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BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

The Other Great Game in Asia

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Summary

At this time of growing concerns about tensions in East Asia and great-power competition, *TNSR* brought together four experts to review “The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia” by Sheila Miyoshi Jager. Jaehan Park, Paul Behringer, Sangpil Jin, and Seo-Hyun Park consider some of the important

1. Introduction: Bringing Korea Back into the “Great Game” for Asia

Jaehan Park

In the 19th century, Britain and Russia competed for lands, markets, and influence across the vast rim of Eurasia. In the second half of the century, the Trans-Caspia — what is today Central Asia — became the focal point as this region could potentially serve as an access route to the crown jewel of the British Empire, India. This rivalry between the leading land and sea powers was dubbed “the Great Game,” first by Arthur Conolly, a British officer in the service of the East India Company.¹ While their rivalry in Central Asia subsided with the settlement of boundaries in the Pamir Mountains in 1895, Russia’s decision to build a railway cutting across Siberia threatened Britain’s commercial interests in East Asia.² Sir Halford Mackinder illustrated Britain’s palpable fear of what the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway might portend for Eurasia — dominated by Russia commandeering vast resources in East Asia — in his famous “pivot” lecture at the Royal Geographical Society.³

¹ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire In Central Asia* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1992); Evgenii I. U. Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856-1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia* (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013).

² David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia, 1828-1914: A Study in British and Russian Imperialism* (London: Methuen, 1977), especially 155-6.

³ Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775498>.

Meanwhile, Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894 - 1895 effectively "decentered" the erstwhile regional order in East Asia that had been centered around China's political and cultural primacy.⁴ Now, the stage was set for the competition between Russia and Japan — the dominant continental and maritime powers in Asia — with other powers standing behind. Their rivalry would culminate in what some historians have called "World War Zero" and, ultimately, Japan's apotheosis as the dominant power in the region.⁵

Prof. Sheila Miyoshi Jager's *The Other Great Game* narrates this epic story. The book appropriately begins with Korea's struggle against the encroachment of the Western powers in the mid-century, taking place against the backdrop of its own domestic problems and, more importantly, Russia's historic drive to East Asia crowned with the establishment of an outpost in 1860 — what became known as Vladivostok. Even though Korea became a *de facto* protectorate of Japan after the Russo-Japanese War, Jager extends her coverage to 1910, when the Hermit Kingdom was finally annexed by the Empire of the Rising Sun. This spelled an end to a historic era of East Asia — tellingly, the Qing Empire met its end one year later.

The *Texas National Security Review* has brought together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds to review this important volume: Paul Behringer, an historian with recent work on late Imperial Russia; Sangpil Jin, an historian of modern Korea; Seo-Hyun Park, a political scientist with expertise on the international relations of historical

⁴ Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵ John W. Steinberg, Bruce W. Menning, David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, David Wolff, and Shinji Yokote, eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005).

East Asia; and this reviewer, a student of great-power politics and grand strategy interested in the late 19th century. It is appropriate to bring together this diverse group given the plurality of participants in and the multifaceted nature of the “Other Great Game.” Incidentally, this year marks the 130th anniversary of the First Sino-Japanese War and, by extension, the 120th anniversary of the Russo-Japanese War (1904 - 1905) — making this roundtable even more meaningful.

While all of the reviewers in this roundtable find considerable merits in Jager’s work, each contributor has slightly different takes and emphases. Below I will briefly summarize their reviews, provide a synthesis, and conclude with a few observations.

Behringer commends the book specifically for incorporating military history and for restoring Korea to its due place in the *fin-de-siècle* imperial rivalry in East Asia. He also finds it appropriate, as Jager does, to place Russia as the major protagonist in that story. Yet, Behringer identifies several shortcomings from the vantage point of a Russia specialist. For instance, he finds wanting Jager’s descriptions of the genesis of Russia’s domestic political structure (Jager’s “allusions to the ‘Mongol/Tatar Yoke’”), the nature of its foreign policy (“inborn Russian expansionism”), and the delineation of its East Asian territories (Amur, Maritime, and Transbaikalian provinces). Also, turning to the “lessons” of history, Behringer does not see parallels between Czar Nicholas II’s and President Vladimir Putin’s objectives in East Asia, as he argues that the former sought imperial glory, while the latter pursues material benefit. Yet, Behringer’s overall assessment of the book is positive. Importantly, Behringer notes how Russia’s remarkable diplomatic resilience in the face of defeat on the battlefield, as demonstrated during the Russo-Japanese War, might tragically repeat itself in the Ukraine conflict — a sobering lesson of the “Other Great Game.”

Jin focuses on the interplay between Korea's internal division and broader regional politics during the period between the 1870s and the Russo-Japanese War. Himself an author of several works on Korea's foreign relations during that period,⁶ Jin praises Jager's comprehensive coverage, ability to draw connections between domestic and international circumstances, and use of multiple sources. Quoting Mark Twain's aphorism that "history never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme," he concludes his essay by observing that Jager's history has much to offer given South Korea's internal division today and, more importantly, the return of great-power rivalry in East Asia akin to that of the late 19th century.

Park sees the book as a major update of previous works on Korea's opening in the late 19th century. In her assessment, Jager's book is particularly strong in its diverse sourcing, narration of various nested conflicts, and interweaving of Korea's internal politics with regional situation. As a political scientist, however, Park finds that Jager could have gone even further in analyzing how decisions made at several turning points — such as Japan's assassination of Queen Min in 1895 or Russia's oscillation between hardline and conciliatory policies — led to different outcomes. In the parlance of social science, Park would like more insight into how contingencies at "critical junctures" could have created

⁶ Sangpil Jin, "The Port Hamilton (Geomundo) Incident (1885–1887): Retracing Another Great Game in Eurasia," *The International History Review* 41, no. 2 (2019): 280–303, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07075332.2017.1409791>; Sangpil Jin, "Revisiting Russo-Japanese Hegemonic Rivalry in East Asia before 1904: Korean Railroads," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31, no. 2 (2020): 209–230, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2020.1760032>.

different causal pathways.⁷ Still, Park sees this book as a major contribution, “[helping] us shine a light on” key issues surrounding the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Asia.

Three Key Contributions

I agree with most of what is said by the other contributors to this roundtable. Specifically, three things stood out. First, the book’s coverage is comprehensive, spanning five decades (1860 - 1910). For instance, Key-Hiuk Kim’s multi-archival work on the opening of Korea stops at 1885;⁸ George Lensen’s encyclopedic two-volume study only covers the period between 1884 and 1899;⁹ Seung-Kwon Synn’s thorough yet (unfortunately) overlooked work ends before the Russo-Japanese War; and John Albert White’s and Ian Nish’s classics deal primarily with the period between 1900 and 1905.¹⁰ Other works with extended coverage usually examine bilateral relations or one country’s regional policy.¹¹

⁷ Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 341-369, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060162>.

⁸ Key-Hiuk Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860-1882*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁹ George Alexander Lensen, *Balance of Intrigue: International Rivalry in Korea & Manchuria, 1884-1899* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1982).

¹⁰ Seung Kwon Synn, *The Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korea, 1876-1904* (Seoul: Yuk Phub Sa, 1981); John Albert White, *The Diplomacy of the Russo-Japanese War* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1964); Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Longman, 1985).

¹¹ Many of them are cited in Jager’s work, but, for instance, Andrew Malozemoff, *Russian Far Eastern Policy, 1881-1904: With Special Emphasis on the Causes of the Russo-Japanese War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958); Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

The Other Great Game covers the struggle over Korea among different parties throughout the entire period from the mid-19th century when Russia started advancing eastward to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 in a *single* volume.¹²

Second, as Jin and Park have pointed out, this book derives from multiple sources across time and space. It makes use of various primary sources — multi-lingual government publications, memoirs, and journalistic accounts — as well as historical monographs published in different languages in multiple time periods. Despite Behringer's dissatisfaction with some of Jager's descriptions of Russia, the result on balance is an even-handed treatment of a period that can be a historiographical, and potentially political, minefield.

Finally, the author masterfully conjoins Korea's "domestic anxiety and external concerns" (내우외환, 內憂外患), thereby "re-centering" Korea in the international relations of East Asia. This aspect is particularly pronounced, as all three reviewers agree, when Jager offers detailed descriptions of Korea's domestic situation, especially interactions among courtiers, rebels, and other grass-root actors, during the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars. This book will thus pair well with more strategically and operationally minded accounts, such as S. C. M. Paine's work on the Sino-Japanese War or R. M.

¹² For those familiar with the Korean language, the book updates Kang Sōng-hak's interpretative work. Kang Sōng-hak, *Siberia Hwaengdan Yeolcha-wa Samurai: Ru-II Junjaeng-ui Waegyo-wa Gunsa Jeollyak* [Trans-Siberian Railway and Samurai: Diplomacy and Military Strategy of the Russo-Japanese War] (Seoul: Korea University Press, 1999).

