

## **TELEGRAPH LINES AND POSTAL SYSTEM: HOW COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS SERVED AS A CONDUIT FOR KOREA-MAJOR POWER RELATIONS FROM THE LATE NINETEENTH TO THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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This article presents the major power competition over Korean telegraph lines and its postal system within the framework of Korean neutralisation, subjects that have largely escaped Western diplomatic historians' attention. To this end, under-examined British, French, and Russian diplomatic and personal documents are consulted, shedding new light on lesser-known aspects of major power activities in Korea during the age of High Imperialism from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Ultimately, the attempts of foreign powers, especially Japan, to control these means of communication severely undermined Korea's independent capacity to execute diplomacy during key moments and eventually extinguished any chance for Korea to retain its fragile independence through neutralisation.

Keywords: telegraph lines, postal system, Sino-Japanese rivalry, Russo-Japanese rivalry, imperialism

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Western imperialism intruded into East Asia. Having already undergone rapid industrialisation that dramatically transformed their economies, Western powers shifted their attention towards the non-Western world, identifying the countries there as potential markets for Western manufactured goods. Possessing superior technologies and immense wealth, the Western powers encountered little difficulty in forcing East Asian countries to sign unequal treaties that allowed them to trade freely at designated treaty ports, where their nationals were given legal immunity via extraterritoriality.

Compared to its neighbours China and Japan, Korea's status in the Western-led international system was peripheral. China and Japan held much greater interest for the Western powers than Korea, the last East Asian country to enter the Western world order due to a lack of interest from Western powers. In fact, it was Japan, not a Western power that opened Korea to the international system through the Treaty of Kanghwa (1876). Despite its late entry into the international system, however, the country could not avoid the fate that other weak countries shared—becoming a victim of imperialism.

Yet, due to its vital geopolitical position, Korea was destined to play an important role in Far Eastern diplomacy; it acted as a bridgehead between maritime powers such as Japan and the United States and their continental counterparts like China and Russia. Realising that Korea's future could well be in jeopardy and that East Asia needed to be stabilized geopolitically, Korea and these foreign countries considered various options that could substantially change its relations with the major powers in the Far East. They included remaining a vassal state of China, declaring itself independent, attempting a Russian-led partitioning, becoming a protectorate of Japan, or alternatively, being turned into a neutralised state. Within this context, telegraph lines and the postal system would have considerable impacts on Korea's interactions with major powers and the rivalries between these powers, all against the backdrop of Korean neutralisation discourse.

Up until now, there has been no independent study in the West that stresses the role of communications (telegraph lines and a postal system) on diplomatic activities between Korea and the major powers, let alone one that touched on Korean neutralisation. While some research has been done on the introduction of telegraph lines in Korea, it does not offer a multi-faceted account on how telegraphy shaped Korea's relations with the imperial powers. In the last few years, a number of scholars have examined the role of telegraph lines in advancing major power ambitions in Korea, but only in the aftermath of specific incidents, amidst escalating tensions among the major powers over the Korean peninsula.

Among a handful of studies on telegraph lines by historians, the following studies stand out. Focusing on the central role of telecommunications for Japanese imperialism in Asia, Yang Daqing<sup>1</sup> describes Japan's utilisation of telegraph lines during times of peace and war to advance Japanese interests in Korea. Kim Munja<sup>2</sup> is a Japan-based ethnic Korean scholar who has taken a close look at Japan's exploitation of telegraph lines in Korea. Drawing on under-

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<sup>1</sup> See Yang Daqing, *Technology of Empire: Telecommunications and Japanese Expansion in Asia, 1883–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Kim Munja, *Myōngsōng hwanghu sibae wa Ilbonin* [The assassination of Empress Myōngsōng and the Japanese], trans. Kim Sungil (Seoul: Tae'haksa, 2010).

researched Japanese primary sources, Kim convincingly shows that Japan had no intention of handing back the temporary control of Korean telegraph lines that it had obtained during the Sino-Japanese War even after the conflict ended. Kirk Larsen<sup>3</sup> incorporates Daniel Hendrick's analysis on the usage of key technologies such as submarine cables by imperial powers to describe Chinese and Japanese efforts to gain an advantage over strategically vital areas in Korea.

Notwithstanding the merits of their work, these researchers drew on primary sources almost exclusively from Japan, despite the availability of other important sources from Britain, France, and Russia. In addition, none of the above-mentioned studies acknowledge Korea's efforts to overcome the Chinese and Japanese drive to control the said telegraph lines. Furthermore, some important examples of how foreign control of Korean telegraph lines hindered effective diplomacy between Korea and the major powers go unmentioned.

To address these weaknesses, this article reassesses the lesser known aspects of imperialism in the Far East: the dynamic role of telegraph lines and the postal system on Korea-major power relations as the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese rivalries played out beginning in the mid-1880s and into the early 1900s, dovetailing appropriately with Korean neutralisation attempts. Above all, the present study shows how Japanese success in controlling these modern tools of communication in Korea allowed Japan to emerge as the preeminent power there by early 1905 and to deal a severe blow to Korean foreign policy decision-making ability, including that regarding neutralisation.

As a way of retracing this decades-long process, the impacts of these modes of communication on Korea-major power relations will be scrutinised from multiple angles. Specifically, I illuminate how the manipulation of the Korean telegraph lines and postal system overshadowed diplomatic interactions between Korea and the major powers from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, surveying the key examples that overlapped with domestic and foreign plans to neutralise Korea. This study is divided into two parts: the first part considers the impacts of telegraph lines and the second part interprets the postal system's effects on diplomacy between Korea and the major powers.

Because telegraph lines' influence on Korea-major power relations has largely escaped scholarly scrutiny and played a much more important role in the Korea-major power relations than hitherto thought considerable space is devoted to them. Due to the relatively marginal role it played in Korea-major power relations and comparatively limited documentary evidence, more limited space will be dedicated to the postal system. In this way, the distinct effects of telegraph lines

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<sup>3</sup> See Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850–1910* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

and the postal system in the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Korean peninsula can be understood in their varying degrees of importance. Because most non-Russian scholars have largely overlooked Russian diplomatic documents, these crucial sources are used whenever necessary to divulge less known aspects of the interactions between Korea and the major powers surrounding Korean telegraph lines and its postal system.

### TELEGRAPH LINES

In the nineteenth century, technological advancement and the expansion of imperialism often went hand in hand. The creation of a network of telegraph wires, transmitting messages around the world at a speed hitherto unthinkable, opened new horizons in imperialism. Acting as a symbol of technological superiority, telegraph lines brought immense prestige to the major powers and enhanced their control over weak states.

Describing them as “an essential part of the new imperialism”, Hendrick describes telegraph lines in the following way:

In time of peace, they were the lifelines of the ever-increasing business communications that bound imperialist nations to their colonies around the world. In times of crisis, they were valuable tools of diplomacy...And in the times of war, the cables [telegraph lines] were security itself.<sup>4</sup>

Recognising the usefulness of telegraph lines in monitoring Korea’s internal and foreign affairs and in checking and disrupting other imperial powers’ plans in Korea, major powers rushed to construct and control telegraph lines connecting Korea with the outside world. Eventually, by 1900, the major cities and towns of Korea would be connected by telegraph lines.

### SINO-JAPANESE RIVALRY OVER KOREAN TELEGRAPH LINES

Compared to other imperial powers, Japan early on understood the valuable role of telegraph lines in its diplomatic relations with Korea. While Japan had operated a post office in Korea from 1876, prior to the construction of a telegraph line, the only way to communicate from Korea to Japan and vice-versa was by ship.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel R. Hendrick, *Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 163–164.

Messages would be transported from Shimonoseki in western Japan or the Chinese port city Tianjin. Upon arrival, messages would then be transmitted by telegraph to Nagasaki via Shanghai.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, this process was quite cumbersome and hampered diplomatic communication between Korea and Japan. Considering that since the Treaty of Kanghwa (February 27, 1876) the Japanese government had tried to increase its influence over Korea,<sup>6</sup> this posed a serious dilemma for Japanese policymakers.

The Imo Mutiny (July 23, 1882), which stemmed from Korea's old-style military units' resentment of the special treatment and better pay received by the Japan-trained Special Skills Force,<sup>7</sup> broke this deadlock. Having found itself dragged into an incident that could curtail Japan's erstwhile growing influence in the Korean peninsula, the Japanese government had to contemplate the construction of a telegraph line to link Japan with Korea. This would enable Japan to come up with a new Korean strategy, based on the receipt of the country's latest political developments.

