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Britain and the Russian Threat

Starting points

This article's starting point is the international debate that began in the spring of 2025 about Britain's support for Ukraine in a war against an aggressive Russia – in a situation where U.S. support seemed to be weakening. The discussion aims to place the debate in a broader British perspective in time and space regarding the Russian threat by examining a similar earlier situation in which the British were concerned about the Russian threat to Russia's border neighbour. One example is the discussion about the Russian threat to Japan in the British-based papers *The Japan Times*, *The Japan Gazette*, *The Japan Weekly Mail*, and *Japan Punch*, published in Yokohama, between 1866 and 1881. What perspectives did the papers emphasize in their statements, how did they interpret the possible interests of the British, and can conclusions be drawn from them that might somehow also refer to the present day? I have not previously examined such a single perspective. Instead, it has been included as one of the components of studies discussing Japan's transformation in the Anglo-Saxon press at that time.¹

The political and economic interest of Western powers in East Asia had forced Japan to abandon its over 200-year-old policy of isolationism. The arrival of a naval force led by American Commodore Matthew Calbraight Perry in Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853 to demand the opening of Japan to Western trade, culture, and influence had broken the tradition of isolationism. Until then, since 1639, only the Dutch had been allowed to trade under strict regulations at the Deshima trading post off Nagasaki. The signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa with the United States on March 31, 1854, began a new era in Japan's international relations. Among other things, it had agreed on the exchange of currency, the replenishment of ships with water and coal, the protection of shipwrecked Americans, and the opening of two ports – Shimoda,

¹ Olavi K. Fält, *The Clash of Interests. The transformation of Japan in 1861–1881 in the eyes of the local Anglo-Saxon press*. Studia Historica Septentrionalia 18. Societas Historica Finlandiae Septentrionalis, Rovaniemi 1990; Olavi K. Fält, "Pohjoinen haaste – Japanissa ilmestyneen brittiläisen lehdistön näkemykset Hokkaidon asuttamisesta ja kehittämisestä vuoden 1868 Meiji-restauraation jälkeisessä tilanteessa". *Historian selkosilla. Jouko Vahtolan juhlaKirja*. Toimittaneet Matti Enbuske, Matti Mäntylä, Matti Salo ja Reija Satokangas. Studia Historica Septentrionalia 65. Societas Historica Finlandiae Septentrionalis, Rovaniemi 2012, 268–270. Papers see Fält 1990, 13–23.

located south of Tokyo, and Hakodate, located on Hokkaido's southern coast – and the appointment of a consul in Shimoda. Similar agreements with other Western powers soon followed the agreement the Americans had made. In 1858, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Japan had been signed, which had similarly served as a model for agreements with other powers. For example, it designated Kanagawa (Yokohama), Nagasaki, and Hakodate as the first permanent places of residence and trade for foreign populations in Japan.²

According to the 1855 treaty between Russia and Japan, the border between the two southern Kuril Islands – Etorofu and Uruppu – was drawn. Both countries also had rights on Sakhalin. The 1860 treaty with China, which gave Russia control of the area between the Ussuri and the Pacific Ocean, strengthened Russia's position in Japan's neighbouring areas.³

Threat

With the new treaties, Japan inevitably became a competitive field for the Western powers regarding their territorial and economic interests. The Japan Times drew attention to this in June 1866 while highlighting the many opportunities for the British world in this situation. The paper emphasised that the Japanese race should be valued very highly in ethnological terms:

*[...] the necessity of giving to the Japanese race its proper – and, as we think, an exceedingly high – ethnological position. The nations of the old world, more particularly the irresistible Anglo-Saxon-Scandinavian race, are too prone to underestimate Orientals.*⁴

The Japanese were described as a noble race, which had created a civilisation for itself, so that there was no cause for looking down on them. If the British treated them wrongly, they would be forsaking a unique opportunity to spread the principles of religious, political and commercial freedom of which they were so proud and the dissemination of which they regarded as their particular task. Linked with this hope was the expectation that one day Japan would become one of the major naval powers in the world, so that it was desirable that Britain should help to build up her fleet and then enter into a pact with her in the face of the Russian threat in the Pacific. The paper saw the opening up of Japan as one of the major achievements of the century,

² Patt Barr, *The Coming of the Barbarians. A Story of the Western Settlement in Japan 1853–1870*. Macmillan, London 1967, 34–38, 84–85.

³ John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, *East Asia. Tradition and Transformation*. First Printing. Modern Asia Edition. Tokyo 1976, 479, 518.

⁴ *The Japan Times* 16.6.1866.

on account of which the promotion of her development should be a matter of duty and honour for all civilised societies.⁵

Here we have not passing hints at common interests between Britain and Japan but a straightforward call for cooperation, in which the first to benefit would naturally be the British merchants in Japan, whose interests the *Japan Times* represented. In this way favourable impressions of Japan and high expectations for her future became firmly associated with British glory, liberalism and commercial interests.