Connaughton's book on the Russo-Japanese War, which examine these conflicts from the great powers' vantage points.¹³

Three Critiques

Any book this ambitious inevitably comes with certain shortcomings. While my own scholarly preferences color my view, I see three relative weaknesses. First, Jager's treatment of U.S. policy in East Asia is somewhat incomplete, which is surprising for a book with a whole chapter on its involvement in East Asia (Chapter 12: "Maritime Power"). While she focuses mostly on President Theodore Roosevelt's attitude towards Korea and Manchuria, U.S. foreign policy during this period cannot be understood without reference to its strategic situation: the overriding importance of the Caribbean over East Asia.¹⁴ When the Russo-Japanese War broke out, therefore, Roosevelt declared

¹³ S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); R. M. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: A Military History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-5* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁴ On American involvements in these regions, especially from military and naval standpoints, see, for instance, William Reynolds Braisted, *The United States Navy In the Pacific, 1897-1909* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958); Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973); Brian McAllister Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Henry J. Hendrix, *Theodore Roosevelt's Naval Diplomacy: The U.S. Navy and the Birth of the American Century* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2009). For general works on American imperialism in these regions, David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States In the Caribbean, 1898-1917* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Walter LaFeber, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations. Volume 2, The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); A. G.

neutrality and kept America's naval presence in East Asia at a minimum. In East Asia, American priorities were, in the order of importance, "the safety of the Philippines, equal commercial opportunity, and the political integrity of China."¹⁵ This is important given how the Philippines — a legacy of the Spanish-American War which broke out over the fate of Cuba — was linked to the fate of Korea in the Taft-Katsura Agreement.¹⁶ However, the somewhat inadequate discussion is likely an editorial decision, as a single-volume book cannot do everything. Jager's essay elsewhere demonstrates that she is quite familiar with the historiography of U.S. foreign policy during this period.¹⁷

Second, Jager's book privileges *narrating* Korea's opening at the expense of *analyzing* several critical questions concerning international statecraft. For instance, Jager notes that the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, marked the beginning of Japan's oscillation between continental and maritime expansion.¹⁸ However,

Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

¹⁵ J. A. S. Grenville and George Berkeley Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy: Studies in Foreign Policy, 1873-1917*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 315.

¹⁶ For a good treatment of this issue, Gregory Moore, *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy: Theodore Roosevelt and China, 1901-1909* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 165-74. On the Spanish-American War, see David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981).

¹⁷ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Competing Empires in Asia," in Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, eds., *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. Vol. III, 1900-1945, (Cambridge University Press, 2022), especially 266-7.

¹⁸ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), 437. Although she acknowledges an earlier incident before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in the footnote (footnote 57, p. 564).

there are earlier examples. During the Sino-Japanese War, the army wanted to march to Beijing, whereas the navy wanted to annex Taiwan. Five years later, Japan's failed occupation of Xiamen, a Chinese port city, redirected its attention back to continental Asia.¹⁹

Likewise, Jager describes that Russia needed Korea by 1900 due to naval requirements.²⁰ Yet, Russian policymakers had been split over priorities in East Asia, including the value of Korea — there had been interest in naval stations on the Korean coast well before 1900.²¹ These issues are critical in addressing specific historical questions (such as when did the Russo-Japanese War become inevitable?) as well as policy questions (such as how do states determine their geopolitical orientation?). Obviously, it is a tall order to weave together key decisions made at Beijing, London, St. Petersburg, Seoul, and Washington while chronicling domestic upheavals, immigration, and intellectual milieu in various capitals, all of which the book does. But the social scientist in me wants more of her analysis on key *politico-strategic* decisions. Perhaps a more focused analysis anchored on *states* could have mitigated this issue, as two prominent historians have argued in the pages of this journal.²²

¹⁹ On Taiwan, Edward I-te Chen, "Japan's Decision to Annex Taiwan: A Study of Itō-Mutsu Diplomacy, 1894–95," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (1977): 61–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2053328>. On the Xiamen (Amoy) Incident, Seiji Shirane, *Imperial Gateway: Colonial Taiwan and Japan's Expansion in South China and Southeast Asia, 1895–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 29–31.

²⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 266–7.

²¹ For instance, Lensen, *Balance of Intrigue*; Nicholas Papastratigakis, *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power: Military Strategy and the Build-Up to the Russo-Japanese War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), especially 104–5.

²² Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2, (2020): 38–55,

<https://tnsr.org/2020/04/recentering-the-united-states-in-the-historiography-of-american-foreign-relations/>.

A final point concerns the definition of the “Great Game,” especially its geographical scope, which Jager does not clearly define. The Great Game 1.0 was, at least from Britain’s standpoint, about India.²³ Hence, it took place in the entirety of Central Asia sitting between the Russian Empire and the Indian subcontinent, from Chinese Turkestan via Afghanistan all the way to Persia. In East Asia, the great prize was China — not Korea. As British Prime Minister Lord Rosebery observed at the time, “above and beyond [the Near Eastern question] there is an infinitely larger Eastern question ... with possibilities of a disastrous kind ... an Armageddon between the European Powers struggling for the ruins of the Chinese Empire.”²⁴ Thus, the Great Game 2.0 spanned the peripheries of the Middle Kingdom, from Manchuria to the East and South China Seas by way of the Korean Peninsula. And, unlike the Great Game 1.0, the “Other Great Game” led to actual military showdowns — not once but twice — due in part to the geographic proximity of protagonists.

This point is important given the author’s expressed concern for the present — Jager’s “Epilogue” is full of insightful observations on contemporary Asia — as well as the readership of this journal: the necessity for deep understanding of the past to deal with challenges of our time.²⁵ It is true that Korea was at the center of historical struggle between continental and maritime powers in the region. But it was only *a* part of this

²³ In reality, Russia did not and could not have invaded India due to logistical constraints. Alexander Morrison, “Camels and Colonial Armies: The Logistics of Warfare in Central Asia in the Early 19th Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57, no. 4 (2014): 443-485.

²⁴ Rosebery to Cromer (secret), April 22, 1895, quoted in T.G. Otte, *The China Question: Great Power Rivalry and British Isolation, 1894-1905* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.

²⁵ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, xvii.

struggle. Korea sat at *one* access route to the continent. Thus, it was connected with Manchuria in the context of Russo-Japanese rivalry. However, East Asia's original fault line, the one along the axis of Sino-Japanese rivalry, runs from the Korean Peninsula to Formosa (present-day Taiwan).²⁶ Seen as such, it is not surprising, for example, that scenarios for a crisis over Taiwan are discussed in connection with the Korean Peninsula as the competition intensifies between the United States and China — the dominant maritime and continental powers in the region.²⁷ A broader conception of the “Other Great Game” would have sensitized us to these types of connections between the Korean Peninsula and other regions.

Conclusion

These minor quibbles notwithstanding, Jager has produced a terrific book. It is vividly written, comprehensive in coverage, and extremely well researched. A layperson will be able to get a feel for the “rhymes” of East Asia's history, and specialists will always find something new and useful. *The Other Great Game* will remain one of the definitive works on the history of East Asian international relations for some time to come, demanding attention from scholars and practitioners of the “Great Game” in the 21st century.

²⁶ I make this broader point in Jaehan Park, “Geopolitics in East Asia: Korea and Taiwan as Flash Points and ‘Chiplands,’” in *Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics*, ed. Zak Cope (Palgrave, MacMillan, forthcoming).

²⁷ For instance, Sungmin Cho, “The Crisis in East Asia: Korea or Taiwan,” *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/the-crisis-in-east-asia-korea-or-taiwan/>.

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2. The Tragedy of Imperial Politics

Paul J. Welch Behringer

The first and most important point to make about Sheila Miyoshi Jager's *The Other Great Game* is that it surpasses any book in English on the imperial rivalry over Korea.²⁸ It will be a foundational text for graduate students who write on the international politics of Northeast Asia during this period. Jager combines breadth with depth in a way that few one-volume histories dare to do.

This is an ambitious work that mostly accomplishes what Jager sets out to do. At least two aspects are unqualified successes: incorporating military history into the story and centering Korea in the narrative of imperial struggle. *The Other Great Game* makes the convincing case that great-power competition over Korea — and the peninsula's modern-day division — predates the Cold War. This review will consider the strengths and weaknesses of the book and conclude with an examination of what lessons *The Other Great Game* holds for readers who want to understand the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Starting with Russia

Jager makes two moves that set this regional history apart. First, she gives Russia its due as an East Asian power, and second, she centers the story on Korea. Overall, Jager's insistence on explaining Russia's policy toward China, Korea, and Japan is a testament to

²⁸ The classic treatment is Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

her persistence, acumen, and reach as a historian. Despite not being a scholar of Russia, she has sought out and engaged with much of the English- and even some of the Russian-language literature on the subject.²⁹ *The Other Great Game* gets the overall course of Russian foreign policy correct and most of the details right.