Given the magnitude of the mutiny, Japan was right to regard the incident seriously; it occurred in the vortex of rising anti-Japan sentiment in Korea that had led to the escape of Japanese minister in Seoul Hanabusa Yoshimoto (1842–1917) and the destruction of the Japanese legation there.<sup>8</sup> Later, having received the news of the mutiny via Li Shuchang (1837–1897), the Chinese minister to Japan, the Chinese government, alarmed by the dispatch of Japanese troops to Korea,<sup>9</sup> also deployed troops there despite its ongoing conflict with France in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Yang, *ibid.*, 29. From early on, Japan had recognised the importance of maintaining an independent telecommunications system. Treating the inability to communicate easily as a serious breach of its autonomy, Japan launched its telegraph service on January 26, 1870 (Yang, 20). By 1888, the telegraph line would fall under state control to prevent leaks of official secrets and to facilitate the smooth conduct of foreign policy (Yang, 28).

<sup>6</sup> This treaty stipulated that Korea was required to open two ports to trade with Japan, to give the latter control over its consular jurisdiction in these ports, and to allow Japanese ships to survey the Korean coast at will. Please see Larsen, 63. To top it all, Japan regarded it as a device to deter Chinese intervention in Korea, mirroring France's acknowledgement of Vietnam's independence in the Second Treaty of Saigon (March 15, 1874) to deter Chinese intrusion. Please see Pak Hŭiho, "Kuhanmal Han'bando chungnip'hwaron yŏn'gu" [A study on the proposals for neutralisation of the Korean peninsula during the period from 1882 to 1904] (PhD diss., Tongguk University, 1997), 30.

<sup>7</sup> Larsen, 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Kojong sillok* 19:34a [1882.6.9].

<sup>9</sup> Hanabusa had already returned to Korea with Japanese forces. Larsen, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Pak Hŭiho, 32.

Meanwhile, having grasped the need for a telegraph line, the Japanese government struck a deal with the Denmark-based Great Northern Telegraph Company (GNTC)<sup>11</sup> in March 1883 to lay a submarine telegraph cable under the Korea Strait. In the same year, after negotiating with the Korean government, Japan obtained an agreement from it to connect Korea's Pusan with Nagasaki, a Japanese port city, via submarine cable. Built and operated by Japan, this telegraph line gave Japan a twenty-five-year monopoly on communications in and out of Korea, since the agreement barred Korea from building its own competing telegraph lines or from allowing a foreign government or company to do so. As a result, Japan could now send and receive Japanese language telegrams securely, strengthening the Japanese presence on the Korean peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

Japan's access to information on Korea through the Pusan-Nagasaki telegraph line caused much anxiety in China. Li Shuchang warned of the dangers of Japan having a monopoly on communications in Korea, and he was later joined by Wu Dacheng (1835–1902). An advocate of a more aggressive Chinese policy in Korea, Wu felt that the botched Kapsin Coup (December 4, 1884)<sup>13</sup> necessitated the construction of a telegraph to connect Lüshun with Seoul. Detecting the possibility of a competing Chinese telegraph line, some Japanese officials pushed for a Japan-constructed telegraph line from Pusan to Seoul and Inch'ŏn, but their views were ignored.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately for Wu, Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) had a different attitude towards the telegraph line; Li supported its construction to reduce Japanese power

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<sup>11</sup> Even before assisting Japan with installing the first telegraph line in Korea, the GNTC had already established a solid track record in bringing telegraph services to the Far East. Between 1870 and 1871, the Danish firm had wired a submarine cable connecting Vladivostok, Nagasaki, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. For details, please see Kim Yŏnhŭi, "Kojong sidae kŭndae t'ongsinmang kuch'uk sanŏp—chŏnsin sanŏp ŭl chungsim ūro" [The communication system modernization project in the King Kojong period—The establishment of a telegraph network system] (PhD diss., Seoul National University, 2006), 33. This left Korea as the sole Far Eastern state with no telegraph service, until the submarine cable project connecting Pusan and Nagasaki was completed.

<sup>12</sup> Yang, 30.

<sup>13</sup> The Kapsin Coup was instigated by the pro-Enlightenment faction in Korea, which was disenchanted about the pro-China faction's dominance in the Korean government; the pro-Enlightenment faction wanted to implement progressive reforms with the encouragement of the Japanese legation in Seoul (Larsen, 124). Li Hongzhang, an architect of China's official Korean policy, felt that China had to intervene militarily to end this coup, believing that Japan was behind it. Please see Li Hongzhang, *Li wenzhong gong quanji* [Complete works of Li Hongzhang] (Taipei: Wenhai Chubanshe, 1962), 345–346.

<sup>14</sup> Yi Sŏn'gŭn, *Han'guksa: ch'oe kŭnse p'yŏn* [A history of Korea: the early modern period] (Seoul: Chindan hakhoe, 1977), 888–889.

in Korea and to improve upon the existing inefficient and wasteful post-horse system.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, in May 1885, Korea's King Kojong (1852–1919), valuing his country's close ties with China, agreed to seek official assistance from China to build a telegraph line.<sup>16</sup> While this decision undoubtedly increased Korean dependence on China, the king was, at least at this stage, prepared to align Korea closely with Chinese interests on the Korean peninsula.

Seen from this standpoint, Kojong's rejection of the neutrality proposal of Japanese Minister to Korea Takezoe Sinichirō (1842–1917) (November 2, 1884) showed his true colours—a pro-China foreign policy—even if Takezoe's scheme could have bought some room for freedom of action for Korea. In this proposal, he sought to persuade the Korean monarch to seek wartime neutrality for Korea to guarantee its safety in the event of a formal war between China and France. Unwilling to alienate Korea from its traditional suzerain, Kojong replied that he hoped there would be peace between China and France.<sup>17</sup> In essence, the Korean sovereign demonstrated his scant appetite for a measure that could drive a wedge between Korea and China and risk his country's most important bilateral relationship.

Once China received an official request from Kojong, the Ŭiju Telegraph Agreement (July 17, 1885) was drawn up between the two countries. This agreement stated that China would oversee construction and provide an interest-free loan of 100,000 taels to finance the telegraph construction. Moreover, just as in its previous agreement with Japan, Korea was obliged not to cede control of the Chinese-built telegraph lines to others for twenty-five years and to seek Chinese approval for expanding existing lines or creating new ones.<sup>18</sup> While some

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<sup>15</sup> Larsen, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Yi Yangja, “Ch'ōng ũi tae Chosōn kyōngje chōngch'i wa Wōn Segae” [Qing's economic and political policies towards Chosōn and Yuan Shikai], *Pusan sabak* 8 (1984): 134.

<sup>17</sup> Itō Hirobumi, ed., *Hisho ruisan-Chosen kōsbō shiryō jō* [Compiled by the Secretary—Materials on negotiations with Korea Volume 1] (Tokyo: Hisho ruisan kankōkai, 1933), 260.

<sup>18</sup> Please see *Kojong sillok* 22:27b [1885.6.6]. Compared to Japan, China was a late convert to the telegraph system, though the latter was more adept at introducing telegraph services than Korea. The first domestic telegraph line was constructed by a Chinese admiral Ding Ruchang (1836–1895) in 1877 to link Tainan with Gaoxing. Please refer to Zhou Yongming, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 32. Four years later, the government-run Imperial Telegraph Administration was established (Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, 135]) and the Shanghai-Tianjin line also entered service in that year (Zhou, 33). In 1882, this line was extended to Tongzhou, and Jiangsu and Shandong provinces also began to receive a telegraph service. More telegraph lines were built in 1883 to connect Nanjing to Hankou and to deliver telegraph services to Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces (Zhou, 33).

Koreans protested over the land and timber confiscation used for this work, the construction went ahead and in just two months, the telegraph line between In'chŏn and Seoul was completed. This was joined to a branch office in P'yŏngyang in October, and by the end of November, the telegraph line to Ŭiju, a Korean town bordering China, was completed.<sup>19</sup>

China's decision to adopt such an interventionist stance in Korea could also be attributed to a neutrality proposal floated by Paul von Möllendorff (1847–1901).<sup>20</sup> Though the exact nature of the Chinese response is unknown, there is no question that this proposal vexed China. Its success could have put a serious dent in Chinese suzerainty over Korea and complicated Chinese efforts to deter other powers from expanding their influence onto the Korean peninsula.

After the Kapsin Coup, Japan tried to recover its lost influence through the Treaty of Hansŏng (January 9, 1885). The treaty involved Korean reparations to compensate Japanese victims of the coup, an official apology from Korea and an increase of Japanese forces to 1,000 men to guard the Japanese legation in Seoul.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, through Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), Li Hongzhang's point man in the Chinese drive to bolster its suzerainty over Korea, China was able to put the brakes on Japanese expansion into Northeast Asia.<sup>22</sup>

Against this backdrop, Möllendorff proposed the neutralisation of Korea, calculating that the political influences of China and Japan and Korea's lack of capability as an independent state meant that a third power had to be enticed to protect Korea.<sup>23</sup> Russia fit the bill as it maintained relatively cordial relations with China, opposed Japan and wished Korea to act as an independent buffer state.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Please see Larsen, 137. Built with Chinese expertise and labour, this telegraph line clearly had strategic implications as it was linked to Fenghuangcheng, a town where the Chinese military garrison was stationed, signalling China's intention to use this line as a means to military intervention, in the event of a political crisis in Korea. As a part of the construction process, 120 technicians were dispatched by China to install and connect telegraph lines and open branch offices (Kim Yŏnhŭi, 46–47).

