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Transcontinental Railways and Wars (1890-1914)

Atul Bhardwaj
Senior Fellow, PMML



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Transcontinental Railways and Wars (1890-1919)¹

Dr. Atul Bhardwaj

Abstract

This paper examines the development of transcontinental railways in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries and their geopolitical consequences. Projects such as the Panama Railroad (1855), the U.S. Transcontinental Railroad (1869), and the Canadian Pacific Railway (1885) integrated domestic economies, facilitated westward expansion, and symbolised national unity in their respective countries.

However, the expansion of rail networks in Russia, particularly the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891–1916) provoked alarm among maritime powers, especially Britain, which perceived land-based Eurasian rail networks as a direct challenge to its naval supremacy. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) exemplified this strategic tension between land and sea power. The British-backed Japanese naval forces decisively defeated Russia, whose incomplete Trans-Siberian Railway limited its ability to project power effectively, highlighting the vulnerabilities of continental expansion against maritime alliances.

Similarly, Germany's Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR), a cornerstone of its imperial ambitions sparked a united opposition from Britain, France, and Russia, intensifying pre-World War I tensions. When war broke out the unfinished state of the railways coupled with Britain's strategic support for Arab nationalism, undermined Germany's attempt to challenge British naval dominance in the West Asia.

By analysing these developments, the paper underscores the enduring land-sea dichotomy that shaped early 20th-century geopolitics and defined global power struggles.

Introduction

Transportation infrastructure—particularly transcontinental railways—redefined global power dynamics during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The paper examines the pivotal shift marked by the rise of land-based rail networks that challenged the supremacy of traditional sea powers like Britain.

The period also saw groundbreaking innovations in global communication, such as the transatlantic telegraph cable (1858) that enabled near-instantaneous messaging across oceans. Yet the most profound geopolitical transformation came from transcontinental railways. Projects such as the

¹ This paper is a revised version of the public lecture delivered at PMML, New Delhi on 22 February 2024.

Panama Railroad (1855), the U.S. Transcontinental Railroad (1869), and the Canadian Pacific Railway (1885) integrated domestic economies, facilitated westward expansion, and symbolised national unity.

However, the expansion of rail networks also fuelled conflict. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) exemplified the strategic tension between land and sea power: Japan's British-backed naval forces clashed with Russia's incomplete Trans-Siberian Railway, culminating in a victory that underscored the limits of continental expansion against maritime alliances.

Similarly, Germany's Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR)—a centrepiece of its imperial ambitions—provoked unified opposition from Britain, France, and Russia, exacerbating pre-war tensions. When World War I erupted, the railway's unfinished state, combined with Britain's strategic exploitation of Arab nationalism, thwarted Germany's attempt to challenge British naval dominance.

This analysis explores these developments to highlight the enduring land-sea dichotomy of early 20th-century geopolitics. It weaves together technology, economics, and strategy to show how transportation infrastructure served as both a mirror and an engine of great power rivalry.

It is argued that the railways not only transformed commerce and communication but they also served as tools of imperial ambition, reshaping the geopolitical balance between maritime and continental powers.

The rise of land-based transportation networks heightened global awareness of a deepening divide between two competing spheres of influence—maritime powers clinging to naval supremacy and, continental powers leveraging on their expanding connectivity. This divergence laid the foundation for modern geopolitics, framing international relations through the lens of geographic determinism. The land-sea dichotomy emerged as a cornerstone of strategic thought.

Mackinder: Understanding Railways in the Age of Sea Power

Alfred Thayer Mahan published, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783* in 1890² which coincided with the emergence of new tensions between maritime and continental power projection. Mahan's ideas provided a framework for naval power at a time when the U.S. Navy was

² Paul Kennedy, "The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power", *The International History Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1988). Also see Thomas Jamison, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: 'The Influence of Sea Power Upon History' as Strategy, Grand Strategy, and Polemic", *Classics of Strategy and Diplomacy*, February 9, 2022, <https://classicsofstrategy.com/2022/02/09/alfred-thayer-mahan-the-influence-of-sea-power-upon-history-as-strategy-grand-strategy-and-polemic/> accessed on 25 January 2023.

still ill-equipped to safeguard America's growing global commerce, while the primary challenger at sea was Britain.³

Central to Mahan's theory was control of critical chokepoints—Gibraltar, Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab el-Mandeb.⁴ Mahan's principle of 'command of the sea' remains foundational to naval strategy, shaping geopolitical thinking to this day.

In stark contrast to maritime theories, Halford Mackinder presented in 1904 a geopolitical framework grounded in railways' transformative power. Unlike sea-based models, his 'Heartland Theory' recognised railroads' dual role: integrating domestic economies by linking interiors to ports, and enabling transcontinental connections that could circumvent maritime trade entirely. This new land mobility undermined traditional sea power advantages, signalling a potential global power shift toward continental empires.

Mackinder's analysis revealed an existential challenge emerging from the 'World-Island'—Eurasia and Africa's unified landmass—where rail networks were erasing the logistical advantages of sea power.

Mackinder's warning captured this revolution: 'Where steam and the Suez Canal once enhanced naval dominance, transcontinental railways are now reshaping land power... Nowhere is this more decisive than in Eurasia's "Heartland"—whose vast, roadless interior finally became conquerable.'⁵

Naval traditionalists, particularly dismissive of his thesis, scoffed at railways as a credible threat to maritime supremacy, dismissing the idea as contrary to 'universal commercial experience'.⁶ These critics fundamentally misread Mackinder's intent when they accused him of advocating Britain to become a continental empire. They also missed Mackinder's essential purpose: not to promote continental expansion, but to jolt maritime powers from their complacency.

His strategic prescription was what might be termed a 'divide and unite' doctrine: prevent Eurasian consolidation while forging unshakable unity among maritime states. This was not a rejection of naval power but a roadmap for its preservation in the railway age.