Jager begins the book with a narrative of Russian expansion, which culminated in the Qing Empire ceding the territory commonly known as the Russian Far East today. In 1860, the Russians also founded the city of Vladivostok — “Ruler of the East” — on the southern tip of this newly acquired territory. At least in part, the Russians were motivated by fear that their British rivals in the original Great Game might obtain territory or concessions along what was then China’s northeastern coast. Taking advantage of the Qing Empire’s weakness amid the Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864 and the Second Opium War from 1856 to 1860, St. Petersburg convinced Beijing to give up the territory that would become known as the Russian Far East. As Jager notes, these acquisitions brought the Russian Empire to the border with Korea for the first time. She claims that this was inherently threatening to China and Japan and set the stage for the “convulsions” of *The Other Great Game*. Introducing the story this way allows Jager to link the original Great Game between Russia and Britain with *The Other Great Game*’s central motif.

²⁹ Some other works that examine Russia’s role in East Asia include John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); S. C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Stephen Kotkin and David Wolff, eds., *Rediscovering Russia in Asia: Siberia and the Russian Far East* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); Kimitaka Matsuzato, *Russia and Its Northeast Asian Neighbors: China, Japan, and Korea, 1858–1945* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); and Chris Miller, *We Shall Be Masters: Russian Pivots to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

In an inauspicious start, however, Jager begins with allusions to the “Mongol/Tatar Yoke,” the old canard that everything bad about the Russian government and culture — most notably its authoritarianism — can be traced back to the fact that the Mongols conquered parts of modern-day Russia and Ukraine in the 13th century and that Muscovy (the Russian Empire’s predecessor state) paid tribute to the Mongols’ successor state, the Golden Horde, until the late 15th century. All told, therefore, Muscovy spent a considerable period paying tribute, but there is almost no evidence that paying a tax led to the passing down of a “semi-oriental despotism,” as Jager implies.³⁰ On the contrary, as Marshall Poe writes, “Of the myriad foolish things that have been said about the Russians, the most foolish is perhaps that they are somehow predisposed to authoritarian government.” References to inborn Russian expansionism are also false.³¹ Almost all historians who have examined the issue closely have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the Mongol influence on Russian history.³² Rather than beginning with

³⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 1. Although she cites many (and more) of the following sources, Jager merely mentions that the issue of Mongol influence on Russia “continues to be one of the most hotly debated subjects among historians,” so it is strange that she chose to go with such an outdated interpretation. Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 487.

³¹ Marshall Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2.

³² Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Donald G. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Edward L. Keenan, “Muscovite Political Folkways,” *The Russian Review* 45, no. 2 (April 1986): 115–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/130423>; Alfred J. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” *Russian History* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 1989): 353–76, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/187633189x00176>; Alfred J. Rieber, “Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay,” in *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Hugh Ragsdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 315–59. These historians see the way in which Muscovy emerged from the Mongol tribute system as the key to understanding imperial Russian culture and ruling practices, rather than the extended influence of the Mongols *per se*. In his widely read book *Russia under the Old Regime*, Richard Pipes popularized his “patrimonial state” paradigm in which he argued that 150 years of

the Mongols in Kyiv, Jager's narrative would have been better served by discussing how Siberian trappers and fur traders drove Russia's eastward exploration and expansion.³³

Thankfully, Jager's treatment of Russia gets better for the rest of the volume. But there are mistakes here and there that might irk specialists and be confusing to readers unfamiliar with Russian history and geography. One problem that resurfaces throughout the book relates to how she refers to specific regions of Russia. She never defines the regions that Russia gained in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking, which would become known as Amur Province (*Amurskaia oblast'*) and the Maritime Province (*Primorskaia oblast'*), respectively. For nearly the next quarter-century, a governor-generalship based in Irkutsk ruled these two provinces — along with the territory between Amur Province and Lake Baikal, known as Transbaikal Province (*Zabaikal'skaia oblast'*) — and the Russian government did little to develop the region. In 1884, in response to events in China and Korea, St. Petersburg decided to accelerate the region's development by establishing a new administrator with combined oversight of Transbaikal, Amur, and the Maritime provinces. This new administrative unit would be known as the Priamur Governor-Generalship.³⁴

Mongol domination “had a very debilitating effect on the political climate of Russia” and intensified Muscovy/Russia's “peculiar type of political authority.” Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime: Second Edition*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 57.

³³ Alexander Etkind, “Barrels of Fur: Natural Resources and the State in the Long History of Russia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 164–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2011.03.007>.

³⁴ Kimitaka Matsuzato, “The Creation of the Priamur Governor-Generalship in 1884 and the Reconfiguration of Asiatic Russia,” *The Russian Review* 71, no. 3 (2012): 365–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9434.2012.00659.x>.

As Kimitaka Matsuzato has pointed out, by 1884 the competition between Qing China and Russia was once again heating up, in no small part because the Russians believed that Britain was behind the Qing's more assertive foreign policy. That same year, the Qing formally incorporated Xinjiang into the empire, while the Russians signed the Russo-Korean Treaty on Friendship and Trade.³⁵ The latter move followed similar agreements between Korea and Japan in 1876 and the United States in 1882, marking the end of Korea's seclusion and reliance on the Qing.³⁶

Again, Jager is correct on the broad strokes, but the failure to define Russian territory crops up later, as she refers to "the Priamur (North Manchurian) forces"³⁷ and "the Russian Far East (Primorsky),"³⁸ even though the terms refer to quite different entities from the definitions in parentheses.³⁹ Later, she rightly refers to Pavel F. Unterberger as the "Primursky governor-general," but then several pages later incorrectly calls him the "Primorskaya Oblast governor general."⁴⁰

³⁵ Matsuzato, "The Creation of the Priamur Governor-Generalship," 370.

³⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 52 and 65.

³⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 261.

³⁸ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 266.

³⁹ In the case of "Primorsky," the term is anachronistic, since "Primorsky" is only used for the modern name for the Maritime Territory, Primorskii Krai, a mistake Jager repeats later as well. Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 570. More generally, the region can be referred to as "Primor'e."

⁴⁰ Unterberger was military governor of *Primorskaia oblast'* earlier in his career, but during the period under discussion by Jager he was the Priamur governor-general.

Korea and Imperial Entanglements

The book is strongest when discussing the convergence of external and internal forces on the Korean peninsula. It is well known that the Japanese launched their wars against China and Russia in order to secure their dominance in Korea. Yet even readers familiar with that fact might have only a passing knowledge of how the breakdown of Korean society and politics — accelerated by the imperial powers’ insistence on “opening” the country — enmeshed the Russian, Chinese, and Japanese empires. Once entangled in the internal politics of Korea, each great power found it difficult to extricate itself. Japanese officials found themselves facing a series of internal Korean rebellions and eventually felt compelled to embark on further imperial expansion to secure their new borders and to control the large numbers of Korean diaspora living in Manchuria and the Soviet Union.

The tensions between China and Japan had roots going back to 1876, when Japan successfully concluded the first Treaty of Friendship and Amity with Korea. This was Korea’s first step away from its traditional subordination to China on foreign policy matters. Having avoided outright colonization or major concessions at the hands of Western great powers, Japan appealed to certain segments of the Korean elite, who saw the Japanese — rather than the beleaguered Chinese — as a model of building internal strength by adopting Western-style modernization. In contrast, in the 1880s, the Chinese had helped quell two rebellions — one anti-Japanese and one fomented by Japanese officials, which nevertheless led to agreements with Tokyo that further weakened the Qing’s grip on Korean politics.⁴¹

⁴¹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 51–80.

The precipitating event for the Sino-Japanese War was the Tonghak Rebellion, “a peasant revolt” that “threatened to topple the inept Seoul government.”⁴² China and Japan both agreed to send in troops to protect the government from the rebels, but the Japanese used the intervention as a pretext to launch a war on the Qing Empire.⁴³ Despite the Chinese forces’ numerical superiority, the Japanese rattled off a string of victories using modern military tactics and more effective weaponry.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the Sino-Japanese War turned the Tonghak Rebellion into a full-blown civil war in Korea, resulting in the deaths of up to 50,000 Koreans, maybe more, and leading to endemic instability on the peninsula.⁴⁵ After the war, Japan received Formosa (Taiwan) as a colonial prize and replaced China as the most influential foreign power in Korea.⁴⁶

Then Russia made its move. Enlisting France and Germany, in what became known as the Triple Intervention, the Russians pressured the Japanese to give up hard-won territory on the Liaodong Peninsula.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, one of the first things Japanese officials did in their newfound position of influence was to engage in a coup attempt and assassination plot against Korean Queen Min, who arguably wielded more power behind the scenes than her husband, King (later Emperor) Kojong. After her assassination, Kojong took refuge in the Russian Embassy, setting the stage for the confrontation between Russia and Japan.⁴⁸

⁴² Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 126–27.