<sup>20</sup> On the recommendation of Li Hongzhang, Möllendorff served as Kojong's foreign policy adviser and the head of the Korean customs from December 1882 to July 1885. Rosalie von Möllendorff, ed., *Möllendorff munsŏ* [Möllendorff documents], trans. Sin Pongyong and Kim Ungyŏng (Seoul: P'yŏngminsa, 1987), 88–90.

<sup>21</sup> *Kojong sillok* 21:87b [1884.11.24].

<sup>22</sup> Larsen, 127. In the aftermath of the Kapsin Coup, the hard-line Purist Party adherents in China called for a more aggressive policy in Korea. Although Li Hongzhang refused to accept all of their demands, he did appoint Yuan as a new Consul-General-level Commissioner for Trade in Korea. See Jerome Chen, *Yuan Shih-k'ai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Möllendorff munsŏ*, 67; 85.

<sup>24</sup> *Möllendorff munsŏ*, 67–68. His choice of Russia also reflected Kojong's nascent pro-Russia sentiment. In May 1884, he dispatched Kim Kwansŏn to Novokievski to advise the Russian



Taking advantage of the Tianjin Convention (April 18, 1885) that called for a simultaneous withdrawal of Chinese and Japanese military forces from Korea,<sup>25</sup> Möllendorff posited that Korea now had more room to manoeuvre as China's interference in Korean affairs and Japanese sabre-rattling in Korea had both lessened.<sup>26</sup>

From this analysis, he concocted a three-stage Russian-led Korean neutralisation proposal to turn Korea into a Belgian-style neutral state: China and Japan would first jointly guarantee Korean neutrality and non-aggression. A military defence relationship would then follow, and finally, a guarantee of non-aggression against Korean territory would be agreed upon.<sup>27</sup> Though Russia's limited military presence in the Far East and its relatively weak economy vis-à-vis the economies of other Western powers contributed to its failure,<sup>28</sup> this initiative showed that China could not rest on its laurels in terms of its position in Korea and had to resist any move that could upset the status-quo on the Korean peninsula.

Meanwhile, although the telegraph project was largely welcomed in Korea, it was not all smooth sailing for China. Citing the Pusan-Nagasaki agreement that gave a twenty-five-year monopoly to Japan on telegraph construction in Korea, Japan demanded reparations and concessions from the Korean government, arguing that the Ŭiju agreement breached Korea's prior agreement with Japan. Chinese and Korean officials sought to deflect the Japanese complaint by stressing the distinction between the Japanese (underwater) and Chinese-built telegraph lines (overland). Though some Korean officials were receptive to Japanese demands for a new telegraph line between Seoul and Pusan, Yuan Shikai<sup>29</sup> and

official Nikolai G. Matiunin about Korea's intentions to enter a treaty relationship with Russia. Sŏng Kŭmyŏng, *Rōsia ūi Tongbuga chinch'ul kwa Han'bando chŏngch'ae* (1860–1905) [Russia's advance into Northeast Asia and its policy on the Korean Peninsula (1860–1905)] (Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 2004), 91.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Kyŏngchang, *Tongyang oegyosa* [East Asian diplomatic history] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1982), 337.

<sup>26</sup> Kim Wuhyŏn, "P. G. von Möllendorff ūi Chosŏn chungnip'hwa kusang" [P. G. von Möllendorff's plan for the neutralisation of Korea], *P'yŏngbwa yŏn'gu* 8 (1983): 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Möllendorff munsŏ*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> Besides, Russian Foreign Minister Nikolai Karlovich Giers (1820–1895) had already called for strict Russian neutrality amidst the Sino-Japanese tension over Korea. Please see Sŏng Kŭmyŏng, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Referring to himself as "His Imperial Chinese Majesty's Resident, Seoul" (Chen, 33–34), Yuan made every effort to demonstrate Chinese suzerainty over Korea. For instance, at a banquet hosted by the Chinese legation in Seoul, Yuan allocated the lowest level seat to the president of the Korean Foreign Office, claiming that Korea was a member of the Sinic sphere. Please see Han Sukhee, "Beyond the Celestial Sinic Sphere: King Kojong and Korea's Pursuit of Modernization" (PhD diss., Tufts University, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1998), 241.

the Chinese Commissioner of Trade in Pusan Tan Gengyao wanted none of it. Once again, Korea found itself squeezed between the Sino-Japanese intrigues surrounding its telegraph system and allowed the two Asian rivals to effectively deny it independent access to telegraphy for diplomatic communication with the outside world.

In any case, determined to consolidate Chinese power in Korea, Yuan and Tan strived to convince Korean officials such as Kim Yunsik (1835–1922), a well-known member of the pro-China faction, that the proposed Seoul-Pusan line should be free from the control of a third power. Since, Kim, along with Ŏ Yunjung (1848–1896) had asked for the dispatch of Chinese troops and warships to Korea during the Imo Mutiny,<sup>30</sup> this was a shrewd move from Yuan and Tan. Signifying China's lingering concern about Russian involvement in Korea, however, some Chinese officials wanted to go further. Their concern lay in the possible construction of a Seoul-Wŏnsan line, which could potentially extend further north, thereby facilitating the enhancement of Russian influence in Korea.<sup>31</sup> Reminded of this possibility by Li Hongzhang, Yuan repeatedly invoked the terms of the Ŭiju agreement to ensure Chinese control of the Wŏnsan line.<sup>32</sup> In this way, China succeeded in preventing Korea from using the Seoul-Wŏnsan line as a conduit to diversification of its foreign policy, since this new communication channel could induce a more active Russia involvement in Korean affairs.

Around the time of the Ŭiju agreement, the influential Russian newspaper *Moskovskije Vedomosti* toyed with the idea of permanent neutrality for Korea (December 29, 1884), demonstrating that there was a growing willingness among Russian opinion makers to question their government's cautious Korean policy. The origins of this initiative centred on Russia's passive Korean policy and the perceived U.S., British, and German expansion onto the Korean peninsula. The newspaper complained that Russia was a mere bystander in Korean affairs, despite

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<sup>30</sup> Academia Sinica. Institute of Modern History, ed., *Qingji Zhong-Ri-Han guanxi shiliao* [Historical materials on the relations between China, Japan and Korea at the end of the Qing dynasty] (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of Modern History, 1972), 748–750.

<sup>31</sup> Larsen, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Larsen, 138. Korea would be more successful in warding off Chinese pressure in the construction of the Seoul-Pusan line. After obtaining China's consent to the partial administration of the proposed telegraph line and the appointment of telegraph line administrators, the Korean government appointed Seoul-based English teacher Thomas E. Halifax to design the line and arranged a loan worth 34,000 won from the Germany company Heinrich Constantin Edward Meyer & Co. to finance the project (Kim Yŏnhŭi, 69–71). The construction would begin on March 6, 1888 and last until May 27, 1888. Notably, this line would be built without any foreign assistance and involved more than thirty Korean technicians (Kim Yŏnhŭi, 71–72).

Korea being located on the doorstep of the Ussuri region and just “two steps” away from Vladivostok. The *Moskovskie Vedomosti* then touched on the possible impact of British, Chinese, Japanese, and German warships being moored at Korean ports and the prospects of Korea becoming a strategic base for foreign military and commercial units poised to invade Russia. The paper also stressed the importance of controlling Korea, quoting Shanghai newspaper articles that identified the country as the key to controlling the Sea of Japan (East Sea). Since for Russia, a neutral Korea would have had the same significance as a neutral Turkey, the Russian government could not afford to ignore Korea, given that all the European powers had already been successfully engaging in colonial policies.<sup>33</sup>

This initiative did not reflect the Russian government’s official stance (recall that Foreign Minister Giers had advocated strict Russian neutrality in Korean affairs [see note 28]), and there is no evidence to suggest that this idea was embraced in St. Petersburg. Still, the fact that it was included in an official Russian document shows that at least some Russian military officials may have contemplated such an option for stepping up Russia’s involvement in Korea to check the expansion of other powers into the country. Under such circumstances, one could not fault China for remaining vigilant about Russian strategy towards Korea and for searching for ways to consolidate its influence over the Korean peninsula.