Mackinder's Heartland thesis was significantly influenced by two pivotal conflicts: the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). In his final article, 'The Round

³ Kennedy, *ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Joachim Klement, *Geo-Economics: The Interplay between Geopolitics, Economics, and Investments* (CFA Institute Research Foundation, Kindle Edition): 11.

⁵ H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1904): 434.

⁶ Louis Halewood, "Peace throughout the Oceans and Seas of the World: British Maritime Strategic Thought and World Order, 1892-1919," *Historical Research* 94, no. 265 (August 2021): 564.

World and the Winning of the Peace', published in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1943, Mackinder drew powerful contrasts between these conflicts to illustrate the evolving relationship between land and sea power.⁷

He highlighted how in the Boer War, British warships traversed six thousand miles of ocean to project power into continental South Africa. In contrast, during the Russo-Japanese War, Russia demonstrated the potential of continental power by moving its forces a comparable distance entirely by land to challenge Japanese sea power.

The experienced British naval power successfully projected force across vast oceanic distances to defeat the Boers in South Africa, while Russia's partially completed Trans-Siberian Railway significantly hampered its military capabilities, contributing to its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. However, Mackinder saw beyond these immediate outcomes, to their longer-term implications. As he noted in his 1904 essay, 'True, that the Trans-Siberian railway is still a single and precarious line of communication but the century will not be old before all Asia is covered with railways.'⁸

The Russo-Japanese War exemplified the clash between sea power and land power. During the same period, Germany also launched the Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR), its transcontinental connectivity project that later became a significant contributing factor to World War I. While the BBR received limited attention in Mackinder's 1904 analysis, by 1919, in 'Democratic Ideals and Reality', he recognised its significance within German imperial ambitions to control "Mitteleuropa" - a region stretching from Antwerp through Hamburg, Vienna, Sofia, and Constantinople, to Baghdad. Sean McMeekin argues in *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, the railway formed part of Germany's broader aspirations for global power, which alarmed other Great Powers and contributed to pre-war tensions. While not the primary cause of World War I, the BBR symbolised the broader strategic competition between maritime and continental powers.

The paper further examines how attempts by continental powers—Russia and Germany—to construct land bridges became catalysts for major conflicts in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The analysis reveals a fundamental contradiction in the approach of the maritime powers to railway development: while they actively promoted domestic railway connectivity, they strategically opposed transcontinental railway projects that could facilitate international commerce outside their maritime control.

⁷ Francis P. Sempa, 'Halford Mackinder's Last View of the Round World', *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/halford-mackinders-last-view-of-the-round-world/> accessed on 20 January 2023.

⁸ Mackinder *ibid.*, 434.

This dichotomy illuminates a broader pattern in great power politics of the era. Maritime powers recognized railways' value for internal development but viewed transcontinental rail networks in Eurasia as potential threats to their control over global trade routes and strategic chokepoints.

The evolution of global communications network

The sturdy sailing vessels known as 'packet ships' were the world's first reliable international postal service at sea.⁹ These vessels braved treacherous waters and unpredictable weather to transport letters, government dispatches, and even precious cargo like books and magazines between continents. They followed strict schedules (weather permitting!), connecting England to its distant colonies and creating a web of communication across the vast expanses of the Atlantic, Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean.

In 1820, steam power began to revolutionize maritime transportation. However, sailing ships retained their economic and operational superiority in global communications network for several decades more due to the slow development of steam technology in the mid-19th century.¹⁰

The old sailing packets, with their billowing sails, converted to steam packets relatively early. Rob Roy, the first steam packet of its kind, was launched by a private operator in 1820. By 1823, the Royal Post Office adopted the Spitfire, an 83-foot steamer with 40-horsepower engines, as its first steam packet.¹¹ Later the British and the North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (later known as the Cunard Line), played a pivotal role in enhancing the reliable transatlantic mail service. This transformation marked the beginning of a new era in maritime communication and transportation.

While steamships strengthened transcontinental connections, railroads revolutionized domestic market integration. Britain pioneered this transformation with the 1830 Liverpool-Manchester Railway—the world's first inter-city steam-powered line—designed to boost hinterland access for its seaports. The technology spread rapidly; by 1835, France, Germany, and Belgium had adopted steam locomotives, aligning with the Industrial Revolution's peak.¹²

⁹ Postal Museum, 'Mail by Sea', <https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/mail-by-sea/> accessed on 20 December 2024.

¹⁰ Gerald S. Graham, 'The Ascendancy of the Sailing Ship 1850-85', *The Economic History Review* 9, no. 1 (1956): 74-88.

¹¹ Lorraine, 'Packet Service to 1854', *The Dover Historian*, March 21, 2015, <https://doverhistorian.com/2015/03/21/packet-service-to-1854/> accessed on 23 June 2023.

¹² Verónica Casanovas González, Carlos Hugo Soria Cáceres, and Gonzalo Andrés López, 'The Marmaray Railway Infrastructure: The Challenges of the Heritage Protection before the Growth of Istanbul's Urban Areas', *Preprints.org*, June 21, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202306.1527.v1> accessed on 15 August 2023.

Railways became Europe's industrial catalyst, reshaping transportation, commerce, and geopolitical strategy. Their integration with ports created new trade networks while offering land powers unprecedented leverage against maritime dominance. This shift extended globally: America's railway boom in the 1870s–1890s redefined its economic and territorial dynamics, mirroring Europe's earlier transformation.

But just as steam packets were perfecting their routes, another innovation revolutionized global communication. In 1858, the first transatlantic telegraph cable was successfully laid beneath the Atlantic ocean. Messages that once took weeks to cross the Atlantic could now be transmitted in minutes. This breakthrough forced packet shipping companies to reinvent themselves, shifting their focus from carrying messages to transporting passengers and cargo, as their role as primary message carriers became obsolete.

The Panama Railroad and Canadian Pacific Railway:

Symbols of national unity

This revolution in global communication networks set the stage for an even more ambitious dream: connecting continents not just by sea, but by land. In 1855, the Panama Railroad, the world's first transcontinental railroad, was completed, connecting the cities of Aspinwall (now Colon) on the Atlantic Coast and Panama City on the Pacific Coast. On January 28, a train crossed the Isthmus for the first time. This significantly reduced travel time between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, serving as a vital link until the completion of the U.S. transcontinental railroad.

