agreed to the joint withdrawal of its forces and Admiral Hornby's ships from the Straits. The diplomatic settlement of the crisis set the stage for the revision of the treaty and the humiliation of Russia at the Congress of Berlin in the summer of 1878.¹⁹ In response to Russia's diversionary activities in Afghanistan, Britain launched its second invasion of the country which forced Russia to abandon her short-lived Afghan alliance.²⁰

The 1885 Crisis

Russia's confrontation with Britain in 1878, coming so soon after her defeat by a British-led coalition in the Crimean War, underlined for the Russian leadership the enduring enmity of Britain and the need for a powerful Black Sea battlefleet to block the passage of British ships through the Straits and to act as a mobile flank of the army. In 1882 Russia embarked upon a long-term capital-ship building programme, focusing on the development of her Black Sea fleet.²¹ Blocked in the Balkans, over the next decade Russia vigorously prosecuted its 'forward' policy in Central Asia. However, the difficulties of mounting significant military pressure on Britain's imperial position in India were recognised in St Petersburg. As William Fuller has emphasised: 'no responsible tsarist statesman from the 1860s until the Russian Revolution ever believed it realistically possible for Russia to launch a war of conquest from Central Asia against the British possessions in India'.²² The limits to Russia's ability to mount a full-scale challenge to Britain's position in India were equally recognised in London. A Russian advance into India was seen by Salisbury to be a 'chimera' and in Curzon's view was a project 'too preposterous to be entertained', since the object of Russian policy was 'not Calcutta, but Constantinople,

not the Ganges but the Golden Horn . . . To keep England quiet in Europe by keeping her employed in Asia that, briefly put, is the sum and substance of Russian policy’²³

In pursuit of its ‘forward’ policy in Central Asia, having seized the strategically important oasis of Merv in February 1884, close to the border of the British protectorate of Afghanistan, Russian forces clashed directly with Afghan troops at Penjdeh on 30 March 1885. In response, Gladstone was forced reluctantly to secure a vote of credit for £11 million (the largest since the Crimean War), in anticipation of military action to defend India. Although preparations were made in India to move 25,000 troops to Quetta, and the expedition sent to rescue Gordon from the Sudan was withdrawn, economic considerations suggested that rather than despatching troops to the Afghan frontier, Britain should send an expeditionary force through to the Straits to secure Batoum and advance through the Caucasus towards the Caspian Sea, thereby disrupting Russia’s communications with her armed forces in Turkestan. On this occasion, Britain found her intention to send naval forces into the Black Sea frustrated by international opposition spearheaded by Germany. Britain consequently mobilized her battlefleet and once more signalled her intention to send a coastal assault fleet to the Baltic.²⁴

With the Black Sea unavailable, Vladivostok assumed a new importance. Connected to European Russia only by inadequate overland links, and largely dependent on sea-borne supplies which could be interdicted by blockade, although Vladivostok was not a far eastern Sebastopol, it was believed that the policy which had exhausted Russia in the Crimea could now be applied at Vladivostok. For those politicians and defence analysts concerned with problems of imperial defence, such as Sir Charles Dilke or Sir George Clarke, Vladivostok appeared to offer the ‘only vulnerable point of the Russian Empire in the event of a war with Great Britain’.²⁵ As a precautionary measure, in April 1885 the China Squadron was instructed to occupy Port Hamilton (Komundo), off the south coast of Korea, approximately half way between Hong Kong and Vladivostok, and a submarine telegraph cable was laid from Port Hamilton to Woosung at a cost of £85,000.²⁶ In the event of war, Port Hamilton would serve as a forward base for Royal Navy operations against Vladivostok 850 miles away. Contrary to British claims that its occupation of Port Hamilton was part of a defensive strategy to contain Russian pressure on Korea and anticipate a Russian seizure of a Korean port, studies of the episode suggest that at this juncture the Russian designs on Korea were not fully known until after the occupation.²⁷ In view of the weakness of her naval forces in the region, Russia closed Vladivostok to foreign shipping and laid mines in preparation for a British assault.²⁸ In earlier evidence to the Royal Commission on Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad, the Admiralty had indicated that Port Hamilton could usefully serve as a forward base for Royal Navy operations against Russia. The Commission agreed that British ownership was desirable and helpfully suggested that force might be used if the Koreans objected!²⁹ However, after the political decision to secure the port had been taken, both the Admiralty and Vice-Admiral Dowell, Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C), of the China Station, and his successor, Vice-Admiral Hamilton, concluded that the occupation of the islet in time of peace would be an unnecessary expense,

while in time of war it would be a strategic liability, requiring the diversion of ships from the China Squadron to defend the base against the possibility of sea-borne attack.³⁰ This change of mind reflected the difficulties in naval thinking at this time of balancing the desirability of securing distant coaling stations, critical for the effective global deployment of steam-powered naval forces, with the concern that the proliferation of such stations might lead to a dissipation of naval power rather than its necessary concentration.³¹