As Chinese officials were busy contemplating a countermeasure against Russian power in Korea, there was a noticeable change in Kojong’s perception of China. Having tolerated the construction of Chinese-financed and built telegraph lines, he now hedged his bets and looked to Russia to check China’s profound influence over Korea. The Second Russo-Korean pact (August 13, 1886) was a by-product of Kojong’s change of heart towards China. After the appointment of Karl Ivanovich Waeber (1841–1910) as Russian Chargé d’affaires to Korea in October 1885, some pro-Russia Min clan members (many of whom were closely aligned with Kojong) approached Waeber about having Russian warships deployed to Korea to facilitate its independence. He in turn demanded an official document bearing Kojong’s seal; Chuksan magistrate Cho Chundu and other Korean officials passed on a secret document containing the stamp and seal of State Councillor Sim Suntaek (1824–1906).<sup>34</sup> Angered by this action, Yuan threatened

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<sup>33</sup> Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, ed., *Rōsia haegunsŏng munsŏ* I (1854–1894) [Russian State Naval Archive, Vol.1 (1854–1894)] (Kwachŏn: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 2007), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Sŏng Hwangyong, *Kŏndae Tongyang oegyosa* [A diplomatic history of modern East Asia] (Seoul: Myŏngjisa, 2005), 207.

to force the abdication of Kojong and have his father the Taewŏn'gun supervise Korean affairs in his place.<sup>35</sup>

While Waeber's denial of the existence of the pact prevented Yuan from carrying out this threat,<sup>36</sup> this sour episode highlighted that from China's standpoint, a possible Russo-Korean rapprochement could upset Chinese predominance over the Korean peninsula. China reacted by tightening its grip over Korean telegraph lines and interrupting diplomatic correspondence between Korea and Russia. As a part of this process, Yuan disrupted the transfer of Waeber's telegraphs to St. Petersburg, and he even presented a forged telegraph message to Kojong to warn him about the supposed arrival of Chinese troops in Korea.<sup>37</sup>

Fixing telegraph fee rates was another way of consolidating Chinese control of its telegraph lines. In light of this, not long after the Inch'ŏn-Seoul-Ŭiju line began operations, Japanese officials noted that the rates for this line were much lower than those of the Seoul-Pusan line and demanded equal treatment for all lines. Ostensibly, the Japanese grievance about its share of revenue from all communications from Seoul and beyond, but what was really at stake was the fulfilment of Japan's long-term desire to put all telegraph lines in southern Korea under its control. This could explain why Japan called for the merging of the Inch'ŏn-Seoul line with the Seoul-Pusan line.<sup>38</sup>

In parallel, the Chinese government had to deal with Korea's nascent desire to have greater control over the telegraph lines. At first, China tried to resolve this dilemma through a compromise; Yuan agreed to allow the Korean government to send apprentices and watchmen to each telegraph office, and he promised to cover some of the expense for the operation of the telegraph line. Nevertheless, China still refused to yield complete control of the telegraph lines to Korea<sup>39</sup> and in 1888, frustrated Korean officials asked Yuan to permit Korea to control the Inch'ŏn-Seoul-Ŭiju line. Replying that such a request contravened the Ŭiju

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<sup>35</sup> Kim Kyŏngchang, 350.

<sup>36</sup> Song Kŭmyŏng, 208–209.

<sup>37</sup> Kim Chongwŏn, "Cho-Ch'ŏng sangmin suryuk changjŏng ũi ch'egyŏl kwa kŭ yŏnghyang" [The ratification of the regulations for maritime and overland trade between Chinese and Chosŏn subjects and its impact], in *Chosŏn hugi taee kwan'gye yŏn'gu* [A study of external relations in late Chosŏn], ed., Kim Chongwŏn and Yi Yangja (Seoul: Hanul, 2009), 209. Russia was not the only victim of this blatant interference. Other Western diplomats complained of the arrival of unintelligible telegrams and pointed their fingers towards China. Kim Wŏnmo, ed., *Allen ũi ilgi* [Allen's diary] (Seoul: Tan'guk University Press, 1991) [October 1, 1887], 517.

<sup>38</sup> Larsen, 138.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Telegraph Agreement, Yuan also earned the backing of Li, who worried about the security implications for China.<sup>40</sup>

Korea refused to budge, however, and in addition to the already discussed Seoul-Pusan line, the Korean government realised that a new telegraph line free from Chinese domination was needed. Therefore, in 1891, the Seoul-Wönsan line was constructed independently with Korean capital and technology, and Koreans secretly hoped that this could spur Russian interest in the Korean peninsula.<sup>41</sup> Previously, the Korean government had sought a French loan in 1890 to repay the telegraph loan from China and recover Korean control of the telegraph line, but Li and Yuan blocked this attempt.<sup>42</sup> More worryingly, China redoubled its efforts to reinforce Chinese control of Korean telegraph lines by requesting the free transmission of official Chinese messages.<sup>43</sup>

Kojong's decision to contemplate Swiss-style permanent neutrality in June 1891 must have grown out of his growing discomfort about Chinese intrusion in Korean sovereignty—including the former's consistent efforts to dominate the latter's telegraph lines, which marked a significant departure from his cold reception of Takezoe's neutrality plan. Suffice to say that Korea was now facing unwanted pressure from China for the administration and operation of Korean telegraph lines, a critical element in any country's official channel for diplomacy. The proposal floundered due to opposition from China and a lack of interest from Britain, Japan, and Russia,<sup>44</sup> but it epitomised Korea's desire to preserve its fragile independence by distancing itself from China. It also attested to a markedly improved awareness of contemporary geopolitics by the Korean monarch (and by extension, the Korean government) and his ability to use Switzerland as a reference point to bring about Korean neutrality, even though that country did not have official relations with Korea.

Ultimately, despite all these challenges, China's grip on Korea's telegraph lines would not face a real test until the Sino-Japanese War (August 1, 1894 to April 17,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>41</sup> The Seoul-Wönsan telegraph line was originally initiated by Kojong's American adviser, Owen Nickerson Denny (1838–1900) in 1888 to connect Seoul with Vladivostok, and he unsuccessfully sought a Japanese loan to finance it (Kim Yönhüi, 73). Facing stiff opposition from China, Korea could extend the line only to Wönsan, but unlike the Seoul-Pusan line, the Seoul-Wönsan line would be administered by the Korean government. The construction would last less than three months and would be completed in June 1891 (Kim Yönhüi, 75).

<sup>42</sup> Yi Yangja, 142.

<sup>43</sup> Kuksa p'yönc'h'an wiwönhoe, ed., *P'ürang'sü oemubu mun'sö* 5, 1891–1892 [French diplomatic documents Vol. 5, 1891–1892], (Kwachön: Kuksa p'yönc'h'an wiwönhoe, 2006), 111–112.

<sup>44</sup> United States Department of State, *Despatches from the United States Ministers to Korea, 1883–1905*, M134, Allen to Blaine [June 3, 1891].

1895) broke out. Along with railroads, telegraph lines were considered by imperial powers to be one of the two infrastructures needed to conduct modern warfare. For example, in order to reliably convey instructions from its military headquarters to its forces serving in the battle areas in Korea, Japanese access to telegraph lines on the Korean peninsula was vital.<sup>45</sup> This awareness contributed to the construction of military telegraph lines in the south of Korea by the Japanese military, where existing lines had been destroyed during the Tonghak Uprising in Korea. Japanese forces also took over the Seoul-Ŭiju and Seoul-Wŏnsan lines,<sup>46</sup> thereby preventing their Chinese opponents from executing effective military operations in Korea.

Little changed after the Sino-Japanese War ended. While the Korean government might have hoped China's defeat would pave the way for the long-overdue Korean control of Chinese-controlled telegraph lines, Japan moved quickly to fill China's shoes. Although the Korean government managed to obtain the administration of all telegraph lines north of Seoul,<sup>47</sup> Japanese Foreign Minister Mutsu Munemitsu (1844–1897) stressed that for future strategies, all Korean telegraph lines had to be placed under Japanese control. Japan's military headquarter and Mutsu were on the same page, since the Japanese military official Saionji Kinmochi (1849–1940) would later emphasize to Japan's Minister to Korea Miura Gorō (1847–1926) the need to protect Japanese-built military telegraph lines.<sup>48</sup> All in all, by 1895, it looked as though Japan had secured a virtual monopoly on Korean telegraph communications,<sup>49</sup> and once again Korea was haunted by the spectre of foreign infringement of its diplomatic sovereignty via telegraph lines.

## **RUSSO-JAPANESE RIVALRY OVER KOREAN TELEGRAPH LINES**

Korea found it hard to break away from the yoke of Japan, but just as it tried to curtail the harmful impacts of Chinese control of Korean telegraph lines, Korea now shifted gears to counter the Japanese scheme to monopolize Korea's telegraph system. This coincided with the advent of Russia as a strategic rival to

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<sup>45</sup> Kim Munja, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Yang, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>48</sup> Kim Munja, 156.

<sup>49</sup> Pak Chonghyo ed., *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso sojang Han'guk kwallyōn munsō yoyakch'ip* [Abridged collection of Korea-related Russian documents at the Russian National Archives] (Seoul: Han'guk kukche kyoryu chaedan, 2002), 363.

Japan in the Far East in 1895 and their competition for predominance in the region, which would continue until the Russo-Japanese War (August 2, 1904 to May 9, 1905).