In 1862, the United States Congress chartered the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroad Companies to construct the nation's first transcontinental railroad, connecting the eastern and western United States. Completed in 1869, this monumental project marked a transformative moment in American transportation history. However, the rapid expansion of railroads faced a temporary setback during the financial crisis of 1872–1873, when Jay Cooke and Company, a major railroad financier, declared bankruptcy.¹³ Once the economic downturn subsided, railroad development resumed with renewed vigour, further solidifying the United States as a connected continental power.

Yet, the flip side of these transformative transportation projects was their profound impact on indigenous landscapes, economies, and societies. The construction of railroads often disrupted

¹³ Julius Grodinsky, *Transcontinental Railway Strategy, 1869-1893: A Study of Businessmen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962).

traditional lands and resources, leading to the displacement and marginalization of indigenous communities.¹⁴

Despite concerns about ‘continental imperialism’, Canada—inspired by the success of the American transcontinental railroad—embarked on its own bold engineering endeavor. In 1881, construction began on the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), a transcontinental line that would stretch across the vast Prairies and rugged Rocky Mountains. Completed in 1885, the Railway’s inauguration was marked by the first freight trains traveling from Montreal to Vancouver—a monumental feat of engineering and logistical precision. The CPR proved transformative, unlocking the Prairies for settlement and forging a critical transportation corridor that connected eastern markets with the Pacific coast, facilitating the movement of grain, coal, and other vital goods.

William Cornelius Van Horne, who joined the CPR in 1882 after a prominent career in the American railroad industry, was a driving force behind the project. The railway under Van Horne’s leadership transcended its role as transportation infrastructure, transforming into a powerful emblem of Canadian unity and ambition.

In the North American imagination, railroads were more than just feats of engineering—they became powerful symbols of unity, progress, and national ambition. Beyond their undeniable economic impact, they were romanticized as instruments of social cohesion, binding together distant regions and diverse peoples under a shared vision of the future. Seen as great democratizing forces, railways were believed to transcend divisions, harmonizing regional interests and accelerating collective prosperity across the continent.¹⁵

This cultural legacy is immortalized in Gordon Lightfoot’s *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* and Pierre Berton’s *The Last Spike*—works that not only chronicle the railway’s construction but also enshrine its mythic status in the nation’s identity.¹⁶ Berton’s account, later adapted for television, and Lightfoot’s folk epic both underscore how the CPR stitched together a vast and disparate land, forging a shared sense of destiny.

¹⁴ Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). In this critical work Karuka challenges conventional narratives of American territorial unification. He reframes the Pacific Railroad as an instrument of what he terms [‘continental imperialism’, arguing that it served as a mechanism for extending state power and capitalist relations across the continent—often at the direct expense of indigenous sovereignty and traditional ways of life.

¹⁵ A. A. Den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 132-33.

¹⁶ Chris Hemer, ‘The Right Man for the Job: Gordon Lightfoot and the “Canadian Railroad Trilogy”’, *Active History Archives*, 1 January, 2023, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2023/01/01/lightfoot/>.

Trans-Siberian Railway and Russo-Japanese War

Russia's size was its greatest strength as well as its greatest weakness. Russia's vast territories remained shackled by mud roads and frozen rivers. Far East was remote. Its military supply lines were vulnerable and the lack of infrastructure stunted the growth of industry. To overcome these connectivity hurdles, Tsar Alexander III greenlit one of history's most audacious infrastructure projects: the Trans-Siberian Railway, (TSR) in 1891. The plan was ambitious as it intended to construct a rail line stretching nearly 6,000 miles from Moscow to Vladivostok.¹⁷

The idea for the TSR was first proposed by Perry McDonough Collins (1813–1900), an American entrepreneur and visionary. Fascinated by Siberia's untapped potential for global trade, Collins undertook an extraordinary 2,690-mile expedition along the Amur River in 1857—one of the first documented traversals of this remote and uncharted region. His journey, detailed in his 1860 book *A Voyage Down the Amur*, laid the groundwork for the Russian-American Telegraph project,

In the mid-1860s, Collins conceived a telegraph line connecting America and Europe via Russia, crossing the Bering Strait. This proposed intercontinental telegraph line would have traversed Alaska, crossed the Bering Strait, and extended through Siberia, creating an unprecedented global communication network. However, this dream was short-lived. In 1866, the success of the Transatlantic Telegraph Cable rendered Collins's plan obsolete, as it provided a faster and more efficient solution for intercontinental communication.

Building on the knowledge accumulated over the years Sergei Witte masterminded the TSR project. Witte's remarkable career trajectory—from humble ticket seller to stationmaster, then railroad executive, and ultimately to Minister of Transport—embodied his unwavering faith in railways as instruments of national transformation.

Witte envisioned the TSR to be Russia's economic lifeline, connecting Siberian resources to European markets while opening new commercial frontiers in China, Japan, and Korea. The railway's completion promised to revolutionize Eurasian trade, slashing transit times between continents from 45 days via Suez to under three weeks.

While the American and Canadian transcontinental railroads were celebrated for their role in national integration—connecting diverse regions, stimulating economic growth, and encouraging settlement—Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR) provoked significant international anxiety.

¹⁷ Christian Wolmar, *To the Edge of the World: The Story of the Trans-Siberian Railway* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013).

Unlike its North American counterparts, the TSR faced a markedly different reception on the global stage. Britain and Japan, in particular, viewed the TSR's progress with alarm, seeing it as a direct challenge to their naval supremacy.¹⁸

For these maritime powers the TSR symbolized not domestic progress but Russian imperial aspirations. They believed that railroads significance transcended commerce—while the railways did stimulate economic activity along their routes, their true disruptive potential lay in military affairs. This revolutionary breakthroughs in logistics, enabled rapid mobilization of personnel and matériel at scales that redefined strategic calculus in Russia's favour.¹⁹

Extending its reach to Vladivostok's ice-free ports promised Russia perpetual access to the Pacific theater. While internal observers saw national unification, external analysts discerned an expansionist weapon. This dichotomy would dictate global responses to Russia's infrastructural ambitions, with sea powers increasingly viewing track mileage as direct measurements of geopolitical threat.

