

### 3. TREATY OF SHIMONOSEKI AND THE TRIPLE INTERVENTION

#### Pitting one barbarian against another

Defying the world's expectations, the Japanese handed China a resounding defeat. Triumphant in battle after battle, the Japanese gathered so much momentum that they were poised to launch a strike on Peking. When the Japanese crushed the Chinese Army during the Battle of Pyongyang, and sent the Beiyang Fleet into oblivion at the Battle of the Yalu River, the Chinese were already petitioning for peace talks. The peace conference was held at the Shunpanro, a hotel in Shimonoseki. Presiding over it were Itō Hirobumi and Mutsu Munemitsu, both invested with plenipotentiary powers, representing Japan, and Li Hongzhang and his son Li Jingfang, also invested with plenipotentiary powers, representing China. The resulting agreement was signed and sealed on April 17, 1895.

The framework of what became the Treaty of Shimonoseki follows:

1. China recognizes the full and complete independence and autonomy of Korea.
2. China cedes to Japan in perpetuity the Liaodong peninsula, Formosa (Taiwan) and all appertaining islands, and the Pescadores Islands.
3. China agrees to pay to Japan as a war indemnity 200 million taels.
4. All treaties between Japan and China shall terminate as a consequence of war, and new treaties of commerce and navigation shall be concluded.
5. Immediately upon the exchange of the ratifications of this Act, all prisoners of war then held shall be restored; China undertakes not to abuse or execute prisoners of war so restored to her by Japan.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, no sooner had the treaty been concluded than Japan was confronted by a bolt from the blue in the form of interference from Western powers.

There is a traditional Chinese diplomatic stratagem that involves pitting one barbarian tribe or state against another to gain the upper hand. For instance, China might use a third-party nation to rein in an enemy or to further its own interests. Other similar tactics are *yuan jiao jingong* (collaborating with distant allies and attacking nearby nations) and *jiedao sharen* (killing someone with a borrowed knife). They involve forming an alliance with a distant entity (or using its power) with the intention of destroying an enemy. These diplomatic strategies have been employed for centuries and are still in favor today, and they may be peculiar to the Chinese.

They were used in the 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War as well, in the following way: the Chinese were secretly hoping that Russia would interfere, and if it did, that the war situation would turn in their favor. They were overly optimistic, assuming that the Russians would never take advantage of them by demanding the three eastern provinces (Manchuria).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.taiwanbasic.com/treaties/Shimonoseki.htm> (retrieved 10/2022).

At first the Russians believed that there was absolutely no possibility of a Japanese victory. But as the Japanese won battle after battle, the Russians began to come to their senses. Seeking ice-free ports, they were eager to acquire territory on the Manchuria-Korea border and the Liaodong peninsula. Not being inclined to tolerate a situation that would hinder their ambition, they decided to interfere.

China's own policies certainly facilitated Russian interference.

As soon as the Treaty of Shimonoseki was concluded, the Qing court erupted in noisy opposition. For instance, Zhang Zhidong, then the viceroy of Huguang (Hubei and Hunan provinces), expressed the following, mind-boggling opinion: "Waste no time in requesting assistance from the UK, Russia, and Germany, offering concessions in return. Do not be parsimonious about this; the rewards must be handsome. It is highly unlikely that the UK, Russia, or Germany will make trouble for us, no matter what we give them. They are far away, as opposed to the Japanese blight." Zhang was saying that if the three powers helped effect the annulment of the treaty, they should be given whatever they asked for. This was an injudicious proposal akin to inviting a wolf into the room to chase away the Japanese. But such as it was, that was the idea that sprang from the brilliant minds of Li Hongzhang and Chinese and Korean politicians in connection with the Treaty of Shimonoseki.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Triple Intervention: origin of 50 years of East Asia misfortune**

The Triple Intervention, as it came to be known, took place just as the Chinese had hoped it would. On April 23, before the ink on the Treaty of Shimonoseki had dried, Russia, France, and Germany "advised" Japan to retrocede the Liaodong peninsula, which Japan had rightfully won. The "advice" from the Russian legation, motivated by "sincere friendship," was for Japan to relinquish the Liaodong peninsula, since Japanese possession of the peninsula would not only pose a threat to the Chinese capital, but also render Korean independence a status in name but not in reality, thus hindering a lasting peace in the Far East. Communiqués from France and Germany contained similar wording.

Zhang Zhidong wasted no time in announcing the revocation of the treaty to the Qing emperor. The content of his message was truly astounding. "If we are going to ask the three nations for help, we must not lie to them. We must make a genuine offer in the form of territory or other useful reward. "It would be better to cede Weihaiwei, Port Arthur, and Taiwan to Russia or the UK rather than to the barbarians (Japan). After we have intimidated the barbarians by abrogating the treaty, we should give Xinjiang or the Southern (or Northern) Silk Road to Russia, and Tibet to the UK."

There was more: Zhang proposed having "a fleet from either Russia or the UK attack Yokohama or Nagasaki. Or perhaps Hiroshima<sup>3</sup> should be first. That will certainly terrify the barbarians. China should revoke the treaty without bloodying its sword, with the help of either the UK or

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<sup>2</sup> Wang Yunsheng, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> During the 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese military headquarters were located in Hiroshima.