Perhaps emboldened by this new development, just a year after Japan secured operational control of the Korean telegraph lines, the Korean government redoubled its effort to construct a telegraph line between Korea and Russia. As a preliminary step, in April 1896, Kojong dispatched Min Yŏnghwan (1861–1905) as his special envoy to coronation (May 26, 1896) of Russian Emperor Nicholas II (1868–1918) to solicit Russian assistance for resolving problems pending between Korea and Russia, including the telegraph line project. Though Min failed to garner Russia's explicit backing,<sup>50</sup> the Korean government still proceeded to build the Seoul-Ŭiju line and by May 1897, the Seoul-Wŏnsan line was completed as well.<sup>51</sup>

Having temporarily handed over virtually total control of its telecommunication lines to Japan after the Sino-Japanese War, Korea took a small but meaningful step to recover its lost sovereignty and pursue a more independent foreign policy. Considering that the Seoul-Wŏnsan line could potentially be used to link up with Russian telegraph lines, this new telegraph line could have had strategic implications for Russo-Korean relations, as described below.

Almost five years after the construction of the Seoul-Wŏnsan line, the Korean government entered negotiations with Russian Minister to Korea Alexander Ivanovich Pavloff (1860–1923) (March 1902) to connect a Korean telegraph line with Russia and, seven months later, the talks had progressed far enough between the Korean government and the Russian legation in Seoul for the building of a telegraph line connecting northern Korea with Russia's Novokiyevskoye to be considered.<sup>52</sup> In December, a Seoul-based Russian diplomat further reported to

<sup>50</sup> Kim Soyŏng, "Seoul kwa Mosŭkŭba esŏ kŭdulman ũi kŏrae rul hada: Peberŭ-Komura kaksŏ (1896. 5. 14) wa Robanop'ŭ-Yamagata ũijŏngsŏ (1896. 6. 9)" [The deal between them in Seoul and Moscow: the Waeber-Komura Memorandum (May 14, 1896) and the Lobanov-Yamagata Protocol (June 9, 1896)], in *Choyak ũro pon Han'guk kŭndaesa* [Modern Korean history through treaties], ed., Ch'oe Dŏksu, et al. (P'aju: Yŏllin ch'aektŭl, 2010), 376. For an account of Min Yŏnghwan's negotiations in St. Petersburg concerning a Russo-Korean telegraph line, please see Michael Finch, *Min Yŏnghwan: A Political Biography* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2002), 97 and 99.

<sup>51</sup> *Rŏsia kungnip munsŏ pogwanso*, 564. During the construction phase of these telegraph lines, the Korean government set up branch offices in Seoul, Kaesŏng, P'yongyang, and Ŭiju and sub-branches in the provincial capitals and treaty ports. Kim Yŏnhŭi, 102. Though the precise amount budgeted by the Korean government for the construction of telegraph lines is not clear, the Russian Finance Ministry noted that a considerable sum was spent by the Korean government. Please see Han'guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, ed., *Kugyŏk Han'guk chi* [Translations of Korean records] (Sŏngnam: Han'guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, 1984), 632.

<sup>52</sup> *Rŏsia kungnip munsŏ pogwanso*, 257.

Russian Foreign Minister Vladimir N. Lamsdorff (1845–1907) about the need to extend Korea's telegraph line to Kyōnghŭng to connect it with Russia. This diplomat also thought that he and the Japanese Minister to Korea Hayashi Gonsuke (1860–1939) could reach an agreement on this problem.<sup>53</sup>

It is not clear why this Russian diplomat thought a deal with Japan was possible, but he might have had in mind the Lobanov-Yamagata Protocol (May 2, 1896), which granted Russia the right to connect itself with Seoul via a telegraph line, though the management of the telegraph lines would still belong to Japan.<sup>54</sup> From the Korean perspective, however, this protocol endangered Korea's sovereignty over its telegraph lines, since the country was not consulted before this accord was signed. After all, the Korean government had been trying to rely on Russia to recover at least some level of autonomy over Korean telegraphy. More importantly, the Russo-Japanese protocol would present a serious dilemma to Korea, forcing it to dispatch emissaries abroad to sustain neutrality diplomacy. Perhaps this should not have come as a surprise since the protocol unwittingly permitted Japan to justify its administration of Korean telegraph lines.

As expected, Japan had no intention of relaxing its control over Korean telegraph lines and it reaffirmed this stance by refusing Russia's request to connect Russia and Korea with a telegraph line.<sup>55</sup> To add insult to injury, like its Chinese predecessors, Japan deliberately manipulated Russian telegrams. To give one example, on December 7, 1903, Nagasaki-based Russian diplomat Alexander A. Gagarin complained to the Director of Asia in Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that a Japanese telegraph office delivered secret Russian telegrams after systematically distorting them. On the same day, Gagarin also reported to the Russian minister in Tokyo that he could not read a damaged telegraph message sent from Pavloff, asserting that the telegram had been destroyed intentionally due to strong anti-Russian sentiment in Japan.<sup>56</sup>

Russia was not the sole victim of this Japanese intrigue. Suggesting that it feared the possible interception of sensitive details by Japan due to its control of the Seoul-Pusan, Seoul-Mōkpo, Seoul-Chemulpo, and Seoul-Wōnsan telegraph lines,<sup>57</sup> Korea chose not to utilise telegraphy when it pursued confidential wartime

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<sup>53</sup> *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 391.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 311. Gagarin's assertion certainly had some truth to it. After all, Russian minister to Japan Alexander Petrovich Izvolsky (1856–1919) commented that his proposal for the permanent neutrality of Korea (January 7, 1901) had failed, partly because of Japan's growing hostility towards Russia. Please see *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 657.

<sup>57</sup> Please see *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 559. Korea had good reason to be suspicious about Japan monitoring its telegraph messages, as the latter had even managed to intercept Min



neutrality diplomacy. On May 8, 1903, Kojong bypassed the telegraph system to ask for the support of Italian King Victor Emmanuel III (1869–1947) for Korean wartime neutrality in the event of a war between Russia and Japan. He instead sent a personal letter to his Italian counterpart.<sup>58</sup> Separately, Kojong dispatched Hyön Yöngun (1868–?) to Japan on August 3, 1903,<sup>59</sup> and Hyön Sanggön to Europe eighteen days later<sup>60</sup> to assess Japanese and European views on Korea's wartime neutrality.

Hyön Sanggön's mission had particular importance for Korea as it attested to the country's readiness to adopt a fresh approach to its foreign policy by communicating directly with a potential major sponsor of Korean neutralisation, Russia, and an international organisation. Hyön first met Korean Minister to France Min Yöngch'an (1874–1948) to pass on Kojong's secret message about Korean neutrality.<sup>61</sup> He then tried but failed to attend the International Peace Conference and visit the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.<sup>62</sup> Hyön's visit revealed Kojong's desire to cement his country's neutrality status through the mechanism of international law, though whether the international community would adhere to the court's ruling was another question. Carrying Kojong's personal letter asking for the Russian Emperor Nicholas II's cooperation in the event of a war between Russia and Japan,<sup>63</sup> he travelled to St. Petersburg where he rendezvoused with Korean Minister to Russia Yi Pömjin (1852–1911) to discuss neutrality and conferred with former Russian Chargé d'affaires to Korea

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Yönghwan's telegram to his government about his activities in Russia (the Japanese naval attaché to St. Petersburg Yashiro Rokurō [1860–1930] boasted to Min's aide Yun Chi'ho, "Ah, the Korean cabinet can't keep any secrets. We know all about what they do". Please refer to Michael Finch, *Min Yönghwan: A Political Biography* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2002), 149.

<sup>58</sup> Please see "Itaeri e ponanün Taehan Cheguk hwangie chinsö" [A personal letter sent from the Emperor of the Korean Empire to Italy], *Sajin yuri p'illüm charyo*, No. GF 0216 [03-21-03]. The Italian king consented to Korean wartime neutrality, but his response came too late (February 28, 1904) to change the security dynamics of the Korean peninsula ("Itaeri kugwang i Taehan'guk kugwang ege ponanün chinsö" [A personal letter sent from the Italian king to the King of Great Korea], *Sajin yuri p'illüm charyo*, No. GF 1593 [13-123-05]), as the Japanese forces had already landed in Korea. Please see Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: the Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 180.

<sup>59</sup> Sö Yönghui, "Rö-Il chönjaengi Taehan Cheguk chipkwön seryök üi siguk taewing" [The Korean Empire governing group's response to the situation during the Russo-Japanese War], *Yöksa na hyönsil* 25 (September 1997): 188.

<sup>60</sup> Hyön Kwangho, *Taehan cheguk üi taee chöngch'aek* [The external policy of the Korean Empire] (Seoul: Sinsöwön, 2002), 119.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> *Tokyo asabi shimbun* [Tokyo morning daily], January 24, 1904.

<sup>63</sup> Sö Yönghui, 188.