⁴³ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 125–34.

⁴⁴ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 135–52.

⁴⁵ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 185.

⁴⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 198.

⁴⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 199–202.

⁴⁸ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 206–11.

Military History and Massacres

Like her previous book, *Brothers at War*, on the Korean War and its legacy,⁴⁹ Jager's prose and presentation in *The Other Great Game* sparkles when she is narrating military campaigns, from the strategic importance of commanders' choices to the vagaries of combat. The book also contains an abundance of clear maps that enhance the reader's ability to follow the action. In short, Jager accomplishes the fourfold goal she lays out for herself in the preface: (1) to cover all the major conflicts of the era in one volume; (2) to reckon "with the enormous consequences of these wars and their impact on societies"; (3) to give readers a sense of how combat was "experienced on the ground"; and (4) to explore how "soldiers and civilians alike struggled to make sense of these conflicts."⁵⁰

Time and again, the book's military history brings out the contingency of the region's changing political dynamics. Readers might be startled to learn of the Japanese-perpetrated massacre of Chinese soldiers and civilians in Port Arthur, which occurred after a spectacularly lopsided victory over the fortified city on the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula. The killing spree presaged the atrocities perpetrated by Japan during the Russian Civil War and World War II, but in the immediate aftermath, Japanese officials realized that such actions could undermine the new empire's supposed civilizing mission — notwithstanding the fact that Western empires committed such atrocities against local populations with regularity. As a result, the Japanese government embarked on a cover-up and successfully limited Western reporting on the massacre as well as Chinese

⁴⁹ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea*, First edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).

⁵⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, xxv-xxvi.

eyewitness accounts. The Western imperial powers shrugged and invited Japan into the “civilized” club.⁵¹

However, as a reaction to the outcry over the Port Arthur massacre, the Japanese military maintained strict discipline during the ensuing Boxer Rebellion, when Japan provided the bulk of the manpower and suffered by far the most casualties of any other intervening power. Whereas the international press and foreign officials praised Japan for the behavior of its troops during the operation, the Germans and the Russians were singled out for their barbarous actions.⁵² In 1900, the Russian military used the threat of the Boxers to engage in an all-out invasion of Northern Manchuria, which included what amounted to the brutal ethnic cleansing of the major Amur River border city of Blagoveshchensk, in which thousands of Chinese residents were killed, many of them forced to drown in the Amur.⁵³ The Russians then refused to end their occupation of Northern Manchuria and continued to expand their influence in Korea, which led the Japanese to launch a surprise attack on the Russian naval squadron at Port Arthur, thus kicking off the Russo-Japanese War.

In that war, Jager makes clear that the reason for the Russian army’s failures at most of the major battles — Port Arthur, the Yalu River, Liaoyang, and Mukden — were not due to the superiority of the individual Japanese soldier but were the result of poor leadership

⁵¹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 152–64.

⁵² Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 247–52.

⁵³ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 252–62. The Russian military also killed as many as 200,000 Chinese during its punitive expedition into Manchuria. See Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 278–80 and George Alexander Lensen, *The Russo-Chinese War* (Tallahassee: Diplomatic Press, 1967), 89–103.

and intelligence on the Russian side.⁵⁴ Had Russian commanders held their ground, trusted in the numerical superiority of their forces, and realized that technological advances like the machine gun and barbed wire favored defensive operations, Japan might have lost the war. In most major battles, the Japanese suffered as many or more casualties, yet the Russians ceded the strategic initiative by retreating. In the end, despite Japan's string of stunning victories, Tokyo had to sue for peace to stem the bloodletting. Time favored the Russian Empire, which could draw on a population three times larger than its Japanese counterpart. At the same time, Russian support for — and later abandonment of — anti-Japanese guerillas both inside and outside of Korea's borders helped convince Japan of the necessity of formal annexation five years after the end of the war.⁵⁵ The imperial political machinations, advent of new weaponry, and the scale of the battles and casualties — all of which seem to portend the combat conditions of World War I — have led some scholars to call the Russo-Japanese War “World War Zero,” a formulation that Jager also adopts.⁵⁶

The war was not quite over. After the massive Battle of Mukden ended in yet another tactical victory for Japan, Russia put down a revolution in St. Petersburg and waited for one last roll of the dice to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The tsar had dispatched the Baltic Fleet on an epic journey halfway across the globe to destroy the Japanese navy and regain control of the sea, which would cut off Japan's ability to supply and reinforce its troops in Korea and Manchuria. Despite the fact that Russia had lost every single engagement thus far, a victory by the Baltic Fleet would have completely swung the

⁵⁴ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 323–30, 354–74, 385–94.

⁵⁵ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 377–78.

⁵⁶ John W. Steinberg et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 1 (Boston: Brill, 2005); David Wolff et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 2 (Boston: Brill, 2005); Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 309.

momentum of the conflict, and Japan could have lost nearly all its leverage at the peace negotiations. Instead, the Japanese navy won at Tsushima the most decisive victory in history, before or since, between two battleship fleets.⁵⁷ Uncharacteristically, Jager provides none of the details, mentioning the battle once before moving quickly to the peace negotiations.⁵⁸

Securing the Peace at Korea's Expense

The resulting Portsmouth Peace Conference, mediated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, ended in another diplomatic disappointment for the Japanese public, even though the final terms of the treaty were almost identical to the bottom-line instructions Tokyo had issued to its negotiators. Afterward, Japanese officials insisted on securing complete control over Korea as well as the Kwantung Leased Territory on the Liaodong Peninsula, which Russia had seized for itself after forcing Japan to give it up in the Triple Intervention in 1895. Roosevelt, who would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts at Portsmouth, turned a deaf ear to the plea of none other than future South Korean President Syngman Rhee, whom the Korean emperor had dispatched to ask the Americans to block a Japanese takeover. Roosevelt had already come to an agreement with the Japanese in the summer of 1905, the Taft-Katsura agreement, to trade Japanese control over Korea for a promise to leave the newly acquired Philippines alone. The

⁵⁷ For an excellent summary of the battle along with analysis of its long-term impact, see Rotem Kowner, *Tsushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁵⁸ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 402.

president also fully supported the idea that the Koreans needed civilizing and the Japanese were best positioned to do it.⁵⁹

Jager explains that Roosevelt’s policy aimed “to establish a new Japan-centric regional order based on the shared principles of the Open Door.” The Open Door refers to the diplomatic notes issued in 1898 and 1900 by U.S. Secretary of State John Hay, which proclaimed that no one should maintain exclusive trading rights or seek territorial concessions in China. Yet whether or not Roosevelt himself cared about the Open Door — and some historians have argued that he did not⁶⁰ — what Roosevelt sought at Portsmouth was not a “Japan-centric regional order” but a balance of power. Although he cheered Japan’s victories during the war, he also worried about the complete destruction of Russia’s position in Asia. Therefore, he encouraged the Japanese to take what they could get and thus leave Russia “face to face with Japan so that each may have a moderate action on the other.”⁶¹ Instead, much to Roosevelt’s disbelief, Russia and Japan buried the hatchet and eventually became allies.⁶²

⁵⁹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 412–14. Jager mentions the ideological reasoning behind Roosevelt’s decision but not the issue of the Philippines. See Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power*, reprint ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 157.

⁶⁰ Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 206.

⁶¹ Roosevelt to Henry Cabot Lodge, June 16, 1905. Elting Elmore Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1230–1231.

⁶² Peter Berton, *From Enemies to Allies: Russo-Japanese Relations, 1905–1917* (London: Routledge, 2012). In 1906, Roosevelt wrote that he was sure Russia would “try another throw with Japan for supremacy” in Northeast Asia. Roosevelt to Edward Grey, December 18, 1906. Morison, *Letters*, 5:528.

Meanwhile, the Japanese compelled Korean Emperor Kojong to sign an agreement turning Korea into a protectorate.⁶³ Later, the Japanese would force the emperor to abdicate, replacing him with his malleable son, who would eventually trade Korean annexation for guarantees that Tokyo would continue to take care of his family.⁶⁴ Jager's account of these events is chilling and heartrending without ever becoming maudlin. Koreans began to stream across the border into Russia, where they supported an armed Korean independence movement and, eventually, insurgency operations against Japanese troops during the intervention in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1922.⁶⁵

Russia, Ukraine, and *The Other Great Game*

In her conclusion, Jager briefly traces the political developments between Korea's annexation through the end of World War II, with some insights on the present-day political situation of each participant in the Other Great Game. Of Moscow's alliance with — one might even say reliance on — Beijing, Jager only concludes with a rhetorical question: “Is it any wonder . . . that today's Russia looks east to Asia as Vladimir Putin seeks to recapture the glories of his country's imperial past?” She concludes with a version of the quotation from Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be masters.” Yet as Chris Miller underscores in his recent book on Russian “pivots” to Asia, Russia's designs in Asia have usually ended in failure and disillusionment.⁶⁶ What Putin seeks in Asia now is not imperial glory, but to bind Russia to China, the burgeoning and sympathetic great power across its border.