Russia.”<sup>4</sup> This conspiracy combined two ancient tactics (pitting barbarian against barbarian, and committing a murder with a borrowed knife). We can only guess what influence the recommendation of someone like Zhang, who had acquired a reputation as a brilliant politician, had on the inclinations of the Qing court.

Imagine the baseness of mind of a prominent Chinese politician who was eager to borrow the power of Russia and the UK to destroy Japan. It is likely that thought processes like his provided the impetus for 50 years of misfortune for East Asia.

The Triple Intervention was accomplished via the threat of military force. The Japanese had neither the military nor financial strength to fight a new war against three major powers at the same time. Left with no other choice, they swallowed their tears, accepted the “advice,” and restored the Liaodong peninsula to China. Russia expressed its satisfaction with the action taken by Japan, offering its congratulations to Japan for its contribution to world peace. But not only did Japan’s retrocession of the peninsula *not* bring about world peace, it also precipitated the next war. Only the gods knew that it would trigger the tribulations that plagued East Asia for the next 50 years.

### **The Triple Intervention and Japanese public opinion**

How did the Japanese public react to the Triple Intervention? Since the citizens of Japan were hoping that their army would storm Peking, they could not possibly have accepted the shameful Triple Intervention. Moved to calm the enraged populace and encourage his subjects to think beyond the current situation, Emperor Meiji issued a rescript in which he counseled his subjects to exercise patience and restraint: “Allow your thoughts to venture beyond the current situation. Avoid being distracted by trivial matters. Do not allow your emotions to control you. Behave prudently, lest our nation’s grand plan be diverted in the wrong direction.”<sup>5</sup> Almost exactly 50 years later, Emperor Showa uttered the following words in his rescript announcing Japan’s surrender:

We are keenly aware of the inmost feelings of all ye, Our subjects. However, it is according to the dictate of time and fate that We have resolved to pave the way for grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.<sup>6</sup>

When we compare the two, we can certainly sense the deep emotions that inspired both of them.

The Meiji rescript did succeed in placating the Japanese public. For instance, the Osaka Asahi Shimbun also encouraged restraint: “We respect the depth of generosity in His Majesty’s heart, so much so that we can only shed bitter tears. Having read the Rescript, we have no words to offer; we can only weep. As His Majesty’s loyal subjects, our only choice is to remain calm and attentive,

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Yunsheng, op. cit.; Furukawa Gyōson, *Kindai Shina gaikō hiroku* (Confidential diplomatic records from modern China) (Tokyo: Uedaya Shoten, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> [kunitama2664.sakura.ne.jp/kansyou280510.html](http://kunitama2664.sakura.ne.jp/kansyou280510.html) (in Japanese).

<sup>6</sup> “Surrender of Japan,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 16 October 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrender\\_of\\_Japan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrender_of_Japan) (retrieved 10/2022).

and await His Majesty's future decisions.”<sup>7</sup>. Fukuzawa Yukichi too asked his compatriots to tolerate the intolerable when he wrote, “Given the forces at work in the world, we can only exercise patience.”<sup>8</sup>

But coexisting with these exhortations for patience was a movement seeking to hold the government responsible for the humiliation of the retrocession and to encourage military expansion. Some Lower-House Diet members, among them Ozaki Yukio and Inukai Tsuyoshi, foreign policy hardliners, launched a campaign in June 1896 seeking an extraordinary Diet session to discuss the following three points.

- (1) Expand the military immediately to restore Japan's honor
- (2) Compel the government to accept responsibility for the retrocession of Liaodong
- (3) Maintain Japanese authority and status in Korea.

But the movement was suppressed on the grounds that it was detrimental to the public peace.

Though influenced by the various entreaties for patience, the Japanese people keenly felt ashamed and regretful of having to accept the Triple Intervention due to a lack of national strength, and recognized the necessity of military expansion. In *Jiji Shinpō*, Fukuzawa Yukichi took the lead in advocating military expansion even in peacetime: “The fact that we are at peace today does not mean that we need not worry about tomorrow. We are placing ourselves in danger if our military preparations are incomplete, even in peacetime. This would be like failing to ready a padded jacket, believing that the winter will not be cold.” Fukuzawa argued in favor of emergency military expansion and scolded the government for its hesitance to submit armament-expansion legislation to the Diet. He also urged the government to begin building battleships immediately (Diet approval could be obtained after the fact). Fukuzawa was voted down, but his arguments elicited the following comment from Ozaki Yukio, one of the signers of the accusatory petition: “Given a precedent like this one, i.e., letting hard-won territory that cost thousands of lives slip through our hands because of diplomatic blunders, we would be hard put to find even one soldier, no matter how loyal and brave, who would sacrifice his life in a national crisis.”<sup>9</sup>

Strange as this may seem, this was the same Ozaki Yukio who later became known as the “god of constitutional politics.” But his comment reflects the feelings of the Japanese public about the Triple Intervention. It is important to realize that it was not only the Diet representatives and journalists who called for military expansion, but also the citizens of Japan. A new age had dawned with a new objective, as the Japanese poured their energy into strengthening their country, vowing to recapture the Liaodong peninsula one day.

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<sup>7</sup> Ōsaka Asahi Shimbun, 13 May 1895.

<sup>8</sup> *Jiji Shinpō*, 01 June 1895.

<sup>9</sup> Isa Hideo, *Ozaki Yukio den* (Biography of Ozaki Yukio) (Tokyo: Ozaki Yukio Kinen Zaidan, 1964).