In retrospect, it seems clear that an Anglo-Russian war was unlikely. Once it became apparent that a British invasion of the Black Sea would be blocked by international opposition, Russia lost interest in being able to threaten Britain in Afghanistan. As Nikolai Karlovich Giers, Prince Gorchakov's successor as Russian Foreign Minister, observed, British interest in the Straits was mainly a response to fears for the security of the Indian Empire and 'a satisfactory arrangement in Asia would diminish the keenness of our antagonism in the Near East and in consequence the danger of a violation of the Straits'. In September 1885 the Russo-Afghan border was settled by arbitration.³² Concerned that Russia might take her place in Port Hamilton or occupy Port Lazarev on the east coast of Korea, it was not until February 1887 that Britain finally withdrew from Port Hamilton.³³

Although the offensive global deployment of the Royal Navy formed a part of Britain's grand strategy towards Russia in both the 1878 and the 1885 crises, in neither case was the role of sea power as an autonomous element decisive. For the Russian leadership, European diplomatic pressures and the limitations of Russia's military strength were the most compelling pressures which brought about a peaceful resolution of the crises.³⁴ However, in both crises Britain's mobilisation of its naval power against the newly acquired and exposed far eastern salient of Imperial Russia was part of a carefully considered strategy of 'horizontal escalation'. An explicit echo of this strategy, which likewise incorporated a challenge to the defence assets of the Soviet Union in the Far East, re-emerged in the Cold War as part of the Reagan administration's Maritime Strategy. Fortunately, in the nuclear age this challenge was never put to the test.³⁵

The Russian Challenge in the Far East

Following the 1885 crisis, the focus of Russia's Asian strategy shifted from Central Asia to the Far East, symbolized by the decision in 1891 to commence construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. As a consequence, the role of the British fleet in the Far East underwent a significant shift. Where previously British sea power in the Far East had been employed primarily to counter Russian 'forward' initiatives in Europe or Central Asia, it now fell largely to the Royal Navy to contain directly the growth of Russia's presence and influence in the Far East. Thanks to its 1882 capital-ship building programme, by 1893 Russia had ousted Italy as the third naval power in the world after Britain and France. From this point until its humiliation in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, the IRN occupied a central position in British naval planning.³⁶ Moreover, by early 1894 the Franco-Russian Alliance was established,

and although Whitehall had no certain knowledge of its secret provisions, it was clear that the Royal Navy's Two-Power Standard in capital ships would now have to be measured against the formidable challenge of the Dual Alliance, rather than against a somewhat hypothetical Franco-Italian combination.³⁷ Indeed, Paul Kennedy has suggested that in strategic terms the naval arms race between Britain on the one hand and France and Russia on the other up to 1904-5 was a more serious matter for British naval mastery than the later Anglo-German naval arms race before 1914. By comparison with the sixty per cent lead which the Royal Navy later enjoyed over Germany's 'risk-fleet', not only did the Royal Navy lack clear superiority of numbers over Franco-Russian naval forces, but it was more difficult geographically for Britain to deal with their combined forces in the Mediterranean and the Far East than to contain the German High Sea Fleet in the North Sea.³⁸