The 1904 War

Russia's development of the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR) was a direct response to both economic needs and strategic vulnerabilities exposed during the Crimean War (1854). The conflict revealed two critical weaknesses: Russia's inability to rapidly deploy troops across Siberia (a process that took months) and the fragility of its naval supply lines, which were easily interdicted by the British in the Indian Ocean. These flaws made a modern, all-weather transportation system imperative.



¹⁸ Richard Cavendish, 'The Trans-Siberian Railway: The World's Longest Railway was Completed on 21 July 1904', *History Today* 54, no. 7 (July 2004), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/trans-siberian-railway> accessed on 23 June 2023.

¹⁹ T.G. Otte and Keith Neilson, eds., *Railways and International Politics: Paths of Empire, 1848-1945* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Source: Britannica, <https://cdn.britannica.com/61/50561-050-5B547F8C/Trans-SiberianRailroad.jpg>

By the late 1880s, the stakes grew higher. British-backed railway surveys along China's border with Russia sparked fears in St. Petersburg that Manchuria could become a hostile buffer, blocking access to vital warm-water ports. This threat of encirclement accelerated Russia's rail expansion.

An opportunity emerged after the First Sino-Japanese War (1895). The Triple Intervention—spearheaded by Russia and supported by France and Germany—forced Japan to relinquish the Liaodong Peninsula. Russia swiftly capitalized: by 1896, it secured a 25-year lease on Port Arthur and rights to build the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) through Manchuria. When completed in 1901, the CER gave Russia direct access to Port Arthur, a year-round warm-water port that complemented the seasonal limitations of Vladivostok.

The Maritime Alliance in Asia

By the 1890s, Britain's era of unchallenged naval dominance was fading and London gradually started accepting that. As rivals emerged, its empire could no longer stand alone and defend itself.

In 1892, Henry Spenser Wilkinson, Oxford's inaugural Professor of Military History, warned that alliances were essential to preserve British power. Two years later, he framed Britain's naval supremacy as dependent on European equilibrium, declaring it 'the outcome of a partnership between England and continental powers united against domination'. By 1895, his message grew more urgent: "Britain," he insisted, "must lead other states in war and peace to maintain its great power status."²⁰

The growing threat of a Franco-Russian entente, and Russia's expanding TSR network, compelled Britain to seek allies. This strategic imperative culminated in the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, a landmark agreement that reshaped Pacific power dynamics.

The treaty's terms were carefully calibrated: while requiring neutrality if either signatory fought a single adversary, it mandated military support if a second power joined the conflict. This clause had profound implications—should France (Russia's ally) intervene in a Russo-Japanese war, Britain would be obligated to fight alongside Japan. The diplomatic mechanism effectively deterred both France and Germany from active participation, preventing the conflict's escalation into a broader

²⁰ Halewood, Louis. "“Peace throughout the oceans and seas of the world”: British maritime strategic thought and world order, 1892–1919", *Historical Research*, 94, no. 265 (May 2021), 1-24:5 <https://doi.org/10.1093/hisres/htab015>.

European war. By isolating Russia from its potential allies, the arrangement enabled Japan to successfully resist Russian expansion in Manchuria.

Russia's eastward expansion through Manchurian railroads and the seizure of Port Arthur had ultimately provoked a conflict with a British-empowered Japan, whose naval capabilities were essentially a projection of Royal Navy expertise.

Though officially neutral during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Britain was in a strategic alignment with Japan. The two maritime powers shared profound naval ties: British shipyards had built the backbone of Japan's fleet, Japanese officers trained under Royal Navy tutelage, and Tokyo's naval doctrine bore clear British fingerprints. This partnership translated into concrete wartime advantages—Britain provided critical intelligence, including real-time tracking of the Russian Baltic Fleet's arduous journey to Asia, while Royal Navy vessels discreetly monitored Russian naval movements, compounding St. Petersburg's strategic dilemmas.

Japan's boldness stemmed directly from this support. When Tokyo launched its preemptive strike on Port Arthur—timed precisely after taking delivery of two Armstrong-Whitworth cruisers—it did so with implicit British backing. London also used its diplomatic influence to block Russia from purchasing additional warships abroad. These coordinated efforts exposed Russia's vulnerability.²¹

The Royal Navy's support for its maritime ally stemmed from its strategic interest in monitoring a conflict between an insular nation and a powerful continental force, seeking to derive strategic and political advantages from Japan's success. This commitment was evidenced by the early dispatch of three naval attachés to Tokyo: Captain William Christopher Pakenham, Commander John de Robeck, and Captain Philip Dumas. These attachés interpreted Japanese victories as validation of British military doctrine and policy, particularly given their shared strategic adversary. Pakenham's reports emphasized the cultural and doctrinal alignment between the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and the Royal Navy, noting that the Japanese had 'thoroughly adopted British naval doctrines' and adhered to 'Mahanian ideas regarding the centrality of fleet action'.²²

After Japan's victory, Admiral Yamamoto, the Japanese Minister of the Navy, acknowledged the deep naval kinship with Britain and profound influence of the Royal Navy on Japan's maritime development. He stated, 'our Navy, ever since its creation, has been modelled on that of Great Britain,

²¹ Australian Association for Maritime History, 'British Assistance to the Japanese Navy during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5', *The Great Circle* 2, no. 1 (April 1980): 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 260.

and we all owe her much in the education of the personnel as well as the preparation of the materiel'.²³ Admiral Yamamoto further emphasized this connection by noting that Japan had conducted the war 'in accordance with the lessons of Nelson, whose pupils he was proud to feel the Japanese were'.²⁴