⁶³ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 416–21.

⁶⁴ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 442–44, 466–69.

⁶⁵ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 421–22, 448–55, 475.

⁶⁶ Miller, *We Shall Be Masters*. Here I use Miller's more accessible translation than the one Jager uses. Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 475. For a translation that tracks more closely to Miller's version, see F. M.

The lesson of *The Other Great Game*, Jager explains, illustrated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is "the return of revanchism and good old-fashioned Great Power politics."⁶⁷

What we should be fearing, according to Jager, is not a return to a Cold War-style bipolar competition between superpowers, but a multipower world akin to the imperial scramble of the turn of the 20th century. This is a perfectly valid takeaway from *The Other Great Game*, although it might surprise readers to find that Jager dismisses the Ukraine-as-Korean War comparison.⁶⁸

Yet the book also provides the opportunity for a more focused comparison between today's Russo-Ukrainian war and Russia's performance during the Russo-Japanese War. Some of the parallels are striking. Once again, we have seen Russian forces sustaining catastrophic casualties and ceding the battlefield against a supposedly lesser opponent.⁶⁹ As in 1904 and 1905, Russia's losses do not seem to have had an effect on Moscow's ability

Dostoevsky [sic], *The Diary of a Writer*, Boris Brasol, trans. (New York: George Braziller, 1919), 1048, <https://archive.org/details/the-diary-of-a-writer/The-Diary-Of-A-Writer/page/1048/mode/2up?q=masters>.

⁶⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 480. For a similar argument, made right after the Cold War, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5-56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981>. However, John Mearsheimer would disagree with Putin's actions as being "imperial." See Isaac Chotiner, interview with John Mearsheimer, *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/john-mearsheimer-on-putins-ambitions-after-nine-months-of-war>.

⁶⁸ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 480.

⁶⁹ *The Economist*, "How Many Russian Soldiers Have Died in Ukraine?" February 24, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2024/02/24/how-many-russian-soldiers-have-died-in-ukraine>.

to pour more troops and weapons into the conflict when needed.⁷⁰ Rather, Putin can play the long game, waiting for Ukrainian losses to become unsustainable and for Western allies to stop the flow of aid to Kyiv, thereby pressuring Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to sue for peace.⁷¹

There are many differences between the two conflicts, of course. Unlike the Russo-Japanese War, Russia is the aggressor in Ukraine. Crucially, there is no burgeoning revolution brewing inside Russia, notwithstanding the brief mutiny by Wagner mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and the recent popular turnout for the funeral of opposition activist Alexey Navalny. Also, there is no Battle of Tsushima to be won, unless, perhaps, Ukraine can sink the Black Sea fleet and retake Crimea in one fell swoop. Regardless, if Russia and Ukraine eventually come to the bargaining table, the Ukrainians are the ones who, like Japan in 1905, because of their smaller population and reliance on foreign aid, will have to leave with less than their victories would seem to have earned. These are the sobering and tragic lessons of *The Other Great Game*.

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⁷⁰ Alistair MacDonald and Kate Vtorygina, “Russia Is Pumping Out Weapons—But Can It Keep It Up?” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-is-pumping-out-weaponsbut-can-it-keep-it-up-ba30bbo4>.

⁷¹ Humeyra Pamuk and Patricia Zengerle, “As War with Ukraine Enters Third Year, US Aid to Ukraine Hangs in the Balance,” *Reuters*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/war-with-russia-enters-third-year-us-aid-ukraine-hangs-balance-2024-02-22/>.

this review do not necessarily represent those of the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine Inc., or of DPAA. His book on the U.S. and Japanese intervention in the Russian Civil War is under contract with Oxford University Press.



3. The Great Game and the Korean Question: A Dawn of the New Order

Sangpil Jin

Today, the Korean Peninsula sits within a region in transition, as world politics shift toward multipolar competition. This is not an entirely new phenomenon, and the region's history provides useful insights into how major powers' interests shape the peninsula. As in the past, divisions within South Korea's domestic politics threaten to undermine its ability to ensure its interests within a changing geopolitical environment.

The Korean Peninsula has a long history of attracting the attention of great powers. In the aftermath of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, Lt. Gen. Ivan Blaramberg, foreseeing his country's central role in East Asia in the decades to come, remarked, "Russia's future does not lie in Europe: It must look to the East."⁷² Sheila Miyoshi Jager's richly rewarding book, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia*, provides a panoramic portrait of a convoluted process that marked Korea's troubled relations with neighboring powers — a by-product of intrigues of several major powers that sought to exert influence on Korean domestic and foreign policies.

More importantly, Jager spells out close connections between regional geopolitics and domestic issues facing the Korean state, expounding on individual actors from various nationalities and classes who furnish multiple vantage points on contemporary events.

⁷² David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 229.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Jager’s work lies in her ability to tap multilingual primary sources, including much overlooked documents from Russia, which she skillfully weaves with scholarly works from Asia, Europe, and North America. Closely reading these important references exposes readers to highly instructive and accessible accounts of major-power intrigues surrounding the Korean Peninsula and its vicinity, most notably Manchuria. *The Other Great Game* takes readers on a long, intricate, and tragic journey — especially for Korea — of intrigues and setbacks that overshadowed East Asia, culminating in a new order.

Clash of Civilizations: Korea and the New Normal

The period from the late 1870s into the late 1880s offered Korea an opportunity for increased independence in its foreign policy, but a combination of internal political disputes and great-power interests — especially from China and Japan — squandered Korea’s chance at increased independence.

On Feb. 27, 1876, Chosŏn Korea and Meiji Japan signed the Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity, also known as the Kanghwa Treaty, which conferred on Korea an “independent” status under the principles of the Westphalian world order. The Korean court did not wish to sever its traditional tributary relations with Qing China with this treaty, but, for Meiji Japan, the Kanghwa Treaty seemed to confirm Korea as an “independent nation following new Western international norms and laws.”⁷³

⁷³ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), 33.

Four years after Korea's treaty with Japan, the Korean government got hold of a treatise that would play a crucial role in refashioning its foreign policy: *A Strategy for Korea*. Penned by a Japan-based Chinese diplomat, Huang Zunxian, it advocated close ties between China and Korea ("as close as lips and teeth"), friendship between Japan and Korea, and an alliance between Korea and the United States to ward off threats from Russia.⁷⁴ Huang's assessment of Korea's geopolitical conundrum also touched on its geographical position. As one Chinese diplomat mused, "Korea's strategic position in Asia guarantees to trigger conflict. Furthermore, a threatened Korea will inevitably create a crisis in Central and East Asia."⁷⁵ As Jager details in subsequent sections, Korea would not always faithfully follow Huang's recommendations. However, as she rightly notes, the Korean monarch Kojong and his coteries now understood that, henceforth, their country needed a "flexible" and "long-term approach" to managing relationships with Western powers and should abandon its hitherto isolationist foreign policy.⁷⁶

While previous scholarship has devoted much space to illustrating Korea's eagerness to enter formal relations with Western powers like the United States, Jager's research proves that the attraction was mutual. On his way back to his homeland from Tianjin in September 1880, U.S. Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt identified the Pacific Ocean as one of the main markets for American goods and noted that a potential treaty with Korea "becomes another link in the chain which binds the East with the West."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 60.

⁷⁵ Zunxian Huang, *Ch'osŏn ch'aekryak* [A Strategy for Korea], ed. by Kim Sŭngil (Seoul: Pŏmusa, 2011), 68-69. It is striking how prescient Huang turned out to be about Korea. Less than five years after the message, Britain occupied the Korean island of Kōmundo, ostensibly to prevent the southern expansion of Russia.

⁷⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 61.

⁷⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 63.

Having set his sights on a treaty with Korea, Shufeldt had to overcome a significant hurdle: the Chinese claim of its suzerainty over Korea. Li Hongzhang, viceroy of Zhili Province and *de facto* arbiter of China's foreign policy, pushed for a clause in a treaty between Korea and the United States that would affirm Korea's status as a Chinese dependency.⁷⁸ In the end, after the American envoy settled with the inclusion of a separate note to the U.S. president from Kojong confirming China's suzerain status, the Korean-U.S. Treaty of Amity and Commerce entered into force in May 1882. Korea would subsequently sign treaties with Britain, Germany, and France — which, far from consolidating Chinese influence over its neighbor, ended up undermining Chinese suzerainty over the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁹ As events unfolded, however, Korea had no real opportunity to use the widened diplomatic horizon to strengthen its bargaining power on the regional stage. Instead, Kojong and his officials would be unable to prevent a seemingly minor domestic issue from morphing into a full-blown geopolitical crisis.