The formidable challenge posed by a Franco-Russian naval combination in the Mediterranean had been foreseen by the Admiralty as early as 1888. By March 1892 it was concluded that: 'unless we are acting in concert with France, the road to Constantinople . . . lies across the ruins of a French fleet', leading some to advocate a policy of 'scuttle' from the Mediterranean.³⁹ In retrospect, it seems that such an evaluation may have overestimated the Franco-Russian challenge in this sea.⁴⁰ Whilst a small Russian Mediterranean Squadron was re-established at the limited French anchorage of Villefranche, and was permitted to use Toulon for refitment and repair, it consisted largely of ships *en route* to the Far East with a few units temporarily detached from the Baltic Fleet.⁴¹ Moreover, all French proposals for an exchange of liaison officers between the French and Russian fleets were rejected by the Russian Navy Ministry, while the French Naval Command remained adamantly opposed to any idea of a union of the French and Russian fleets in the Mediterranean. After Fashoda, understandably, the French had no intention of becoming embroiled in a war with Britain even with Russian support.⁴² The subsequent non-binding Franco-Russian naval conventions concluded in 1901 (and 1912) therefore did little more than simply outline a division of labour between the two fleets in the event of war.⁴³

In the Far East, the challenge of a Franco-Russian naval combination initially seemed less serious. In a private letter to Lord Spencer, the First Lord of the Admiralty, on 29 October 1893 Vice-Admiral Sir Edmund Fremantle, C-in-C of the China Station, wrote that the naval forces under his command would be:

more than a match for Russia alone. But in view of the 'entente cordiale' between France and Russia we ought to be able to match both powers or our China trade would be ruined for a time, and were the French and Russian squadrons to combine and work together they might even inflict a decided reverse upon us . . . I think it right to put the situation before you and warn that we are not as strong as we ought to be.⁴⁴

Aware that Russia was sending out from the Mediterranean to the Far East the 8,520-ton armoured cruiser *Admiral Nakhimov*, carrying eight 8-inch guns and ten 6-inch

guns, and the 3,506-ton protected cruiser *Rynda*, carrying ten 6-inch guns, in March 1894 a new second-class station battleship, the 10,500-ton *Centurion*, carrying four 10-inch guns and ten 4.7-inch quick-firing guns, was despatched from Spithead to the China Station and the 5,600-ton armoured cruiser *Undaunted*, carrying two 9.2-inch guns and ten 4.7-inch quick-firing guns, was despatched from the Mediterranean.⁴⁵ These powerful reinforcements ensured that the Two-Power Standard would be comfortably maintained in the Far East.

The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in August 1894 opened up a decade when the Far East became the focal point for not just European but, thanks to the emergence of the United States as a Pacific power, global rivalry.⁴⁶ Whilst the China Squadron provided protection for British merchant shipping and British communities in the treaty ports during the war, the despatch of reinforcements to all the European fleets in Chinese waters did not initially strain Anglo-Russian naval relations in the Far East.⁴⁷ Indeed, caught between the Triple Alliance and the Dual Alliance, the Liberal administration of Lord Rosebery sought to reach an accommodation with Russia. However, when Britain stood aside from the Russian-led Triple Intervention at the end of the war, what remained of an Anglo-Russian understanding collapsed.⁴⁸ Having frustrated Japan's efforts to establish its position in the Liaotung Peninsula and Korea, the credit Russia gained in Peking and Seoul was not cashed in the form of a demand for an ice-free naval base on the Chinese or Korean coast. Instead, St Petersburg sought to develop Russia's economic and railway penetration of Manchuria, aware that the development of the Trans-Siberian Railway and its extension through Manchuria in the form of the Chinese Eastern Railway would enable Russia to exert influence throughout Northeast Asia without much reference to British sea power. As a consequence, on his return to office in June 1895 Lord Salisbury confronted the dilemma of how the partition of the crumbling Chinese empire might be averted and the expanding continental influence of Russia in Northeast Asia might be contained in a part of the world where Britain's land forces were weak. The Russian Empire maintained four divisions in Central Asia and two divisions in the Irkutsk and Amur Military Districts, and with the progressive completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway looked forward to the prospect of speedily reinforcing the Far East from her 48 infantry and 22 cavalry divisions stationed in Europe. Her ally France maintained two divisions in Indochina. By contrast, Britain maintained only one battalion in Hong Kong and one in Singapore, the nearest available forces of the British Empire being those nine British divisions in India which could only be supplied to the Far East by sea.⁴⁹