In the next phase, the Russian threat was raised when examining the internal struggle in Japan, resulting in the transfer of power from the samurai class's Tokugawa rule to the Meiji Emperor's rule in 1868. The opinions expressed by *Japan Punch* reflected the rivalry between Britain and Russia, with the two-headed eagle of Russia pictured as a spider watching on delightedly from its web while the Japanese fought among themselves.⁶ In another cartoon a bear is shown stepping across from the Kuril Islands to Hokkaido, and under it is the title "The Northern Bear and the Japanese Honey. The Bees don't see beyond their cells."⁷ When the navy supporting the Tokugawas retreated to Hokkaido during the war, this was again interpreted as a sign of the Russian threat, and a cartoon appeared entitled "'The Russian *Mikado* with his boots off", picturing les exiles de Tokugawa" with the vicious claws of an eagle under their boots and gloves.⁸ The purpose of these cartoons was quite obvious; to warn the Japanese of the threat from the north and at the same time indicate who could help them to repel that threat – the British.

The press did not believe in Japan's capabilities regarding the Russian threat, as *The Japan Daily Herald* stated in May 1874 when assessing the position of the punitive expedition Japan sent to Formosa concerning China and Russia. It had been sent under the pretext that three years earlier, Ryukyu Islanders who had been shipwrecked on Formosa's southern coast had been killed there. According to the newspaper Russia alone was strong enough to possess herself of Japan, and Japan could not expect sympathy or assistance from other nations.⁹ The *Japan Gazette* did not believe either that Japan could prevent Russia from taking "Yeso" (Hokkaido) whenever she wanted.¹⁰

The border between Russia and Japan was defined more precisely in the treaty signed in St. Petersburg on May 7, 1875, and that Sakhalin belonged to Russia and the Kuril Islands to Japan.¹¹ Partly in order to secure Japan's position in the north, the government had begun a campaign for the settlement of Hokkaido, formerly Ezo,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Japan Punch* 7/1868, 142.

⁷ *Japan Punch* 7/1868, 146.

⁸ *Japan Punch* 1/1869, 208–209.

⁹ *The Japan Daily Herald* 6.5.1874.

¹⁰ *The Japan Gazette* 29.5.1874.

¹¹ Fairbank, Reischauer and Craig 1976, 518.

at the beginning of the decade under the direction of an American advisor, General Horace Capron. The island had been under Japanese jurisdiction since the 11th century. The work had proceeded relatively successfully, and the population of the island had increased more than fourfold between 1869 and 1881, during which time the area of land under cultivation was extended by a factor of ten.¹²

The Japan Gazette took a favourable view of the settlement of Hokkaido in an article of the subject in August 1874, whereas it was against any attempt to settle Sakhalin. In the same connection the paper criticized the Japanese for failing to take sufficient notice of the opinions of their foreign advisers and preferring to follow instructions from people who knew nothing about the subject.¹³ According to the paper one could not be particularly optimistic about the long-term opportunities offered by Hokkaido. Its climate was harsh and unsuitable for farming in many places, and therefore the large-scale settlement that had been planned was looked on as an unfortunate decision. Similarly was not inclined to take the threat from Russia, which lay behind this policy especially seriously.¹⁴

Like the Japan Gazette, the Japan Weekly Mail did not regard Sakhalin as important for Japan, at least not to be the extent of creating a dispute over it,¹⁵ but once the boundary agreement had been signed in 1875 the paper did express concern that Russia might continue her advance southwards now that she had a vantage point from which to survey events going on in Japanese coastal waters.¹⁶

The concern expressed by the paper evidently was not restricted to matters of Japanese security, but extended to the endangering of British interests in the area. This interpretation is confirmed by a comment made by the paper in November of the same year suggesting that it was Britain's duty to keep watch against Russian advances in Asia. On the other hand, the paper did not believe that Japan would find herself an object of Russian aggression, even if the latter country had shown an interest in Hokkaido. Hokkaido was a part of Japan proper, and conquering it would entail overthrowing Japan entirely, which would be impossibility for Russia on account of the great geographical distances involved. The Japan Weekly Mail was convinced that Japan would be quite safe from outside aggression provided she remained internally strong, which the paper suspected that she was capable of doing in view of the level of patriotic feeling in the country, the steady increase in the striking power of her army and navy, the advances made in education and the general progress achieved.¹⁷ The increased confidence in Japan's military capabilities was

¹² Fairbank, Reischauer and Craig 1976, 518.

¹³ "The Development of Yezo". *The Japan Gazette* 24.8.1874.

¹⁴ *The Japan Gazette* 9.5.1875.

