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A War-Cloud in the East

Ross Winn

1903

Oriental war rumors are rife. Russia and Japan, facing each other across the frontiers of Manchuria, are marshaling their mighty resources for a death struggle. The crisis may be delayed. It may come tomorrow or next year. But it will come. Russia and Japan are bound to fight. It is an irrepressible conflict. And when it does come it will be short, sharp and decisive. That it has been so long delayed and that it does not come at once is due to several causes. No international problem, no diplomatic chess game, of modern history is more interesting to a student of human affairs than this deadly game between Russia and Japan.

The success of Japan in her war with China in 1895 brought the island empire to the world's notice and established its rank among the first-rate powers. The rapidity of Japan's rise is one of the marvels of history. Twenty years ago Japan was ranked with China, Persia, and other Asiatic nations. Today she is one of the Great Powers. Japan is the predominant spirit of the Orient. She has political and commercial interests peculiarly Asiatic, and these interests are far more important to her national policy than any other consideration.

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Retrieved on 9th May 2023 from en.wikisource.org

Originally appeared in *Winn's Firebrand*, Vol. II No. 7, December

1903.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

That very victory, by which Japan leaped into the world's recognition, was disastrous for China. It revealed her weakness and opened the way of her destruction. The partition of China had never seriously entered into the schemes of European statesmen. No one had ever dreamed that the Chinese, numbering a quarter of the world's population, could be conquered, except at a fearful cost in blood and treasure. The war of 1895 betrayed China's impotency. For centuries the Celestial Empire was bulwarked against foreign invasion by the sham of formidable appearance. Japan undeceived the world. Then the cupidity of the Christian cabinets was awakened, and from that time on the Great Powers of Europe began to contemplate the partition of China.

That the European powers have not already divided China's vast domain between them is due mostly to international jealousies, and the fear of each of the would-be land-grabbers of being overreached by the others. Thus Great Britain, who was very willing to add Tibet to her Indian empire, could not allow Russia to gain a position in Chinese Turkestan, where at some future time, the czar could pour his troops upon India by a direct rout, thus depriving England of the shield of Afghanistan. And Britain relies more upon the mountain passes and impregnable defiles of Afghanistan for the security of her Indian empire than upon her armies and fleets.

Japan, from her geographical position, finds all her interests opposed to the European occupation of China. Since, however, Japan is not strong enough to enforce a Monroe Doctrine of her own, her statesmen have directed their efforts to the prevention of any concerted attack upon the integrity of the Celestial Empire. The Anglo-Japanese alliance and the open door attitude of the United States regarding China, has extricated Japan from the danger of any united action by the Christian powers. She has only to deal, at present, with Russia. But Russia is a tough proposition. Of all the European governments, Russia is especially interested in Asia. Russia's naval and commercial power is now held in check by Turk-

ish occupancy of the Bosphorus and Germany's possession of the southern shores of the Baltic. For half a century Russia has been seeking a southern port. Headed off at Constantinople by allied Europe, the great northern empire finds her advance towards the Indian ocean blocked by England, intrenched behind the barriers of Afghanistan. So Adam Zad, the bear that walks like a man," turns toward eastern China, and here he encounters the Japanese. Japan has commercial and political interests on the eastern Asiatic shores that Russia will seriously invade if the latter once gets a marine outlet in that part of the world.

Moreover, Russia already controls a vast part of Asia, stretching from the Ural mountains to Bering strait. The proximity of so powerful a neighbor is naturally alarming to Japan. Russian advance is a menace, not only to Japanese commercial supremacy, but to Japan's political security.

In 1901, on the occasion of the allied Christian invasion of China, Russia occupied Manchuria, promising that her occupancy should be only temporary. The time set for the fulfillment of this promise expired long ago. But Adam Zad is still in Manchuria. Moreover, he does not intend to get out until he is thrust out by bayonets.

The strategical importance of Manchuria happens to be of very little importance to anybody except Russia, China and Japan. It is the extreme northern province of the Chinese Empire, lying next to Siberia, and populated by a nomadic half-barbarian people, and therefore the whole country is of small consequence from a commercial point of view. So neither the United States nor Great Britain have any material interest in the Russianization of that district. But with Japan it is a different matter. The addition of Manchuria to the Russian Empire would bring that power to the very doors of Japan, and would seriously interfere with Japan's commercial supremacy in eastern Asia. Besides, Japan reckons that Russian dominion in Manchuria would be only the prelude to a further raid on Chinese territory, in which event the

possession by Russia of the disputed province would be of the highest importance. So Japan finds it necessary to “stand pat” on Manchuria in order to hold a better hand when Russia makes a new deal for higher stakes.

The profound silence of the British government during all this Manchurian muddle is passing strange, especially when one recalls the blare of trumpets that recently announced an Anglo-Japanese alliance. What has become of that master stroke of British diplomacy? The plain truth is that England thought thru this alliance to induce the simple Japs to pull a few warm chestnuts out of the fire for her. But she strenuously objects when invited to perform a similar service for Japan. England is not prepared to measure strength with Russia. The South African war sapped the British Empire of its resources. That achievement was one of those victories of which it may be said that another like it would have been more disastrous than defeat. England’s statesmen realize that the empire is in too enfeebled a condition to match the terrific onset of the mighty mistress of the snows, whose embattled legions are so numerous that they sweep the breadth of a continent.

So England will allow Japan to extract her own chestnuts.

Russia is ready to take advantage of a situation so favorable to her ambitions designs. The czar is therefore pushing Japan with a determination to carry the point or force Japan into war single handed and supported only by her own resources. The Russian leaders know that Japan is the barrier in the way of Russia’s supremacy in the east, and that, sooner or later, Japan has got to be crushed. Now is the opportunity to do it, while Japan has no allied help. Then again the czar is menaced at home by the rising spirit of liberty, which threatens internal revolution. Better therefore to distract public attention by a foreign war than to face war at home. The Japanese statesmen appreciate the tremendous power of the Russian military. They are doing all they can to avert the catastrophe. But, if the worst comes, Japan will fight, single handed and to the death.