This strategic positioning was articulated by Yoshino Sakuzō, a leading Japanese political thinker and democratic reform advocate during the Taisho period (1912–1926), who observed: 'Personally, I am not opposed to Russian territorial expansion, but the policy of territorial expansion is certainly uncivilized. Since territorial expansion brings with it the rejection of foreign trade, Japan must oppose Russian expansion in order to defend itself fiercely'.²⁵

Russia's defeat was compounded by the yet to be complete Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR). Though construction had begun in 1891, the 7,000-kilometer artery remained incomplete during the war, with its full operational capacity only achieved in 1916. The TSR's shortcomings epitomized Russia's broader logistical crisis—a stark contrast to Japan's British-backed efficiency. When the Baltic Fleet arrived exhausted after its 18,000-mile voyage (only to be annihilated at Tsushima), Russia's dual transportation failures—by rail *and* sea—sealed its fate.

Japan's victories—the destruction of Russia's Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur (1904) and the near-total obliteration of the Baltic Fleet at Tsushima (May 1905), coupled with its own land victories in Manchuria—forced Russia to sue for peace. The resulting Treaty of Portsmouth (September 1905), mediated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, marked a watershed in modern warfare.

The Second Anglo-Japanese Agreement (August 1905) transformed the 1902 pact into a decade-long strategic framework, capitalizing on Japan's victory over Russia to institutionalize a dual hegemony in Asia. While framed as a guardian of China and Korea's nominal sovereignty, the treaty's core provisions promoted greater *Naval Integration* involving joint patrols and intelligence-sharing mechanisms creating a de facto Anglo-Japanese naval cordon from the Sea of Japan to the Malacca Strait with a purpose of containing Russia. The alliance explicitly covered defence of India, reflecting British fears of Russian southward expansion, while granting Japan a free hand in Korea. With this Japan and Britain marked their respective spheres of influence. Britain tacitly endorsed Japan's 1910 annexation of Korea, while Tokyo turned a blind eye to British dominance in Yangtze ports.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance successfully prevented French and German interventions, effectively implementing what Mackinder's doctrine: keeping the Eurasian continent divided while unifying

²³ Richard Dunley, "'The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself Greater than His Weapons': The Royal Navy's Interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5", *War & Society* 34, no. 4 (2015): 251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵ Yōko Katō, 'What Caused the Russo-Japanese War: Korea or Manchuria?' *Social Science Japan Journal* 10, no. 1 (2007): 101.

maritime nations. This strategic success demonstrated how the combination of naval strength and carefully crafted alliances could effectively contain the ambitions of continental powers.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance didn't just counterbalance Russia; it laid the groundwork for a maritime condominium that would dominate Asian waters until Washington's rise as a Pacific power after World War I.

Even as Japan's alliance with Britain flourished, tensions simmered with America, another rising maritime power. The flashpoint emerged in Northeast Asia, where Tokyo's tightening grip over Manchuria and Korea—particularly through railroad networks—put it on a collision course with Washington. Two railways - *The South Manchurian Railway*: and *The Antung-Mukden Line* (strategic corridor linking Korea to Manchuria's heartland) became a diplomatic battlegrounds after the 1905 peace settlement. When China moved to reassert control over the Antung-Mukden line, its legal right under the original treaty, Japan reacted with disproportionate alarm. Washington's intervention on behalf of China was opposed by Japan because it viewed any infrastructure challenge as an existential threat to its legitimate spheres of interest, what Washington decried as illegal monopolies. This confrontation became the template for future Pacific conflicts, proving that railroads could easily spark wars.

E.H. Harriman, renowned for modernizing and integrating the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads in America, emerged as a key figure in these international railway politics. In mid-October 1905, he secured tentative permission from the Japanese government for partial control of their southern Manchurian railway operations, a crucial link in his ambitious vision of a global transportation system. Harriman's proposal to invest one hundred million yen in building a round-the-world transportation network represented a bold attempt to extend American railway influence into Asia.²⁶

Harriman narrated his grand vision for a global transportation network to Lloyd C. Griscom, the American Minister to Japan: 'I'll buy the Chinese Eastern from Russia, acquire trackage over the Trans-Siberian to the Baltic, and establish a line of steamers to the United States. Then I can connect with the American transcontinental lines, and join up with the Pacific Mail and the Japanese transpacific steamer'.²⁷ This ambitious plan would have created an unprecedented integrated land-sea transportation system spanning multiple continents.

²⁶ Sergey Tolstoguzov, 'Russian-Japanese Relations after the Russo-Japanese War in the Context of World Politics', *Japan Forum* 28, no. 3 (2016): 290.

²⁷ Quoted in Richard T. Chang, 'The Failure of the Katsura-Harriman Agreement', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 1 (November 1961): 67.

However, Tokyo's strategic concerns about maintaining control over its regional railways led to the cancellation of these agreements after just three months. This episode illustrated both the growing ambitions of the American capital to create global transportation networks as well as Japan's determination to maintain exclusive control over strategic infrastructure in its sphere of influence.

This growing rift foreshadowed the Pacific rivalry that would culminate in 1941—proving that even Britain's alliance couldn't shield Japan from the consequences of confronting America's vision for Asia.

The land-sea conundrum

While the Russo-Japanese War is often celebrated as the first triumph of an Asian power over a European nation in modern history, its deeper significance lay in demonstrating the decisive role of sea power and modern maritime warfare. British war correspondents drew strategic parallels between Japan's confrontation with Russia and Britain's own position vis-à-vis Continental Europe, recognizing the broader implications for global maritime strategy.²⁸

Japan skillfully managed its diplomatic communication to secure not only British but also American support by emphasising its commitment to expelling Russia from Manchuria while masking its own interests in Korea. The Japanese narrative carefully constructed a stark contrast between Russia and Japan. Russia was portrayed as an 'uncivilized country (hibunmei kuni)' with an intention to economically exclude it, while Japan presented itself as a 'civilized country (bunmei kuni)' championing open-door policies in Manchuria that would benefit Western capitalist interests.