¹⁵ "Saghalien". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 12.12.1874.

¹⁶ "The Cessation of Saghalien". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 24.7.1875.

¹⁷ "Notes of the Week". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 27.11.1875.

evidently a reflection of the favourable outcome of the Formosan affair and the resulting new image of the "Young Japan".

On the issue of Korea's opening in 1876 the newspapers came out almost unreservedly on the side of Japan. The Japan Gazette saw the Japanese as the bringers of civilisation to Korea¹⁸ and regarded the status of Korea as a matter of extreme importance for Japanese security, on account of which Japan could not look dispassionately upon the possibility of Korea falling under the domination of a powerful, aggressive nation,¹⁹ by which the paper very probably meant Russia.

It was evidently for this reason that the Japan Weekly Mail was not entirely against the idea of Japan becoming involved in a military confrontation with Korea, especially since it believed that this would not be a particularly heavy burden economically.²⁰ The paper interpreted a strengthening of Japan's position in Korea as implying advantages for the western powers, including Turkey but not Russia, noting specifically that Japan looked favourably on western aspirations to establish relations with Korea.²¹ In other words, by preferring to place Turkey in the western camp rather than Russia, the paper was indicating that it saw Japan's interests with respect to Russia as lying in the same direction as those of western powers as defined in this way, bearing in mind the recent Russo-Turkish War.

As in earlier times, the attitudes of the British-owned papers reflected at the turn of the 1870s and 1880s the power struggle between Great Britain and Russia in East Asia. Apart from the avowals of a community of interests with Japan, direct warnings of the threat posed to Japan by Russia were issued in the Japan Herald²², Japan Punch ('Ivan the Terrible on the war path!')²³ and The Japan Gazette. Only Britain was seen as capable of defending Japan and China against the threat from the north, on account of which The Japan Gazette looked critically upon the self-sufficient attitudes expressed by these two countries and wondered with interest how long these would be maintained if the threat really came to anything.²⁴ The paper made no attempt to belittle the strength of Russia by comparison with Japan, claiming that only Russia could snub her to the extent of sending a huge fleet into her waters without any fear of retribution, an allusion to the coming visit of the Russian navy.²⁵

¹⁸ "Daily Notes". *The Japan Gazette* 16.5.1881.

¹⁹ "Korea and Powers". *The Japan Gazette* 23.7.1881.

²⁰ "Japan and Korea". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 23.11.1878. See also "A Crisis for Korea". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 25.1.1879.

²¹ "Corea and the Duke of Genoa". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 2.4.1881.

²² *The Japan Daily Herald* 8.10.1878.

²³ *Japan Punch* 7/1880, 232.

²⁴ *The Japan Gazette* 14.3.1879; "Russian Intrigue Exposed in the Central Asia Papers". *The Japan Gazette* 15.2.1879; "Russia and China". *The Japan Gazette* 8.3.1879.

²⁵ "Japan: Her Forced Relations with Russia". *The Japan Gazette* 27.11.1880.

Further evidence of anti-Russian sentiment is to be found in *The Japan Gazette*, when it called upon Japan to replace its policy of ‘benevolent neutrality’ by one of absolute impartiality in the event of a war between China and Russia²⁶, and also in its threatening pictures of Russian advances in Europe:

*The smaller kingdoms of Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Holland, are looking on with the deepest anxiety, as if Russia came out of the struggle victorious, Sweden and Norway would follow the fate of Finland.*²⁷

The *Japan Weekly Mail* had expressed the hope in autumn 1878 that the Japanese statesmen would choose their friends so as to ensure that the country had her at her side a power which was not only willing but also able to defend her “against the unscrupulous and insatiable ambition of her northern neighbour”.²⁸ The peace negotiations following the Russo-Turkish War held in Berlin that summer were still fresh in memory, as was Britain’s intervention on the side of Turkey.

Even so, the paper took the opposite stance to that of the *Japan Gazette* and advised Japan to conform to Russian desires in her neutrality in the event of a war between the latter and China, since it feared the unwelcome consequences of strict neutrality.²⁹ In other words it did not believe that Britain would actually support Japan or would be able to support her sufficiently, in that situation.

The difference in outlook between *The Japan Gazette* and *The Japan Weekly Mail* also manifested itself in their attitudes to the armament of Japan. The former regarded it a vitally important to maintain the army as it existing size of 42 000 men in the presence of two powerful neighbours China and Russia. The country’s independence and security were bound up with “the efficient of the army which has been the safeguard of the empire in times of revolt, and will be again its bulwark against a foreign foe”.³⁰

The *Japan Weekly Mail*, on the other hand, was of the opinion that Japan did not need a permanent army, and that it was quite sufficient to maintain a strong police force. It looked on a permanent army as a potential internal threat to the country’s security, supporting its argument with references to various small military uprisings and the poor behaviour of the Japanese soldiers in public.³¹ A couple of months later, in March 1879, however, when discussing the Japanese navy, it did not say a word

²⁶ “China and Japan”. *The Japan Gazette* 11.12.1880.