As well as the challenge of Russia's overland advance in the Far East in the months following the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War, the activities of Russian survey parties along the Chinese and Korean coasts indicated that the IRN was actively pursuing its search for an ice-free naval outlet in the Far East. Unlike Vladivostok, such a port would enjoy access to the Pacific unconstrained by the choke-points of the La Perouse (Soya), Tsugaru, or Broughton (Korea), Straits which provided Vladivostok with its access to the Pacific.⁵⁰ On 28 January 1896 Francis Bertie, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State in charge of the African and Asiatic Departments

of the Foreign Office, reviewed the strategic implications for Britain of possible Russian (and German), seizures of naval ports in the Far East. With grim realism he concluded:

The Russians must have a winter harbour. It would be better that they should have one separated from their territory so that we can cut off their communications with such a harbour rather than they should have Talienwan with the Liaotung Peninsula or a Korean port with Korea . . . the Admiralty ought to make up their minds . . . what counterpoise if any we ought to seek in the event of Russia establishing herself permanently at Kiaochow Bay or at some other Port in the north of China, or at some Korean port.⁵¹

Anxious to prevent any such annexation of a Chinese or Korean port, but lacking any means of bringing pressure directly to bear on Russia in this region, in a major policy speech on 3 February 1896, Arthur Balfour, Lord Salisbury's nephew and First Lord of the Treasury, invited Russia to focus instead on securing a *commercial* ice-free outlet to the Pacific.⁵² Within Whitehall there were few illusions that Russia would respond along the lines suggested by Balfour. As Captain Beaumont, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), gloomily observed, Russia's enlarged Pacific Fleet: 'naturally deserved to have some secure and ice-free place of assembly during the winter months, elsewhere than in Japanese or even Korean ports'.⁵³

The 1897–98 Far Eastern Crisis

Thanks to the activities of the abrasive new Russian Consul General in Seoul, Aleksei Nikolaevich Shpeier, in early November 1897 the English Chief Commissioner of the Korean Customs Service, John McLeavy Brown, was ousted from his post, confirming Salisbury's worries as to Russia's designs on Korea

Of course she [Russia] intends to swallow Korea if she can: & we cannot stop her by 'representations' at St Petersburg. Much stiffer instruments will be required'.⁵⁴

When news reached London on 4 December 1897 that nine ships of the Russian Pacific Fleet had anchored off the Korean port of Chemulpo to back up Russia's demands for a peacetime coaling station at Deer Island (Chollyong-do), at the entrance to Fusan (Pusan), harbour, both Lord Salisbury and Admiral Sir Frederick Richards, the First Naval Lord, were clear that the moment for the application of a 'stiffer instrument' had arrived.⁵⁵ On 8 December the Admiralty was instructed to telegraph Admiral Sir Alexander Buller, Fremantle's successor as C-in-C of the China Station, to depart from Hong Kong as soon as possible and assemble a squadron off Chemulpo approximately equal in strength to the Russian squadron.⁵⁶ Having steamed north to rendezvous at Port Hamilton with other ships from the station before proceeding to Chemulpo, on 26 December Buller was startled to learn of the arrival of four Russian warships at the Chinese naval base of Port Arthur (Lushun), and two at the nearby Chinese commercial port of Talienwan (Dairen). On his own initiative he immediately despatched the armoured cruiser *Immortalite* and the cruiser *Iphigenia* to Port Arthur to observe the activities of the Russian squadron.

⁵⁷ The arrival of Buller's squadron of eight warships off Chemulpo on 29 December generated a stir in the Korean capital since the assembled British and Russian fleets represented the largest-ever concentration of naval forces off the Korean port. ⁵⁸ Although Buller subsequently departed from Chemulpo on 13 January 1898, the bulk of the British squadron remained at Chemulpo until early February. ⁵⁹ Bolstered by the presence of the powerful British fleet loitering off the Korean coast, the Korean authorities in Seoul secured the partial reinstatement of McLeavy Brown while the negotiations with Russia over Deer Island came to nothing. ⁶⁰ Finally, in early March sixty-odd Russian financial and military advisers were dismissed by the Korean authorities and in early April Shpeier was transferred to Brazil. ⁶¹ The despatch of a powerful Royal Navy squadron to Chemulpo proved to be an effective instrument of British coercive diplomacy, demonstrating Britain's resolution to protect its interests, thereby stiffening the resolve of the Korean government in Seoul to resist Russia's demands. ⁶²