Waeber. On his way back to Korea, Hyŏn travelled to Lüshun, where he spoke with the Russian governor of the Russian Far East.<sup>64</sup>

Despite these efforts, the tension between Japan and Russia did not subside, and Korea's non-telegraph-line-based neutralisation strategy reached its climax with the declaration of wartime neutrality on January 21, 1904. This bold move is vividly described in the report of French Chargé d'affaires to Korea Viscount Fontenay to French Foreign Minister Théophile Delcassé (1852–1923). In this document, Fontenay justified his role in assisting this timely declaration, which had both Pavloff's and his government's backing.<sup>65</sup> Believing that Korean neutralisation guaranteed by the major powers could defuse Russo-Japanese tensions and preserve peace in the Far East, Fontenay penned the text of the declaration, which was forwarded to Kojong. After securing his blessing, Fontenay recommended a fellow French diplomat, Vice-Consul Guérin, to act on behalf of the Korean government to transmit Korea's wartime declaration, pointing out that using a Japan-controlled telegraph line was too risky.<sup>66</sup>

Fontenay's pertinent advice showed just how indispensable the telegraph system was for Korea to meet its key diplomatic objective, as the tension between Japan and Russia reached a new level. Unfortunately, his proposed solution, while reasonable, made the wartime neutrality declaration process lengthy, unintentionally thwarting the spontaneity and the strategic value of Korea's wartime neutrality. This meant the international community, Japan in particular, could find fault with such a process, given that neutrality had to be declared at a foreign legation, not within Seoul itself.

This wartime neutrality declaration notwithstanding, once the prospects for war between Japan and Russia were no longer conjecture, Korea's telegraph lines quickly fell into Japanese hands. Two days before the war officially commenced, a number of Japanese troops landed at Masan and occupied Korea's telegraph office. During the night, Japanese troops also severed the two Korean telegraph lines north of the Yalu River.<sup>67</sup> Using the same tactic as the Japanese military in northern Korea, Japanese Consul in Pusan Shidehara Kijurō (1872–1951) had Japanese policemen sever the Korean government-owned Seoul-Pusan telegraph

<sup>64</sup> *Hwangŏng sinmun* [Capital gazette], August 20, 1903; September 12, 1903.

<sup>65</sup> The Russian government might have expected this move as Kojong had already solicited Russian support for the declaration of wartime neutrality through Hyŏn Sanggŏn. Please see *Rōsia kungniŏp munsŏ pogwanŏ*, 430.

<sup>66</sup> French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fontenay to Delcassé, February 2, 1904 in No. 210, *Correspondance Politique et Commerciale/Nouvelle Série 1897–1910 Corée: Politique extérieure Étrangers en Corée III, 1902–1904* (Political and Commercial Correspondence/New Series 1897–1910 Korea: External Politics and Foreigners in Korea III, 1902–1904), 16–18.

<sup>67</sup> *Rōsia kungniŏp munsŏ pogwanŏ*, 301.

line, an act that clearly contravened international law. Japanese Minister in Seoul Hayashi also chipped in, ordering all telegraph lines out of the Korean capital except Japanese-owned ones to be shut down for three days.<sup>68</sup>

These actions left little room for the Korean government to manoeuvre as there was now no fast and secure means of communication at its disposal for relaying and receiving confidential diplomatic messages to and from Russia. While Kojong relied on secret envoys, Fontenay, and coded communication documents as alternatives, in the end, fortune smiled on Japan. On May 6, 1905, having decided to supervise the Korean telegraph system, the Japanese government won international recognition of its control of telegraph lines in Korea via the Bern-based International Postal-Telegraphic Office,<sup>69</sup> and just a month later, the last Korean-run telegraph office closed. Finally, after years of trying, Japan had succeeded in taking total control of Korea's telegraph lines, and Korea lost not only its 'telegraph sovereignty' to Japan, but also an indispensable tool for conducting effective foreign policy, in a timely fashion. This loss also signalled the end of Korea's hopes for achieving neutralisation with active cooperation from friendly major powers like France and Russia by maintaining regular communications between them and Korea.

## POSTAL SYSTEM

As stated earlier, compared to the telegraph network, the postal system has received less attention from scholars interested in major power intrigues surrounding Korea. Though by no means as important as the telegraph cable, the postal system left its mark on Korea's interactions with the major powers, including neutralisation.

For countries like Korea, which had embarked on the path towards modernisation, a dependable and swift means of private correspondence, namely the establishment of a national post office under its auspices, was essential. Until such a system was functional, the Korean government had to depend on its traditional correspondence system (i.e. post-horse), which was marred by inefficiency and slowness. Moreover, such a step would also enable Korea to maintain a secure diplomatic communication channel with potential allies such as Russia, whose assistance would be crucial for Korea's neutralisation. Under these circumstances, the Wujöngsa was founded on December 4, 1882, and was subordinated under the Tongni kyosöp tongsang samu amun. This new department was expected to

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<sup>68</sup> Yang, 36.

<sup>69</sup> *Rōsia kungniḡ munsō pogwanso*, 44.

provide an impetus to the establishment of a postal system in Korea and seven government officials were tasked to administer the Wujōngsa, headed by Hong Yōngsik.<sup>70</sup>

### THE POSTAL SYSTEM DURING SINO-JAPANESE RIVALRY

Even after the creation of the new government body, Korea had to wait until October 1, 1884, to commence its postal service, when the Sino-Japanese rivalry over the Korean peninsula was brought to the fore.<sup>71</sup> When this venture failed after Hong Yōngsik, along with other pro-Japan officials, was implicated in the failed Kapsin Coup, there was no independent means of postal communication for years. As a remedy, Korean Customs ran a courier service between Seoul and Chemulp'o, and Seoul and Wōnsan.<sup>72</sup> Almost a decade would pass before another attempt to resume the Korean postal service was launched in August 1893. By that time, in support of its imperialistic aims, Japan was already preparing to

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<sup>70</sup> Kim Hyōngt'ae, "Kaehang ch'ogi (1876–1894) kŭndae t'ongsin ūi toip kwajōng e kwanhan ilgoch'al" [A study of the communications system at the early stage of the open ports (1876–1894)] (MA thesis, Kyōnggi University, 2012), 22–23.

<sup>71</sup> Tan'guk Taehakkyo tongyanghak yōnguso ed., *Kaehwagi taeoe min'gan munhwa kyoryu ch'ongsō VII: Kaehwagi Han'guk kwallyōn Ku-Mi myōk pogosō charyojip* [External exchange of civilian culture in the time of Enlightenment, series vii: Korea-related Western trade report sourcebook in the time of Enlightenment] (Seoul: JNC, 2006), 175.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Just as was the case with the telegraph system, the histories of modern postal systems in China and Japan were much longer than in Korea. Having long maintained the effective I-chan system, China was slow to embrace the Western-style postal system. Consequently, it was Britain who pioneered the modern postal service there. A packet agency, a precursor of the post office, operated from Guangzhou in 1834 and on April 15, 1842, the Hong Kong Post Office was opened. In 1864, the Shanghai Local Post, created by the Shanghai Municipal Council, became the first inland post office. More British postal agencies would follow in other treaty ports, and they were later joined by French, American, Japanese, and German equivalents. Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911) had pushed for a national postal office as early as 1861, but he had to wait until 1896 to implement his recommendation. Until then, the Imperial Chinese Customs and the post office in Taiwan were the only postal services administered by Chinese capital and expertise. For more details, see Cheng Ying-wan, *Postal Communication in China and its Modernization, 1860–1896* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). For its part, Japan had already commenced its postal service in 1871, and the country's first public post office opened on May 1, 1878. (Yang, 23). By March 1884, Japan was already operating a thriving national postal system, with 4,819 post offices across the country (Kim Hyōngt'ae, 26). Russia, too, was operating an active postal service, with the *Han'sōng sunbo* (Seoul gazette) reporting that in 1882 alone, 31,900,206 stamps were sold across the Russian empire (Kim Hyōngt'ae, 28).

establish postal offices in Seoul and the open ports, suggesting that Japan wanted to be in charge of the Korean postal system as well as its telegraph lines.<sup>73</sup>

With the Korean customs and telegraph networks already under Chinese influence, Kojong had to find at least one reliable communication tool to stop the unnecessary outflow of intelligence and to ease communication constraints on diplomacy. Thus, a Korean government decree on the need for the establishment of a postal service appeared on September 26, 1893, in the *Corean Gazette*. While Britain's Acting Consul-General to Korea William Henry Wilkinson (1858–1930) reported in March 1894 to British Foreign Secretary Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) that no noticeable progress had been made after the decree's proclamation,<sup>74</sup> it nevertheless manifested Korea's desire to operate an indigenous postal service<sup>75</sup> as the Sino-Japanese competition over hegemony in Korea reached new heights.