The Imo Uprising in July 1882 may have initially stemmed from a pay dispute and inadequate provision of rice for old Korean army units, but what looked like a domestic affair from the outset quickly adopted a foreign dimension. After disgruntled soldiers burned down the house of Min Kyŏm-ho, a senior official in Korea's ministry of military affairs, to vent their fury and approached Taewŏn'gun — Kojong's father and a former regent — for further advice, the mutiny transformed into an international crisis. Drawing upon Taewŏn'gun's tacit support, some soldiers stormed the Japanese legation and killed a Japanese drill master of a newly created force, Horimoto Reizo, thereby evincing their grave concern about growing Japanese influence in Korea. These soldiers were later joined by a

⁷⁸ Martina Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 119.

⁷⁹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 65.

large mob who set fire to the building,⁸⁰ and the uprising ultimately claimed the lives of other Japanese as well. The rebellion eventually reached an ignominious end after China abducted Taewŏn'gun and helped Queen Min, Kojong's consort, to regain her authority, an unprecedented action that strengthened Chinese influence over Korea.⁸¹

History is littered with a series of events that, if successful, could have changed the course of a nation's future; the Kapsin Coup on Dec. 4, 1884, was one of them. Disenchanted with the pace of domestic reforms and the deep-seated influence of China in post-Imo Korea, reform-minded figures like Kim Ok-kyun and Pak Yŏnggho concocted a daring scheme to unseat the Min clan from power and to weaken the close bond between Chosŏn Korea and Qing China. The Kapsin instigators had reasons to feel confident about their success: China was distracted by the Sino-French War, and Japanese Minister to Korea Takezoe Shin'ichiro was instructed to assist Korean reformers.⁸² Unfortunately for the Kapsin plotters, the coup barely lasted three days, ending when the coup leaders failed to secure Kojong and Chinese forces under the command of Yuan Shikai, the future Chinese imperial resident in Korea, repelled Japanese forces guarding the Ch'angdŏk Palace, which housed the Korean monarch. The coup initiators also lost popular support for their cause when the news of the Japanese-aided coup spread throughout Seoul, and they were forced to escape to Japan.⁸³

The Convention of Tianjin in 1885 restored much-needed peace and order to the Korean Peninsula. Tokyo sent Itō Hirobumi as ambassador plenipotentiary to China to avert further

⁸⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 68.

⁸¹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 73.

⁸² Frederick Foo Chien, *The Opening of Korea: a Study of Chinese Diplomacy, 1876-1885* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1967), 149-150; Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, 206.

⁸³ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 78-79.

rifts between China and Japan over Korea. After some haggling over the punishment of Chinese military officers and compensation for injured Japanese residents in Korea, Itō and Li agreed to set aside their differences and sign the convention. The treaty contained three clauses that, among other things, allowed both China and Japan to dispatch troops to Korea, provided that either side delivered previous notice in writing.⁸⁴ With this accord, Tokyo achieved what it could only dream of not too long ago: securing equal footing with China in Korea.

In her illustration of Britain's temporary occupation of Kōmundo (Port Hamilton), Jager illuminates how the "turmoil" in Korea could be attributed to "heightened tensions between Russia and Britain over Afghanistan."⁸⁵ In so doing, Jager pushes us to contextualize Korea within the greater framework of the Eurasian Great Game, thus going beyond Sino-Japanese intrigues surrounding Korea, as documented above — an erudite approach also found in other historical studies.⁸⁶ On April 15, 1885, British Vice Adm. William Dowell occupied Port Hamilton, a small group of islands near Korea's southern coast, intent on using the island as a base for the potential blockade against Russia's Vladivostok-based Pacific Fleet. Jager recounts that, having initially tolerated a temporary British presence on the Korean island after Russia warned against occupation of other parts

⁸⁴ T. C. Lin, "Li Hung-Chang: His Korea Policies, 1870-1885," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* 19, no. 2 (July 1935): 231.

⁸⁵ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 81.

⁸⁶ See for instance, Sangpil Jin, "The Port Hamilton (Geomundo) Incident: Retracing Another Great Game in Eurasia," *The International History Review* 41, no. 2 (2019): 280-303,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1409791>; Yu Suzuki, "Anglo-Russian War-Scare and British Occupation of Kōmundo, 1885-7: The Initial Phase of Globalisation of International Affairs Between Great Powers," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47, no. 6 (2019): 1100-1124,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1638629>.

of Korean territory, Li sprang into action. He advised Kojong to deny Britain's access to Port Hamilton, concerned that London's decision would not sit well with Japan and Russia. Li later secured a written guarantee from the Russian chargé d'affaires to China, Nikolai Ladyzhensky, of Russia's promise of Korea's territorial integrity, and the Port Hamilton Crisis ended with the British withdrawal from the Korean island in February 1887.⁸⁷

Two Wars, Imperial Intrigues, and Korea as a Sacrificial Lamb

Although the abovementioned Convention of Tianjin had shepherded a decade of peace on the Korean Peninsula, except for the Port Hamilton incident, this short respite was an illusion, as China and Japan came to blows in July 1894. As is often the case in other geopolitical hotspots, such as Belgium and Bulgaria during the early and mid-19th century, Korea became exposed to major conflicts — the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars — that signaled radical ruptures of the existing regional order.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, a Japanese intellectual and the proponent of the *Datsu-A Ron* (Leaving Asia) theory, equated his country's participation in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) to spreading "civilization and enlightenment" in Asia and "a battle for the sake of world cultures."⁸⁸ While Yukichi's opinion may have reflected popular pro-war sentiment within Japan, the Japanese leadership knew better than to underestimate China: A decade earlier, Beijing regained the eastern part of the Ili basin region after coming head to head with St. Petersburg.⁸⁹ For Japanese leadership, too, the war not supposed to be about territorial

⁸⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 88.

⁸⁸ Donald Keene, *Landscapes and Portraits: Appreciations of Japanese Culture* (Kodansha International: Tokyo, 1971), 263.

⁸⁹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 136.

conquest. Rather, as Itō explained, “Korea’s sovereign status was the principle cause of the current conflict between Qing and Japan.”⁹⁰

The tragedy for Korea was that not only did the country have to reconcile with foreign intrusions, but its domestic politics were severely fragmented as well. Departing from a nationalist or nation-state narrative, Jager methodically sheds light on internecine strife between Tonghak (Eastern Learning) forces and government troops with Japanese support. Unable to muster consensus on the direction of social and political reforms for their country among governing elites, the Tonghaks raised arms against the government. Their battles with the Korean establishment not only resulted in enormous casualties but further widened rifts within Korean society, which great powers were able to exploit to their advantage.⁹¹

Tokyo emerged victorious from its brief conflict with China. With the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed on April 17, 1895, under its belt, it seemed only a matter of time before Japan gained a free hand over Korea. This led to the Triple Intervention on April 23, 1895. Determined to check Japan’s continental ambitions in East Asia and arguing that the Japanese concession in Liaodong threatened Beijing and rendered Korean independence meaningless, French, German, and Russian ministers to Japan lodged a protest with Tokyo.⁹² Although Foreign Minister Mutsu Munemitsu initially floated hosting a conference with the three European powers, along with Britain, to resolve his government’s deadlock

⁹⁰ Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku: A Diplomatic Record of the Sino-Japanese War*, trans. by Gordon Mark Berger (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1982), 29-30.

⁹¹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 185.

⁹² Gaimushō, ed., *Nihon gaikō bunsho* [Japanese Diplomatic Documents] 28 (2), no. 671, 14-18,

www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/shiryo/archives/mokuji.html.

with Berlin, Paris, and St. Petersburg, Japanese leaders relented,⁹³ recognizing that Japan could ill afford another conflict.⁹⁴

How did Korea react to its neighbor's dilemma? According to Jager, Queen Min sought to take advantage of Tokyo's setback by liaising with Russian diplomat Karl Ivanovich Weber to check the Japanese advance into Korea. Seeing how Japan could not withstand Russian might, the queen assumed that Korea was in safe hands as long as it could rely on Russia.⁹⁵ Desperate to stop Korea falling further into Russia's orbit, Miura Gorō, the Japanese minister to Korea, hatched what Jager dubbed a "fantastical plot": the assassination of Queen Min.⁹⁶ In an ironic twist, Miura's plot actually facilitated Russian domination of Korea, albeit brief, with Kojong replacing his pro-Japan cabinet with pro-Russia figures.

Fortunately for the Japanese government, Russia was anxious that Japan was intent on defending its interests in Korea "even at the risk of the war."⁹⁷ Russian concerns led the country's Foreign Minister Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky to settle for a *modus vivendi* with Tokyo. Through the Komura-Weber Memorandum in May and the Yamagata-Lobanov Agreement in June 1896, both sides agreed to limit their military presence in Korea, help Kojong to train his military force, and assist in the management of Korean finances.⁹⁸

⁹³ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 201.

⁹⁴ Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku*, 207.

⁹⁵ Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 313-314.

⁹⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 207.

⁹⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 222.