By contrast, British sea power failed to block the acquisition by Russia of the ice-free Chinese ports of Port Arthur and Talienwan. Russia's quest for ice-free naval and commercial outlets on the Pacific coast, linked by rail with Russia's heartland, was a long-standing feature of the geopolitical thinking of Imperial Russia. ⁶³ Nonetheless, the decision to send Russian warships to these two ports in the Liaotung Peninsula in December 1897 was not the fruit of any carefully considered plan. Rather, the decision by the Tsar and the new Russian Foreign Minister, Count Mikhail Nikolaevich Muraviev, represented an impulsive and ill-considered response to the despatch of German warships to the Chinese port of Kiaochow, taken in flat disregard of the reservations of the Russian Navy Ministry and the Russian Finance Minister, Count Serge Iul'evich Witte. ⁶⁴ Initially uncertain as to what the presence of Russian ships at Port Arthur and Talienwan might signify, in a speech on 10 January 1898 Balfour reiterated the theme he had expounded two years earlier, indicating that Britain had no objections to Russia securing an ice-free commercial outlet to the Pacific but adding the warning *proviso* that Britain should not be excluded from going there too. ⁶⁵ Desperate to establish some sort of fresh understanding with Russia to preserve the *status quo* in the Far East, in response to Russian complaints concerning the presence of the two British cruisers at Port Arthur, Salisbury immediately apologized to the Russian Ambassador in London, indicating that 'they had been sent thither by Admiral Buller without any orders from home . . . and that in the ordinary course they would soon move to some other anchorage'. ⁶⁶ Quite apart from the offence this apology caused to the Admiralty (Buller had been within his rights under the Treaty of Tientsin to exercise such a prerogative), a triumphalist Russian *communiqué* to the press, divulging these developments, generated much anti-Russian sentiment in Britain and a storm of public criticism of what was perceived to be Salisbury's pusillanimous response. ⁶⁷ In particular, an ill-judged speech by Sir Micheal Hicks Beach, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in Wales on 17 January 1898, in which he stated that Britain would maintain her trading rights in China 'even at the cost of war if necessary' precipitated an 'excited' reaction from the Russian Ambassador in London. ⁶⁸ In response, the Russian Foreign Minister warned the British Ambassador in St Petersburg that the presence of the British ships

at Port Arthur was looked upon in Russia 'as so unfriendly as to set afloat rumours of war with Great Britain'.⁶⁹

In this fevered atmosphere, it was recognised in Whitehall that if Russia was to be denied the two Chinese ports on the Liaotung Peninsula, then general war with Russia, and possibly France, might be the outcome. An estimate of British and foreign fleets on the China Station was accordingly prepared by the Naval Intelligence Division (NID), for the First Lord of the Admiralty, George Goschen, and circulated to the Cabinet in early February 1898. It indicated that although the China Station was at this point narrowly outnumbered by Franco–Russian naval forces in the region, the reinforcements of two battleships and two large cruisers already arriving on the station would enable the China Squadron to give a good account of itself in the event of war. It was, however, recognised that the German and Japanese fleets in Chinese waters would now have to be left out of account.⁷⁰ In the event of war, an asymmetric response by Russia could be expected. As Harcourt confided to Balfour on 10 March 1898:

The idiots who are clamouring for war with Russia imagine that it will be waged by sea whereas anybody who knows anything about it is perfectly aware that the Russians in two months would place 100,000 men – and if necessary 500,000 men – at Herat and invite the valiant Roberts to come and meet them there.⁷¹

On receipt of the news on 24 March of Russia's ultimatum to the Chinese government to cede a 25-year lease of Port Arthur and Talienwan, Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Seymour, the successor to Admiral Buller as C-in-C of the China Station who had newly arrived at Hong Kong, was asked to report immediately on the precise disposition of the Russian and French squadrons as well as his own squadron, and to indicate how soon he could collect a force at the northern Chinese port of Chefoo stronger than the Russian forces in the Gulf of Pechihli.⁷² On 25 March Seymour reported that the bulk of the formidable Russian Pacific Fleet was concentrated in or near the Gulf of Pechihli and that the two Russian battleships which had only recently arrived in Chinese waters, the 10,400-ton *Sissoi Veliki*, and the 9,480-ton *Navarin*, had just left Hong Kong for the north. In total, the Russian fleet immediately available for action in or near the Gulf of Pechihli would therefore comprise two battleships, four armoured cruisers, one second-class protected cruiser, a coastal defence ship and seven small vessels, making a total of fifteen ships in all. In contrast, the entirety of the French fleet, with one exception, was located in southern waters close to Hainan, suggesting the likelihood of a French initiative to secure a naval station on the South China coast. Seymour revealed that at this juncture the forces of the Royal Navy's China Station were divided. A cruising squadron of six ships under the command of Rear-Admiral Fitzgerald, comprising two armoured cruisers and four protected cruisers, was in northern waters and had just left Chefoo for Chemulpo. Of the remainder, some twelve ships, including his flag-ship, the battleship *Centurion*, the armoured cruiser *Immortalite*, and the first-class protected