Western journalists reinforced the maritime-continental dichotomy in their coverage of the Russo-Japanese War, framing Japan as the embodiment of 'civilized' qualities—a term steeped in the imperial biases of the early 20th century. This narrative equated civilization with maritime powers, portraying them as progressive and dynamic, while casting land-based nations such as Russia in a backward, conservative mould. In their reporting, journalists patronizingly celebrated Japan's arrival on the world stage, depicting it as a modern, progressive force standing against Russia, which they caricatured as a symbol of barbarism and reactionary stagnation. This portrayal not only reflected the era's racial and cultural hierarchies but also served to legitimize Japan's rise within a Western-dominated global order.

²⁸ Alexander M. Nordlund, 'A War of Others: British War Correspondents, Orientalist Discourse, and the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905', *War in History* 22, no. 1 (2015).

The ideological divide between maritime and continental powers ran deep. Maritime powers linked the ocean to freedom—unbound by soil or race—and tied it intrinsically to free markets, casting themselves as guardians of liberty. On the other hand, continental powers viewed maritime influences with suspicion. For instance, Chinese communists, before their mainland victory, condemned coastal cities such as Shanghai, Amoy, and Canton—centers of Chinese-Western trade—as corrupt and parasitic, seeing their proximity to the sea as a sign of excessive openness to capitalism and moral decay.²⁹

This antipathy went beyond strategy, reflecting opposing world views. Maritime powers championed freedom, progress, and open markets, while continental powers saw sea-based commerce as a source of corruption and decay. This ideological rift profoundly shaped twentieth-century international relations, with each side viewing the other's values and systems as inherently flawed.

Carl Schmitt, a conservative German legal, constitutional, and political theorist, analysed this divide, noting how the victors of World War I dismantled the non-discriminatory concept of war in international law. He highlighted a legal asymmetry: the 1907 Hague Convention protected non-combatant property in land warfare, but no such protection existed at sea, where disrupting enemy commerce—including seizing merchant ships and cargo—remained unrestricted.

Schmitt argued that maritime powers disrupted the land-sea equilibrium in legal terms. He contrasted continental land warfare, which aimed to protect civilians and property, with maritime warfare, which targeted both enemy and neutral private assets. For Schmitt, this dichotomy defined global history, framing it as a series of conflicts between maritime and land-based powers. For Schmitt, this dichotomy was not merely a legal distinction but a defining feature of global history, which he described as the history of conflicts between maritime powers and land-based powers.³⁰

The land-sea binary became central to twentieth-century geopolitics, shaping how major powers approached global conflicts. George Kennan captured this division starkly, envisioning a world split between liberal, free-trading maritime powers, led by the United States and its allies, and authoritarian, land-based continental powers, represented by the Soviet Union and its satellites.³¹

The Russo-Japanese War, often referred to as the "Zero War," was a precursor to the larger and more intense conflicts that followed. It was driven by the ambitions of continental powers to expand their

²⁹ Christopher L. Connery, 'Ideologies of Land and Sea: Alfred Thayer Mahan, Carl Schmitt, and the Shaping of Global Myth Elements', *Boundary*, 2* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 194.

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, quoted in Giorgi Tavadze, 'Land and Sea: Carl Schmitt's Philosophical Geography', *European Scientific Journal*, special edition (July 2013).

³¹ Francis P. Sempa, 'George Kennan's Geopolitics of the Far East', *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/george-kennans-geopolitics-of-the-far-east/>.

reach through transcontinental railways and the desire of maritime powers to maintain their dominance in the international political economy.

Connecting Berlin with Baghdad

Rudyard Kipling's popularisation of the 'Great Game' concept helped alert British policymakers to the mounting threats to their empire. While Russia had long been Britain's primary continental rival, Germany emerged as an equally concerning challenger to British imperial interests by the late nineteenth century.

The growing continental threat was exemplified by changing military dynamics. Vice Admiral Livonius of the German navy articulated this shift in his significant Reichstag speech: "Carrying out a landing on the English coast has been greatly increased by the introduction of steam power. The possibility of steaming by night with lights covered in order to escape the enemy's observation, have much reduced the advantages of England's insular position".³² However, what truly alarmed British strategists was not just Germany's naval ambitions but its broader continental strategy, particularly the Berlin-Baghdad Railway project. This transcontinental rail initiative represented a more fundamental challenge to British power than naval technology alone, threatening to create a land-based commercial and strategic network that could bypass British maritime control.

The July 1905 negotiations between the Kaiser and the Russian Emperor at Bjork for a potential alliance alarmed London. This development seemed to validate Mackinder's warnings about the dangers of a Russo-German alliance and the creation of a "world island," lending new urgency to his strategic theories in Whitehall. In response, the British press began advocating for a diplomatic rapprochement with Russia.³³ A sustained media campaign culminated in the signing of the Anglo-Russian entente on August 31, 1907.³⁴

Concurrent with these developments, Japan also recalibrated its position toward Russia as their mutual interests converged around the northern section of the Russian railroad in China. Russia's ultimate decision to reject German overtures in favour of an alliance with Britain likely stemmed from a pragmatic recognition that, despite Britain's relative industrial decline, its maritime supremacy remained a decisive factor in global power politics.

³² Lambi, Ivo Nikolai. *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914*. Allen & Unwin, 1984:24

³³ Tolstoguzov, 'Russian-Japanese Relations', 287.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

This diplomatic realignment—bringing Russia into alignment with Britain rather than Germany—represented perhaps the most significant strategic dividend of Britain's support for Japan during the Russo-Japanese War. The outcome helped prevent the formation of a powerful continental bloc that could have challenged British maritime hegemony.

The declining Ottoman Empire became a critical arena for imperial competition, with Germany strategically positioning itself through the Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR) project. This railway initiative served dual purposes: enhancing Germany's connectivity with its East African and Far Eastern colonies while circumventing British-controlled sea routes.