⁹⁸ Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (Routledge: London, 1985), 33.

Subsequently, in 1898, the Nishi-Rosen agreement was signed, which only accorded special commercial and industrial interests for Japan — instead of a free hand — in Korea.⁹⁹

The Russo-Japanese stand-off over Korea epitomized intense diplomatic wrangling between these imperial powers, which would also encompass the strategically vital Trans-Siberian Railway. As Jager vividly illustrates, as early as 1887, the Russian government had envisaged building a railway that would connect Russia's western cities with its Pacific coast. Five years later, with the appointment of Sergei Witte as finance minister, the construction of the railway became a part and parcel of a “new vision of Russia as a Far Eastern power.”¹⁰⁰

From Witte's standpoint, the Trans-Siberian Railway also exemplified Russia's ambition to become a global power, and the proposed railway “[occupies] one of the first places in the ranks of the largest and most important undertakings of the nineteenth century, not only in our Motherland but also in the whole world.”¹⁰¹ With an eye for detail, Jager skillfully connects a thread to Japan's stance on the Trans-Siberian Railway, pointing to the 1888 memorial from Yamagata Aritomo, where he foresaw Vladivostok acting as a major transportation center and naval base once the railway was completed.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 225.

¹⁰⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 102.

¹⁰¹ Steven G. Marks, *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850-1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 126.

¹⁰² Jager adds that the Trans-Siberian Railway threatened Korea's security, as the railway could serve as a springboard for Russian expansion into Korea. Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 113.

The Triple Intervention taught Japan the importance of garnering support for its foreign policy from fellow great powers. Hence, while not ruling out a diplomatic compromise with Russia over Korea, Japan focused its diplomatic capital on entering a formal alliance with Britain, as well as alignment with America. The successful conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in January 1902 was a diplomatic coup for Tokyo, with London recognizing Japan's interests in Korea and its right to "safeguard those interests."¹⁰³ Jager also eloquently argues that Britain wanted to avoid any possibility of Japan and Russia coming to terms over Manchuria, as such a move would severely undermine Britain's position in East Asia.¹⁰⁴

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance could not have come at a worse time for Korea. Though the alliance purportedly guaranteed Korean independence, Japan also had the right to intervene in Korea under the pretext of protecting Japanese political, industrial, and commercial interests.¹⁰⁵ In line with this, Jager could not but be tempted to point out that the Anglo-Japanese alliance sowed further division within Korea over the country's external orientation: Japan or Russia.¹⁰⁶

By the second half of 1903, despite last-ditch efforts to avoid conflict, the prospect of the Russo-Japanese war seemed closer than ever. At this critical juncture, Jager carefully recounts how Kojong desperately dispatched feelers to Japan and Russia for the neutrality of Korea. The Korean monarch's earnest wish to preserve his country's territorial integrity notwithstanding, only Russia responded favorably to the Korean overture. In fact, though not discussed in Jager's book, Russian Minister to Korea Aleksandr Ivanovich Pavlov would

¹⁰³ Hayashi Tadasu, *The Secret Memoirs of Count Tadasu Hayashi* (Eveleigh Marsh: London, 1915), 170.

¹⁰⁴ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 286.

¹⁰⁵ Ch'oe Töksu et al., *Choyakūro pon han'guk kūndaesa* [Modern Korean History Through Treaties] (P'aju: Yöllin ch'aektül, 2010), 459.

¹⁰⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 288.

later liaison with French chargé d'affaires to Korea Vicomte de Fontenay when the latter helped with the wartime neutrality declaration.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, after the Korean court announced the declaration in late January 1904, the Russian cabinet backed the court's decision, hoping that neutrality could prevent Korea from becoming a Japanese protectorate.¹⁰⁸

In the end, having failed to resolve their differences over Korea and China,¹⁰⁹ Japan and Russia became embroiled in a bitter war between February 1904 and September 1905 that would finally seal the fate of Korea and facilitate the new round of Great Power Concerts, which enabled the participants to ascertain their spheres of influence in the region later.

The Portsmouth Treaty and the Establishment of Japanese Control

Japan went on to defeat Russia at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905. Its result and the mounting domestic discontent against the Tsarist regime forced Russia to sue for peace. Both powers thus convened at Portsmouth, in the United States, in August 1905 to hammer out East Asia's post-war settlement. Under the mediation of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the Japanese delegation led by Baron Komura Jutarō and his Russian

¹⁰⁷ Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve, *Correspondance Politique et Commerciale/Nouvelle Série 1897-1910 Corée: Politique extéiure Étranger* [Political and Commercial Correspondence/New Series 1897-1910 Korea: External Politics and Foreigners in Korea III, 1902-1904], no. 210, Fontenay to Delcassé, February 2, 1904, 16-18.

¹⁰⁸ Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve, *Correspondance Politique et Commerciale/Nouvelle Série 1897-1910 Japon* [Political and Commercial Correspondence/New Series 1897-1910 Japan], Fontenay to Delcassé, January 23, 1904, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Jager explains that Tokyo stood firm in demanding Japanese rights and privileges in Manchuria. Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 306.

counterpart Witte initially had trouble settling their differences over the cession of Sakhalin — an island located off of Russia’s east coast and to the north of Japan — and indemnity. Eventually, both sides agreed to waive Russian indemnity to Japan, and the latter consented to the division of Sakhalin.

Discerning the potential impact of Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War on Korea’s independence, Jager rightly draws our attention to the importance of Russia’s recognition of Japanese special rights and interests in Korea. Though not a participant in the conference, the Korean government hoped that Russia would help preserve the territorial integrity of Korea.¹¹⁰

Unfortunately, notwithstanding Russian Emperor Nicholas II’s initial wish for Japan to accept Korean independence and Witte’s insistence on “the rights of the Korean nation,”¹¹¹ St. Petersburg had to reconcile with the reality that the great powers were not committed to Korean independence. After all, as Jager noted, by this time both Washington and London had withdrawn their recognition of Korean independence. In the case of the former, in his meeting with Katsura Tarō, Secretary of War William Taft conceded that “the establishment of Japanese troops of a suzerainty over Korea ... would directly contribute to the permanent peace in the East.”¹¹² Taft added that Roosevelt shared his sentiment on the

¹¹⁰ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 412.

¹¹¹ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 413.

¹¹² Kirk W. Larsen and Joseph Seeley, “Simple Conversation or Secret Treaty? The Taft-Katsura Memorandum in Korean Historical Memory,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 61,

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2014.0003>.

Korean subject.¹¹³ London also gave its blessing of Japanese annexation of Korea during Britain's negotiations with Japan for the renewal of their alliance,¹¹⁴ having recognized that Tokyo already possessed *de facto* control of Korea's economy – and increasingly — politics.

Having received American and British consent to its Korean policy, Japan could now move on to the next order of business: turning Korea into a Japanese protectorate. Kojong refused to place his imperial seal on the treaty document and Han Kyu-sŏl, the Korean deputy prime minister, protested, but other cabinet ministers went along with Itō's scheme for the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty on Nov. 17, 1905.

The Protectorate Treaty marked the beginning of the end of Korea's existence as a sovereign state. Henceforward, Korea's diplomatic sovereignty was to be exercised by Japan. To be sure, not all Koreans, as Jager reminds us, were upset about this development. The Ilchinhoe, a pro-Japan Korean group, welcomed Tokyo's "guidance," as they believed that it could help Koreans attain "true" independence in substance.¹¹⁵ It did not take long to prove that Ilchinhoe's position was a sheer folly: In June 1906, Russia's newly appointed Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky decided to reach an accommodation with Japan, believing that St. Petersburg's priority lay in Europe.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, in July 1907, Russia signed a new convention with Japan to finally settle the respective spheres of influence for

¹¹³ Raymond A. Esthus, *Double Eagle and Rising Sun: The Russians and Japanese at Portsmouth* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 93. Taft's assertion may have reflected America's desire to preserve stability in the Pacific by acknowledging Japan's sphere of influence in the region.

¹¹⁴ Douglas Howland, "Sovereignty and the Laws of War: International Consequences of Japan's 1905 Victory over Russia," *Law and History Review* 29, no. 1 (February 2011): 53-97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800932>.

¹¹⁵ On Ilchinhoe, see Yumi Moon, *Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896-1910* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹¹⁶ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 439.

Tokyo and St. Petersburg. With Russia's consent, Japan cleared the final hurdle to annexing Korea in exchange for recognizing Russia's rights and privileges in outer Mongolia.¹¹⁷ Finally, on Aug. 22, 1910, the curtain fell on Chosŏn Korea, after more than five centuries of existence.

Conclusion

Will today's Korean Peninsula be able to escape the same fate that it endured during the late 19th and early 20th centuries? A Russian scholar, V. I. Shipaev, once observed, astutely, that a factional discord — “conservatives” versus “progressives” — sapped the internal unity of Korea and allowed foreign powers to take advantage of the country, with Japan making the most strides there.¹¹⁸ It is striking to discern how contemporary South Korean politics are still beset with internal division and how the intrigues of major powers continue to shape South Korea's geopolitical landscape.