### THE POSTAL SYSTEM DURING RUSSO-JAPANESE RIVALRY

The opening of Japanese-run post offices in the Korean capital and treaty ports laid bare Japan's plan to dominate the Korean postal system. Concerned that Japan could hold sway over Korea through the postal system, Kojong and Korea's pro-Russia faction hoped to build closer ties with Russia in order to receive necessary assistance from it in times of crisis.

Considering Russia's leading role in the Triple Intervention (April 23, 1895),<sup>76</sup> which heralded the advent of Russia as a new rival of Japan in the Far East, maintaining amicable ties with Russia seemed to be a sensible option for Korea. But with Japan in control of communications between the two nations, this was easier said than done; in June 1895, Russia's Amur region governor reported that

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<sup>73</sup> Kim Hyönsuk, "Han'guk kündae söyangin komun'gwan yön'gu (1882–1904)" [A study of Western advisers in early modern Korea (1882–1904)] (PhD diss., Ehwa Woman's University, 2002), 112.

<sup>74</sup> *Kaehwagi taeye min'gan munbwa kyoryu ch'ongsö* VII, 175. China's complaint against the decree might have put the brakes on the Korean government's plan to operate an independent postal system. Without informing China in advance, Kojong had instructed his American adviser on foreign affairs Clarence Ridgeby Greathouse (1846–1899) to begin a foreign postal service. In addition, after Kojong's decree, the telegraph system and the postal service merged under the newly-established Telegraph and Postal Service office. Greathouse's appointment, for all its shortcomings, reflected the Korean monarch's determination to use U.S. influence to counter Chinese intrusion in Korea's domestic affairs (Kim Hyöngt'ae, 47).

<sup>75</sup> *Rōsia kungniṅ munsö pogwanso*, 133.

<sup>76</sup> Gaimushō, ed., No. 671, *Nibon gaikō bunsho* [Japanese diplomatic documents] 28(2), 14–18.

Japan was dominating the Korean postal system and telegraph network.<sup>77</sup> Left with no alternative, Kojong would instruct his emissary Kwŏn Tongsu to deliver the former's secret letter to Pavel Fedorovich Unterberger (1842–1921), Governor of the Russian Maritime Province during the summer of 1898. The message solicited Russian assistance to preserve Korean independence against Japanese encroachment.<sup>78</sup>

Given that Japan was casting an ever-present shadow over the Korean postal system, using an emissary to relay a sensitive diplomatic message was understandable in this situation. However, it inevitably impeded the Korean government's ability to sustain diplomatic communications with a friendly power as the noose was tightening around Korea.

Undeterred, Kojong and his close aides still envisaged a countermeasure that could weaken Japan's grip over the Korean postal system, albeit indirectly. The Korean monarch sent a letter to Russian Chargé d'affaires to Korea Alexis De Speyer (1854–1916) and his predecessor Waeber through the pro-Russia faction member Yi Pŏmjŏn, clamouring for Russian assistance and imploring them not to ignore his plea.<sup>79</sup> De Speyer in turn responded favourably, judging that Russian assistance could re-establish political order in Korea.<sup>80</sup> This communication paved the way for Kojong's flight to the Russian legation on February 11, 1896.

By taking this unprecedented gamble, he might have expected to diminish Japanese influence over Korea. On another level, he inadvertently reinvigorated foreign interest in Korean neutralisation as well. Suspecting that Korea had fallen under the Russian sphere of influence, the British government contemplated its neutralisation to check Russia there (May 1, 1896). At the same time, because Russia knew all too well that Japan was wielding a strong influence over Korean communication systems, Britain might have overestimated its European rival's capacity to entice Korea to do its bidding.

Britain first presented its case for Korean neutrality by presenting a telegram to Mutsu:

There is a possibility that the present position of affairs in Corea may lead to Russia declaring it a protectorate. It is possible that the King of Corea may declare himself a vassal of China. Would Japan be disposed to agree to a declaration of neutrality of Corea or a guarantee of independence of that

<sup>77</sup> *Rŏsia kungniŏp munŏ pŏgwanso*, 363.

<sup>78</sup> *Rŏsia kungniŏp munŏ pŏgwanso*, 169.

<sup>79</sup> Kim Yŏngsu, "Agwan p'ach'ŏn, 1896: Seoul, Tokyo, Mosŏkŏba" [Kojong's flight to the Russian legation, 1896: Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow], *Sarim* 35 (February 2010): 63.

<sup>80</sup> Han'guk kyohoesa yŏn'guso, ed., *Mwitel chugyo ilgi* [Bishop Mutel's diary] (Seoul: Han'guk kyohoesa yŏn'guso, 1993), [January 27, 1896], 28–31.

Country by the Powers? Under these circumstances if Count Mutsu wishes to see Sir Ernest he will come back at once.<sup>81</sup>

For his part, Mutsu wanted to know whether the British government would play a leading role in fulfilling Korean neutrality, negotiate with other powers, or work with another country to accomplish Korean neutrality, as well as to what extent Britain had obtained or would obtain permission from other powers on this issue, and what Britain knew about Russia's intentions regarding neutrality.<sup>82</sup> British Minister to Japan Ernest Mason Satow (1843–1929) conjectured that given the wording of instructions from London, Britain would play a leading role.<sup>83</sup> The Under Secretary and Assistant Under Secretary of the British Foreign Office also informed Japanese Minister to Britain Katō Takaaki (1860–1926) that with Japanese consent Britain would strive to bring about Korean neutrality and that Britain had already informed Germany and the United States of negotiations for Korean neutrality. Britain's only worry was that Russia might oppose the proposal.<sup>84</sup>

On May 13, 1896, the British Foreign Secretary the Marquess of Salisbury (1830–1903) joined the fray, telling Katō that Britain just wanted to know whether Japan was willing to be a participant in Korean neutrality. Furthermore, he understood that though Korea's recent instability required its neutralisation, minimal British interests on the Korean peninsula vis-à-vis Russia, China, and Japan made it inappropriate for Britain to propose Korean neutrality. Britain was thus content to follow the lead of other powers and actively cooperate within the scope of their leadership. Ideally, there should be negotiations among the major powers including Germany, to which Russian objections were not expected. Russia had already promised to stay out of Korea in return for Britain's withdrawal from Kōmundo—an island off the south coast of Korea—and until the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR) was completed, Russia could not invade Korea easily.<sup>85</sup>

Rejecting the British Foreign Secretary's analysis, Katō discerned that Russia's assurances applied only to China and were not relevant as China's international status was waning. The Foreign Secretary begged to differ, arguing that Russia could not disavow its earlier agreement and invade Korea due to its insufficient

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<sup>81</sup> Gaimushō, ed., No. 300, *Nihon gaikō bunsho* (hereafter NB) (Japanese diplomatic documents) 29, 582.

<sup>82</sup> NB 29, No. 301, 303, 304, 582–585.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., No. 300, 582.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., No. 312, 583; No. 305, 587.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., No. 312, 583–595.

naval power. Even if rumours about the Russian acquisition of the construction rights for the TSR were true, its expansion could be solely for commercial purposes, and even if Japanese fears had a rational basis, since Russia only needed China's approval to continue with the TSR, no other country could veto its construction. Moreover, with its gigantic landmass stretching across Europe and Asia, Russia was destined to seek a coastal passage. Katō then received the British Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who grumbled about Japan's perceived misunderstanding of the pros and cons of Korean neutralisation.<sup>86</sup>

Much to the British government's disappointment, its neutralisation efforts did not bear fruit. With Kojong staying at the Russian legation, it was practically impossible for the Korean government to embrace any kind of neutralisation proposal without the explicit backing of Russia. Besides, within the context of the prevailing Russo-Japanese rivalry, it would have been difficult for a third power (Britain), having no significant concessions in Korea, to spearhead neutralisation. Though Britain may have calculated that neutralisation was necessary to prevent Korea from falling into the pro-Russian camp and to a lesser extent to secure the status quo in the Far East, neutralisation could not be realised in the absence of Japanese and Russian support.<sup>87</sup>

While the drive for Korean neutralisation had lost some steam, the efforts by Russia and Korea to elude Japanese chicanery with the Korean postal services persisted. Witte's telegram to Foreign Minister Mikhail Nikolayevich Muraviev (1845–1900) (April 22, 1897), instructing the foreign minister to arrange a passenger ship to call at Chemulp'o to pick up mail,<sup>88</sup> implied that the Russian government did not want to risk allowing sensitive information to fall into the hands of the Japanese by utilising the Korean postal service. The situation would change for the better in May 1898, when Korea, having striven to end the Japanese monopolization of the Korean postal service, finally ended this impasse by recommencing its own postal service after the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce announced the establishment of post offices.<sup>89</sup> Three months later, another remedial action was suggested by Russian Chargé d'Affaires Matunine, who called for the establishment of a Russian-owned postal office in Seoul. He cited Japan's indiscriminate monitoring of all correspondence in Korea, intimating that he readily recognised the negative impact of a Japanese-run postal service.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> NB 29, No. 312, 583–595.