²⁷ “The Forces of Europe”. *The Japan Gazette* 24.1.1880.

²⁸ “The Advance of Russia in Asia”. *The Japan Weekly Mail* 5.10.1878.

²⁹ “‘Between the Devil and the Deep Sea’ – Japan’s Neutrality”. *The Japan Weekly Mail* 26.2.1881. *The Japan Gazette* 13.1.1879.

³¹ “The Japanese Army”. *The Japan Weekly Mail* 11.1.1879. See also “‘Jo-i’ and Its Consequences”. *The Japan Weekly Mail* 14.9.1878.

about this being in any way unnecessary, but on the contrary merely encouraged the Japanese to trust more and more in their own experts to develop in further.³²

This would suggest that the paper was looking at the significance of the army precisely from the geographical viewpoint. It did not consider overseas conquests or provocations part of the country policy, and therefore a force of arms would only to be needed to maintain internal order. The country's military resources were fairly limited as far as external wars were concerned, and internally there was in practice little fear of uprising, as the people owed loyalty to the Emperor. Thus a police force and navy were more than adequate to ensure the country's security.³³ Admittedly a year earlier, in autumn 1878, the paper had gone so far as to recommend a merchant fleet rather than a navy for Japan.³⁴

The Japan Weekly Mail perceived the situation in an entirely different light a couple of years later, since apart from the threat posed by Russia, the paper's patronising tone had evidently abated somewhat with the greater social stability in Japan, and at the same time the need for an army was something much more to be taken as a matter of course. By that stage it was no longer a question of whether an army was needed or not, but much more a matter of its inadequacy and the deficiencies perceivable in its training, since the paper believed that the Japanese troops could "become one of the most effective combatants in the world, if only he be properly manipulated, and it is therefore all the more lamentable that, having made so promising a start, he should be suffered to halt halfway".³⁵

As far as developing the navy was concerned, the paper then went through its own view of the country's needs ship by ship, explaining what size the navy should be and of what strength in order to respond to the challenges posed by its surroundings and to be both efficient and at the same time economical,³⁶ although admittedly questions of economy have to be laid on one side when confronted with a colossal, aggressive neighbour – another reference to Russia, and thus indirectly to the interests of Britain. The same interests were also to the fore when discussing the building of warships, which, it was stated, should take place where the best natural conditions, materials, experience and skills for this existed, i.e. in Britain and certainly not in Japan as the Japanese would have preferred.³⁷

The references to British interests, and also the concern shown for these, were topical matters at that point in time, as there had been much public discussion on the

³² "The Japanese Navy". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 8.8.1879. See also "The English Naval Mission". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 19.4.1879.

³³ "Army or Police". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 15.11.1879.

³⁴ "'Jo-i' and Its Consequences". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 14.9.1878.

³⁵ "The Infantry of Japan". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 15.1.1881.

³⁶ "The Japanese Navy". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 11.6.1881.

³⁷ "The Japan's Maritime Power". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 16.7.1881.

role of Britain in Japan.³⁸ Viewed from the British angle, action in Japan was a matter of keeping up British interests in the face of political and military competition from Russia (and commercial competition from the Americans). Russia was the worst threat, as evidenced, for example, by *The Japan Weekly Mail*'s reference to freedom of speech in Russia. It claimed, public opinion had been infected there with a poison to which the whole civilised world was engaged in seeking an antidote.³⁹

Conclusions

From the beginning, the papers referred to various advantages and opportunities for influence that dealing with Japan would offer Britain and local British merchants. Simultaneously, however, despite the strong emphasis on Western culture, the importance of Japan's own culture was also emphasized. Cooperation was central in many ways, such as in a possible agreement against the Russian threat in the Pacific and in a possible construction of the Japanese navy. It was also stated that Britain's duty was to keep watch against Russian advances in Asia.

It is interesting to note, as if referring to today's perspectives, the presentation of Finland's position in relation to the Russian threat and Britain as a counterweight to it. According to the newspaper's assessment, Finland, annexed to Russia, offered a good example of what might happen to Sweden and Norway if Russia were to win a possible war against China.

The same emphasis, namely the common interests of Britain and Japan concerning Russia, which sought to expand its interests in Asia and the Pacific region, was constantly present in the papers. In addition to the global perspective connecting Asia and Europe, a similarity to the current situation existed in the idea that Britain's task was to be a central actor against the Russian threat – today within a European framework.

³⁸ Fält 1990, 257–262.

³⁹ *The Japan Weekly Mail* 4.6.1881.