The 1889 contract between the Ottoman government and Deutsche Bank for an eight-year railway construction project from Konya to Basra via Baghdad held immense significance for both parties. For the financially struggling Ottoman Empire, it represented a potential tool for imperial consolidation. For Germany, the BBR offered a land route to the east through Basra that could reduce Mediterranean-India travel time by three days compared to the Suez Canal route, directly challenging British control over east-west trade through Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

The ambitious 2,500 km BBR route from Istanbul to Basra, planned to traverse Adana, Angora, Mosul, Aleppo, and Baghdad, finally commenced in 1903 after numerous delays. What began as a modest northeastern Anatolian project evolved into a grand initiative that captivated German and Austrian financial, industrial, and political circles, while triggering responses from Russia, France, and Britain.

International opposition shaped the railway's route: Russian objections led to rerouting through Konya instead of Angora, while British resistance resulted in selecting Basra rather than Kuwait as the terminus. Although Germany offered shares to France and Britain, with some British investors supporting 'internationalization' as a potential 'highway to India', the British government remained cautious amid rising German ambitions.

The 1903 London discussions regarding British participation reflected deep strategic concerns. As one British official presciently noted: 'It will be little consolation to those who come after us to think that by refusing to accept the share that was offered to us, their ancestors turned aside the temporary displeasure of Russia and scored a point against the then unpopular Germans'.³⁵ This statement reflected Britain's recognition that the BBR, as part of a through line from the Atlantic to the Pacific, required British involvement to protect both commercial interests and Britain's position as a major Asiatic power.

³⁵ Foreign Department, File No. 112-69/secret-E, January 1906, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

London's fundamental concern was that an unchecked system under German control could become a strategic weapon against British interests. The project thus presented Britain with a strategic dilemma: participation might legitimize German influence, while abstention could lead to complete German control of this crucial transportation corridor.

British engagement with the BBR project followed a complex trajectory. Initially, some experts argued for British participation, emphasizing that Britain's interests would be more affected than any other power's and therefore warranted an equitable role in the project's execution. They advocated for specific conditions: equal powers in construction, management, and control, along with British possession of the crucial Baghdad to Persian Gulf section. This pragmatic approach suggested it would be easier to secure British interests through participation rather than outright opposition to German plans.

However, this accommodating stance toward German initiatives was ultimately rejected. Britain faced an unpalatable choice: either opposing the project despite support from other powers, or accepting the prospect of Persia and Turkey falling under Russo-German influence. Neither option aligned with British strategic interests.

Opposition to the BBR remained relatively muted until 1904. The completion of the first section extending the existing Anatolian railway line served as a wake-up call, alerting Britain to what it termed the "Germanisation of Mesopotamia."³⁶ This development was perceived as a direct threat to British positions in Egypt and commercial interests extending from the Mediterranean to the Arab Gulf. Subsequently, Britain adopted a more actively hostile stance, working to restrict German access to British and French financial markets.

The strategic implications became evident in September 1905, when Sir N. O'Connor, British ambassador at Constantinople, formally protested to Turkish authorities about their establishment of a post on Bubiyan Island, citing infringement of Kuwait's territorial rights. Britain threatened to support Kuwait in establishing a counter-post on the island's northern shore if the Turkish post wasn't withdrawn. The Sheikh of Kuwait's response reflected the delicate balance of regional politics: while seeking British assistance (requesting Rs 500 for guards' quarters and Rs 100 for maintenance), he carefully avoided too close an association with Britain due to the Turkish military presence on Bubiyan Island.³⁷

³⁶ P. Maloney, 'The Berlin-Baghdad Railway as a Cause of World War I' *Centre for Naval Analysis*, January 1984.

³⁷ 'Berlin Baghdad', File No. 468-470/secret-E, October 1906, Foreign Department, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

British diplomatic maneuvering regarding Kuwait revealed complex layers of strategic calculation. Initially, Britain avoided confronting the Porte (Ottoman government) over Bubiyan Island to preserve Turkish sensibilities. This careful approach reflected genuine concern that insisting on the withdrawal of the Turkish post might lead to an unwanted compromise proposal, potentially resulting in the permanent withdrawal of the British Political agent.

The appointment of Captain Knox as British political agent in Kuwait in June 1904 exemplified this delicate balancing act. To avoid provoking Ottoman sensitivities, Knox's position was initially kept temporary. His brief recall from Kuwait in 1904 and subsequent reinstatement in October 1905 demonstrated the complex choreography of British regional diplomacy.

British strategic thinking was further revealed in their handling of intelligence about Khor Abdullah in northern Kuwait. While British Admiralty surveys had voiced concerns about the unsuitability of the area as a functional port, they recognized its potential as a railway terminus—crucial information deliberately withheld from German railway promoters. This selective sharing of intelligence highlighted Britain's sophisticated approach to protecting its strategic interests.

By 1906, Britain saw an opportunity to expand its influence beyond its traditional role of maintaining order in Persian Gulf waters. The fundamental question became whether Britain should cede control over the Gulf's development and commercial prospects—a question that touched on broader issues of imperial strategy and regional power dynamics.³⁸

Britain's diplomatic maneuvering regarding Kuwait demonstrated sophisticated strategic calculation in managing multiple competing interests. The initial reluctance to confront the Porte over Bubiyan Island reflected not just diplomatic caution but a deeper strategic concern: any forceful action risked triggering an Ottoman compromise proposal that could jeopardize the crucial presence of the British Political agent.

Captain Knox's appointment as British political agent in Kuwait in 1904 illustrated the nuanced execution of this strategy. By deliberately keeping his position temporary and managing his strategic recall and reinstatement between 1904 and 1905, Britain maintained diplomatic flexibility while preserving its influence in Kuwait. This careful choreography enabled Britain to assert its interests without directly challenging Ottoman sovereignty.