<sup>87</sup> Pak Huiho, 108.

<sup>88</sup> *Rōsia kungniŋ munsō pogwanso*, 255.

<sup>89</sup> *Kugyōk Han'guk chi*, 630.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.



Correspondingly, a year after Matunine's proposal, the Russian office in charge of telegram and postal services explored the idea of opening a branch office to handle mail at the Russian legation in Seoul.<sup>91</sup> Though neither idea was implemented, Russia evidently recognised that a secure postal service was a vital tool for its diplomatic correspondence with Korea. Realising that obtaining international recognition of its postal service was crucial for inducing major powers to receive diplomatic messages sent via the Korean postal service, the Korean government applied for and later became a member of the International Postal Union in early 1900.<sup>92</sup>

However, despite much fanfare, once Korea's postal service began operations, it soon became clear that the service was ill-equipped to speedily deliver major powers' deliberations on matters affecting Korean foreign policy, leaving Kojong and his associates without ample time to plot and implement their major power diplomacy. The government-appointed French Postal Inspector found that Korea's postal administration was struggling due to an excessive number of staff, a dearth of profitable offerings like parcel post and money orders, and the profligate conduct of the administration.<sup>93</sup>

As Kojong's personal adviser and the point-man of Korea's neutralisation diplomacy, William Franklin Sands (1874–1946) seems to have already foreseen the negative ramifications of Korea's inability to operate an independent postal service, since he was wary about the risks posed by relying on a Japanese-dominated postal system for personal communications. In a letter to his mother, Sands confided: "I do not trust anyone, where my letters are concerned. The Japanese authorities may or may not read my letters."<sup>94</sup> Under such circumstances, using a passenger vessel to both deliver and receive any substantial correspondence between Korea and Russia, as Witte had previously suggested, remained the most viable option. At a time when the balance of power between Japan and Russia over the Korean peninsula was hanging in the balance, this was a scenario that Korean policymakers had to avoid if they were to work with their Russian counterparts to come up with a more sophisticated strategy to quicken the pace of Korean neutralisation.

As time progressed, the Japanese interference in Korea's postal service would become ever more intrusive, making it even harder for the parties concerned to navigate the labyrinth of Korean neutrality. Pavloff's written opinion (October, 1902) on the need for Russian acceptance of Japanese rights over Korean

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<sup>91</sup> *Rōsia kungniŭp munsō pogwanso*, 134.

<sup>92</sup> *Kugyōk Han'gukchi*, 631.

<sup>93</sup> *Kaehwagi taeye min'gan munbwa kyoryu ch'ongsō* VII, 348.

<sup>94</sup> William Franklin Sands, in Box 3, Folder 9, Item 66, October 1, 1900, *Sands Papers*.

railroads, postal system, and telegraph lines,<sup>95</sup> reflected this grim reality. Pavloff might have been compelled to make such a sobering observation after the botched joint Korean neutralisation scheme envisaged by him, the Russian minister to Japan Izvolsky, and Russian Ambassador to the United States Arthur P. N. Cassini (1836–1913) a month earlier.

Fortunately for Pavloff, he was not the only Russian representative abroad to float Korean neutralisation; on August 2, 1902, Izvolsky had advised the Foreign Ministry that as the Anglo-Japanese Alliance sought to secure superior positions for its signatories not just in China, but in Korea and Thailand as well, Korea had to be neutralised to protect Russian concessions there.<sup>96</sup> Izvolsky's recommendation demonstrated that frontline Russian diplomats like him and Pavloff recognised that Korea's fate was irrevocably linked with geopolitical dynamics in other parts of Asia.

The above-mentioned joint plan grew out of the following factors: Japan's interventionist policy in Korea, the accelerated open door policy in Manchuria due to the Russo-Chinese Convention on the Russian withdrawal from the region (April 8, 1902), and the possible American alignment with the Anglo-Japanese camp. Basically, Pavloff devised this scheme after meeting with Kojong, and Pavloff and Izvolsky agreed in Tokyo (July 31, 1902) that Korean neutralisation was only possible under the joint guarantee of Russia, Japan, and the United States. Pavloff then travelled to Paris in early September to discuss Korean neutralisation with Cassini and spoke again with Izvolsky about it in Russia.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, the three Russian diplomats concurred that the Russian government had to approach its U.S. counterpart first.<sup>98</sup> All things considered, there is no evidence to suggest that the U.S. government received any formal suggestion from the Russian government.

Sensing a serious crisis due to the hardening of Japan's Korean policy and the creation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the three Russian diplomats formulated a joint proposal with the blessing of the Russian government.<sup>99</sup> This bold gamble could have strengthened the chance for Korea to become a permanent neutral state by including a friendly power that harboured no territorial ambitions on the Korean peninsula (i.e. the U.S.) as one of the guarantors. Additionally, that the U.S.

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<sup>95</sup> *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 23.

<sup>96</sup> *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 735.

<sup>97</sup> NB 35, No. 182, 393–394.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 190, 191, 399–402.

<sup>99</sup> Sök Hwajōng, “Rōsia ūi Han'bando chungnip'hwa chōngch'aek—Witte ūi tae Manju chōngch'aek kwa kwallyōn hayō” [Russia's neutralisation policy on the Korean Peninsula—In connection with Witte's Manchurian policy], *Chungso yōn'gu* 83 (1999): 168; 181.

was approached by the Russians demonstrated that the former was seen as an honest broker, which could mitigate any differences that might have emerged between Russia and Japan in the course of implementing Korean neutrality.

The failure of this well-coordinated neutralisation scheme notwithstanding, compromising with Japan was still a bitter pill to swallow for Russia. In December, 1903, Gagarin for one expressed his dismay over Japan's extensive interference in the Korean postal system, which rendered it virtually impossible for Russia to communicate with Korea through normal correspondence.<sup>100</sup> Kojong and his close aides must have also recognised this, as their subsequent actions demonstrated. In mid-January, 1904, Kojong secretly sent a eunuch to the Russian legation to find out whether it could provide refuge to him, and he also asked for asylum in Russia should his life be endangered.<sup>101</sup> About four months later, having annulled all agreements between Korea and Russia under the pressure of the British and Japanese representatives in Seoul, Kojong bypassed the postal service again and instead employed Fontenay as a go-between to promise Russia that he would reverse this decision when the opportunity arose.<sup>102</sup> The last example drove home the point that with its postal system under Japanese control, Korea could not maintain a smooth communication channel with Russia, which severely restricted Korea's freedom to conduct diplomacy.

With its telegraph lines also falling under Japanese control during this period, Korea found itself ever more isolated diplomatically. Needless to say, these constraints further dampened any remaining hope for realising Korean neutralisation through diplomatic communications.

## CONCLUSION

This article delineated the roles of telegraph lines and the postal system in shaping diplomatic interactions between Korea and the major powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interactions crucial to the potential neutralisation of Korea. Specifically, it traced Chinese, Japanese, and Russian dealings with Korean telegraph lines and its postal system during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese rivalries from the 1880s to the early 1900s. In this way, we can appreciate how, like in other weak countries, Korea's communications infrastructure became a vehicle for major powers to increase their influence there. With this in mind, the following observations can be made.

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<sup>100</sup> *Rōsia kungnip munsō pogwanso*, 311.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 405–406.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

First, determined to challenge traditional Chinese suzerainty over Korea, Japan first sought to take an advantageous position by pioneering a telegraph service there. Relatively speaking, China was slow to react to Japanese attempts to use telegraph lines to draw Korea into its orbit. Russia fared even worse than China because while China later managed to construct and operate telegraph lines in Korea, Russia never did. As a result, unlike China and Japan, Russia could not exploit Korean telegraph lines to check other major powers' advances into Korea, despite close ties between Korea and Russia.

Second, the potential for a judicious application of the postal system in facilitating Korea's communications with a friendly major power like Russia cannot be stressed enough. With telegraph lines under Japanese control, the postal system could have served as an alternate communication channel for Korea to convey urgent or sensitive diplomatic messages to Russia without Japanese obstruction. However, the available evidence shed light on the fact that as with the telegraph lines, Japanese interference was too extensive to overcome, and mired in mismanagement, Korea's postal system never lived up to its full potential. Instead, the country had to depend on a foreign diplomat to maintain confidential contacts with Russia. In effect, Korea unintentionally undermined its commitment to neutrality by 'outsourcing' its diplomatic functions to foreign powers, and this inevitably affected its status as a sovereign country in the international system.

In the final analysis, Korea's failure to exercise full control of its telegraph lines and postal system might explain why the country could not prevent itself from becoming a pawn of Chinese and Japanese designs to dominate the Korean peninsula, as it severely restricted the scope of multilateral diplomacy for Korean policymakers. This explains why, however well-intentioned, domestic and foreign attempts to neutralise Korea suffered a crushing blow, and the country lost an opportunity to emerge as an independent variable and transform the major powers' strategic calculus of their respective positions in the Far East.

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