cruiser *Edgar*, were at Hong Kong. The newly arrived second-class battleship, the 10,500-ton *Barfleur*, had left Hong Kong that day for Chefoo, while another important reinforcement, the 14,560-ton first-class battleship *Victorious*, was on her way from Singapore to Hong Kong. Seymour therefore estimated that it would take him ten days to concentrate a force of some twenty ships in or near the Gulf of Pechihli which would be superior to the Russian squadron.⁷³ Around thirty-five British and Russian warships, including five battleships and seven armoured cruisers, would then be assembled in and around the Gulf of Pechihli, the largest-ever concentration of modern heavy warships in Chinese waters.

At the critical Cabinet meeting of 25 March 1898, it was recognised that since general war with Russia to block her occupation of Port Arthur could not be justified, Britain had little option but to secure a Chinese port by way of compensation. The decision was therefore taken to seek a lease of the nearby Chinese naval station of Weihaiwei for 25 years or until the Russians left Port Arthur.⁷⁴ By securing Weihaiwei it was hoped that a semblance of the balance of power in the Gulf of Pechihli might be preserved. Seymour was accordingly informed that the purpose of the concentration of Royal Navy ships in the north was not to turn the Russians out of Port Arthur but simply to back up Britain's demand for the lease of Weihaiwei.⁷⁵

Since the shortcomings of Weihaiwei were well known, only after the political decision had been taken by the Cabinet to secure this port was the Admiralty formally consulted as to the suitability of Weihaiwei as an anchorage.⁷⁶ The Chief Hydrographer at the Admiralty simply confirmed what were known to be the serious deficiencies of the harbour of Weihaiwei – it was too shallow, it was exposed to northerly winds and it had a limited capacity.⁷⁷ It therefore seemed likely that Weihaiwei would not be suitable to be developed as a fortified 'forward' naval station on the North China coast. Although Salisbury's relations with his Liberal Unionist First Lord of the Admiralty were sometimes 'decidedly stiff', Goschen nonetheless accepted the political case for the acquisition of the port. Having rejected the option of seeking to block by force the Russian acquisition of Port Arthur, Goschen recognised that Britain's acquisition of Weihaiwei was necessary as a symbolic strategic counterpoise to the Russian action. As he later confided to his friend Alfred Milner, Governor of Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa:

Never was there a more difficult problem than what to do. There was the possibility of war, but it was thought Port Arthur was too narrow a shelf on which to rest so tremendous a decision.⁷⁸

Having saved face politically by securing Weihaiwei, Salisbury was subsequently relieved to secure a limited agreement with Russia in March 1899 based on a mutual recognition of the spheres of interest now being carved in China. The agreement marked the start of a fresh chapter in British policy in the far East, based on a frank recognition of the spheres of interest now being carved in China. As such, it laid the basis for a new international equilibrium in the region.⁷⁹ Although Anglo-Russian

relations in the Far East remained tense, and the build up of the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur pushed Britain down the road to the signing of the Anglo–Japanese Alliances of 1902 and 1905, no further crises tested Anglo–Russian relations in the region before 1914.⁸⁰

Unless otherwise specified, all unpublished sources are located in the Public Record Office, Kew, London.

¹ Barbara Jelavich, ‘British Means of Offense against Russia in the Nineteenth Century’, *Russian History*, no. 1 (1974), 120. For a wide-ranging exploration of the utility and limitations of sea power see Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York, 1992).

² Keith Neilson, ‘“A Dangerous Game of American Poker”: The Russo–Japanese War and British Policy’, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1989), 68.

³ David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia, 1828–1914: A Study in British and Russian Imperialism* (London, 1977), 92–95.

⁴ Andrew D. Lambert, *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy, 1853–56* (Manchester, 1990),.

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