To quote Mark Twain, “History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.” As was the case in the late 19th century, the East Asian order is once again undergoing transition. More importantly, the “trend of geopolitics” is taking us back to a multipolar era with multiple blocs, which overshadowed the late 19th century.¹¹⁹ Only time will tell whether contemporary historians and policymakers can draw appropriate lessons on the perils of the Great Game. One thing is clear, though: they can always turn to Jager's work as a guide to navigate the treacherous current of international relations in East Asia.

¹¹⁷ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 441.

¹¹⁸ Jager, *The Other Great Game*, 288-9.

¹¹⁹ Christopher M. Dent, “Brexit, Trump and Trade: Back to a Late 19th Century Future?” *Competition & Change* 24, no. 3-4 (2020): 228-357, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529420921481>.

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4. **Recentring Korea in the British-Russian Strategic Rivalry: Seeing Imperialism Through the Lens of Domestic Politics and Regional Instability**

Seo-Hyun Park

In *The Other Great Game*, Sheila Miyoshi Jager aims to recenter Korea in the region's history, rather than confining it to its oft-stereotyped role as a "shrimp among whales." She argues that "Koreans were key players in this history and the source of transformational change" in regional and global politics during this period.¹²⁰ In doing so, she highlights the different sources of political, economic, diplomatic, and military instability throughout the region, beyond the standard story of imperial competition and conflict. Jager also painstakingly describes how Britain, France, Germany, and the United States — and governmental and nongovernmental actors within and representing each of these countries — were involved to varying degrees in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), as well as "smaller" conflicts involving peasant rebels, paramilitary groups, border disputes, internal coups, and treaty negotiations (and reversals). The result is a comprehensive and dynamic regional historical narrative, and a welcome extension and update on existing works such as Key-Hiuk Kim's *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order* (1980); Martina Deuchler's *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys* (1977); and Hilary Conroy's *The Japanese Seizure of Korea* (1960).¹²¹

¹²⁰ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), xvii.

¹²¹ Key-Hiuk Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860-1882* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1980); Martina Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1977); and

Expanding the Lens Beyond the Usual Areas of Focus

Jager’s masterful depiction of the “great transformation in East Asia” begins in the mid-19th century when imperial expansionism and competition among the Western powers was on full display in China — *and* its neighboring countries. In 1860, for example, Western powers — led by Britain and France, whose troops had looted and destroyed the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) outside of Beijing — sought to secure their commercial and strategic interests in China by forcing the Qing court to sign a new treaty concluding the Second Opium War. But lesser known, and explored in detail by Jager, is the Supplemental Treaty that accompanied the Treaty of Peking signed in October 1860, in which Russia gained control of the areas east and south of the Ussuri River amidst the chaos in the Chinese capital. That same year, the Russian Empire created the new strategic outpost of Vladivostok, which triggered fears in the Qing and Chosŏn courts, as their borders intersected with these maritime provinces. It also alarmed Japan and Britain, as Russia’s southward expansion affected their existing and future interests.

In *The Other Great Game*, Jager provides a compelling account of just how far-reaching and interconnected these imperial rivalries were in the various sub-regions of Asia, not just in central China. In addition to the well-documented British and Russian rivalry over Central Asia and the areas surrounding India, she argues, was another great power “game” involving Britain and Russia as well as Japan over their interests in the Korean

Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

peninsula and northeastern China — often referred to as Manchuria. This “other great game,” Jager contends, was fueled by two main factors: the increasing ambitions of the Russian and Japanese empires and the internal divisions within the beleaguered Chosŏn kingdom of Korea. While each of these points is not entirely new, *The Other Great Game* weaves the different narrative accounts together in a fresh perspective on the key role that Russia (directly) and Britain (indirectly) played in 19th-century East Asian international relations.

Bringing in New Sources and Voices in Explaining Regional Conflict

A major strength of the book is the author’s use of a dazzling array of primary and secondary sources in multiple languages. The list of references includes a wide variety of historical documents as well as memoirs, biographies, and policy papers, which add to the vivid descriptions of the battlefield and foreign policy debates. The quotes and reflections from central figures and participants help the overall narrative flow by providing glimpses into the deeper context behind key events.

In addition, the book enriches security and military studies with its detailed descriptions of weapons systems, naval and troop formations, battlefield tactics, and logistics during two major wars: the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. More importantly, perhaps, Jager goes beyond these easily recognizable wars to highlight other types of war and conflict in the region. In between these major wars were smaller — but just as significant — military operations and mobilizations, such as the joint expedition against the Tonghak peasant rebellion by Japanese and Korean government troops in 1894-1895, the China Relief expedition of 1900, and the Russo-Chinese War of 1900. These are significant because they demonstrate the pervasive instability in the region. Also, Jager’s research suggests that the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War were not

inevitable turning points in Russian and Japanese imperialism, but rather that war and conflict in the region occurred in the midst of breakdown in negotiations over longstanding and sometimes mundane issues, such as migration across porous borders (in northern Korea), taxation, property disputes, failed or incomplete domestic political reforms, etc.

The Importance of Domestic Politics

A third important contribution of the book is to bring domestic politics back into this reexamination of regional history. The detailed descriptions of the internal divisions within the Tonghak rebellion — between the more aggressively anti-feudal and anti-government Southern Assembly, on the one hand, and the more ideologically anti-foreign Northern Assembly, on the other — as well as the polarization between the gradualist and progressive reform factions within the Korean court, are particularly illuminating. It is worth noting that Jager analyzes these internal fissures in a way that admirably avoids the timeless trope of victim-blaming, in which it is all too easy to explain political dysfunction and eventual colonialism as the outcome of perennial divisiveness and factionalism in “uncivilized” nations.

She carefully draws out transnational connections and alignments that intensify the stakes of domestic political competition in Chosŏn Korea. Different Korean political factions sought potential alliances with Japan and Russia — and the resources and influence they could offer, which incentivized and escalated internal political outbidding. Jager also shows how these transnational coalitions were constantly evolving during this period and argues against the false dichotomy of the old versus the new, and East versus the West. In other words, domestic political actors in Korea continuously participated in the great powers’ “game” and sometimes took advantage of, albeit with little success, the

changing security, economic, and political situations of Russia, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, as well as Japan and China.

It is precisely this point, I believe, that the author could have pushed even further in her analysis. The internal divisions that plagued Korean politics and foreign policy were rampant throughout this period, including within the imperial powers that take center stage in the book. There were several turning points in the narrative where the outcome of internal policy disagreements in Japan, Russia, Britain, the United States, and China could have led to alternative paths in each government's decision-making. The Qing court's expectation of British and other Western powers' mediation (presumably favoring the Chinese position), shaped Chinese preparations — or lack thereof — during the Sino-Japanese War. But this stance ignored the views of other court officials who were skeptical of relying on a diplomatic solution and Western intervention. The 1885 Osaka affair, in which the Japanese government quelled a secret plan to overthrow Kojong's government in Korea, and Japanese participation in the assassination of Queen Min 10 years later in 1895 are just two examples of the back-and-forth in Japan's policy toward Korea. The vacillating views in Japan toward Russia were also evident in the two-track policy of negotiating an alliance treaty with Britain while conducting diplomatic talks with high-ranking Russian officials in St. Petersburg about a possible deal on a Man-Kan exchange (recognition of respective interests in Manchuria and Korea). In Russia as well, Finance Minister Sergei Witte and Foreign Minister Vladimir Lamsdorf repeatedly appealed to more moderate conciliatory solutions that would not further provoke China, Japan, or Britain — to no avail, as they were overruled by Minister of War Aleksei Kuropatkin and Commander of the Pacific Fleet (and, later appointed Viceroy of the Far East by Tsar Nicholas II) Adm. Yevgeny Alekseev. A common theme that emerges in Japanese and Russian politics, in particular, is the sidelining of moderates in favor of expansionists and hardliners, often supported or led by mercenaries and freelancers, such

as Alexander Bezobrazov, who became deeply involved in the Russian timber project near the Yalu River.

Concluding Thoughts

Ironically enough, a central message that comes out of *The Other Great Game* is that the “game” itself was never clearly defined and the key players kept changing the rules — sometimes in response to their external environments and at other times due to changing winds in their own domestic political situations. It seems more likely that these contingencies and exigencies, rather than a master game plan from the great powers, culminated in the wars and conflicts discussed in the book. The book reminds us that identifying different types of turning points — both noticeable and mundane — is important for not oversimplifying the history of imperialism in East Asia into a series of inevitable great-power wars. It also helps us to connect East Asian regional history to the broader global context, in which imperialism coexisted with local resistance and transnational alliances. *The Other Great Game* helps to shine a light on these other players and processes amidst the strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia.

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