The British handling of intelligence about Khor Abdullah revealed another layer of strategic sophistication. While Admiralty surveys had identified the area's limitations as a functional port, they also recognized its potential significance as a railway terminus. By deliberately withholding this

³⁸ Ibid.

information from German railway promoters, Britain exercised a form of strategic denial, effectively using intelligence control as a tool of diplomatic leverage and territorial control.

The non-completion of Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR) proved a critical factor in the Turco-German defeat. The project's delays severely compromised the Ottoman Empire's logistical capabilities during wartime. However, the most tragic aspect of this strategic failure involved the Armenian communities along the railway line. Perceived as a security risk, these communities faced devastating deportations to the Syrian desert, resulting in what would later be recognized as genocide. Beyond the immense human tragedy, the deportation of skilled Armenian railway workers also dealt a severe practical blow to German engineering efforts, particularly in completing the crucial Cilician section.

The Railway's incomplete status critically hampered German military capabilities, limiting their ability to transport troops and materiel across vast Asian territories. Britain's successful obstruction of the BBR project achieved its strategic objective: preventing the emergence of a land-based alternative to British naval dominance and curtailing German expansion in West Asia.

The conflict reflected a tragic collision between two imperial visions: Britain's determination to preserve its empire based on control of maritime commons, and Germany's ambitious attempt to establish a continental land bridge, coupled with its exploitation of Ottoman pan-Islamism. The deadly intersection of these competing imperial ambitions contributed significantly to the catastrophic scope of World War I.³⁹

The Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR) united Britain, France, and Russia in opposition to Germany. While other contentious issues—from Alsace-Lorraine to German naval expansion—typically concerned individual Entente Powers, the railway project generated simultaneous hostility from all three powers. This unified opposition deepened Germany's sense of encirclement, pushing it toward an increasingly dangerous alliance with Austria.⁴⁰

³⁹ Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), McMeekin delves into the intricacies of the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway project, shedding light on its political significance and the power struggles between nations. The book offers a thought-provoking exploration of the events that shaped the modern Middle East.

⁴⁰ Maloney, *Berlin-Baghdad Railway*, 15.



Source : Global Security , [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/de-berlin baghdad-2.htm#google_vignette](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/de-berlin%20baghdad-2.htm#google_vignette)

Maloney's seminal analysis, originally written in 1959 and published by the Center for Naval Analyses in 1984, captures the BBR's crucial role in precipitating World War I: 'The Railway was a manifestation of a dramatic growth of German economic Power. It played a role in the British-German trade rivalries, in their strategic maneuverings, and in the German-English press controversies'. He further argues that while 'German hopes for the Railway undoubtedly were exaggerated', the Entente Powers' failure to recognize these aspirations contributed to the outbreak of war. As he concludes, 'the Railway involved a major conflict of national interests; failure to estimate these sources of this conflict correctly, on both German and Entente sides, definitely helped bring on World War I'.⁴¹

The Berlin-Baghdad Railway (BBR) was more than an infrastructure project—it was the linchpin of the Ottoman-German alliance. By binding Istanbul to Berlin through steel and capital, the BBR emboldened both empires to challenge British dominance in the Middle East. Its completion, they believed, would sever Britain's imperial lifeline to India and shift the balance of power. Yet the Railway's unfinished state proved fatal to their ambitions. Gaps in the BBR's critical junctions forced

⁴¹ Ibid.

the Ottoman Fourth Army to rely on sluggish mule caravans for logistics, leaving them hopelessly outmatched against Britain's mechanized expeditionary forces. What was meant to be a conduit for victory became a symbol of strategic overreach.

The Turco-German war plan hinged on a dual thrust: a direct military assault on the Suez Canal and a calculated ideological offensive—the proclamation of *jihad*.⁴² Berlin and Istanbul gambled that a call to holy war would spark Muslim revolts from Egypt to India, paralyzing British rule.⁴³ But the gamble failed. The pan-Islamic uprising they envisioned never materialized; Muslim soldiers in the British Indian Army remained loyal, and colonial subjects largely ignored the sultan's call. The jihadist propaganda, intended as a weapon of mass destabilization, fizzled into irrelevance.

While the Ottomans gambled on jihad, Britain played their own geopolitical game. Recognising growing Arab discontent with Ottoman rule, British intelligence courted Arab nationalists, particularly Sharif Hussein of Mecca. The British leveraged the anti-Ottoman sentiments of Syrian intellectuals in Egypt and promised support for an independent Arab state in exchange for rebellion.⁴⁴ This culminated in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1915-16), where Britain (ambiguously) pledged to back Arab independence—though it secretly contradicted these assurances with the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which divided the Middle East with France.

By 1917, the Suez Canal remained firmly under British control, securing the vital sea route to India. Ultimately, the BBR's incomplete state mirrored the broader flaws in the Turco-German strategy: grand vision, flawed execution. Where Germany and the Ottomans saw a path to dismantling British hegemony, London saw vulnerability—and exploited it. By leveraging Arab nationalism and reinforcing the Suez defenses, Britain turned the Railway's shortcomings into a decisive advantage. The Red Sea remained a British lake, the canal stayed open, and the dream of a German-Ottoman Middle East collapsed under the weight of its own logistical and ideological failures.

The period's conflicts and diplomatic maneuvers, from the Russo-Japanese War to the complex negotiations surrounding the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, revealed the intricate interplay between land and sea power. The alliance of maritime powers, Britain and Japan, against continental expansion demonstrated both the enduring significance of naval strength and the crucial role of strategic alliances in maintaining global power balance.

⁴² Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴³ Erik-Jan Zürcher, ed., 'Jihad and Islam in World War I: Studies on the Ottoman Jihad on the Centenary of Snouck Hurgronje', *Holy War Made in Germany*, (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 306.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

This era's legacy continues to resonate in contemporary geopolitics. The fundamental tension between maritime and continental power strategies remains relevant, as does the role of transportation infrastructure in shaping strategic advantage. Modern initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative echo historical attempts to alter the balance between maritime and continental power, suggesting that the strategic lessons of this period maintain their relevance in today's multipolar world.