

THE FAILURE OF THE WEST TO FILL THE POWER VACUUM IN EAST ASIA: ANGLO–FRENCH RIVALRY ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA, 1866–1887

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Received October 9, 2025. Revised October 24, 2025. Accepted October 28, 2025.

Abstract. In the late nineteenth century, the race for colonial expansion unfolded across many regions of the world, most notably in Asia and Africa. Although this imperial contest drew in the principal European and American colonial powers, certain areas remained “power vacuums” owing to rival cooperation or the absence of explicit agreements among Western states. The Korean Peninsula during the final decades of the nineteenth century epitomises such a case. Despite their military and diplomatic interventions, both Britain and France failed to construct a sustainable “Western order” on the peninsula, thereby leaving an unfilled “power vacuum” within East Asia. This vacuum was gradually occupied by Japan from the late nineteenth century onwards, especially following the first Sino–Japanese War and, ultimately, through formal annexation in 1910, while the Qing dynasty still retained residual influence and Korea pursued a strategy of “pragmatic balancing.” This paper seeks to analyse the failure of Britain and France in their endeavours to conquer and partition East Asian territories through a case study of Korea between the 1860s and 1880s, and to elucidate the structural and contingent reasons behind this failure, thereby contributing to interpretations of how East Asia’s power structure was transformed amid the colonial expansion of the Western imperial powers and the rise of Japan, which came to replace the West’s regional role during this period.

Keywords: East Asia, Korea; power vacuum, French expedition to Korea, Anglo–French rivalry.

1. Introduction

By the late 19th century, the Industrial Revolution had propelled the European powers into a new phase of imperialism, characterized by an insatiable demand for markets and colonies. Imperial powers hastened to complete the conquest of what they termed “unclaimed lands” in Asia and Africa, particularly in East Asia. The arrival of Western powers in East Asia profoundly disrupted the existing structure of regional power, which had long revolved around China’s tributary system. China’s defeat in the First Opium War compelled the Qing to sign the Treaty of Nanking (1842), which eroded the traditional Sino-centric order and enabled Western powers to supplant China’s position in the region. The ensuing decline of Qing authority, accelerated by the Taiping Rebellion and foreign incursions, created a genuine *power vacuum* in East Asia. This situation persisted until Japan’s victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).

Seizing upon this vacuum, Britain and France expanded their influence into territories under Chinese control, particularly in Southeast Asia and Korea, maintaining intimate tributary relations with the Qing [1]. However, both Britain and France failed to establish their influence in Korea. Why did they not succeed in transforming their military, diplomatic, or economic presence into a lasting sphere of influence comparable to that which they achieved in Siam? An examination of Anglo–French rivalry on Korea and of the reasons behind their inability to fill this regional power vacuum, offers insight into how regional and global dynamics intersected. This study thus links *micro-historical* episodes, France’s 1866 intervention and Britain’s Port Hamilton occupation (1885–1887), with *macro-historical* developments, including the decline of the “traditional empire” of the Qing, Japan’s “leaving Asia and entering Europe” and the agency of the Joseon court in preserving its sovereignty amidst Western colonial encroachments [2].

To address these issues, this study employs several analytical frameworks: *informal empire*, *buffer state*, *agency of small powers*, and *rival imperialism*. The concept of *informal empire* refers to situations in which Western powers, without direct territorial administration, nonetheless exercised political, military, or economic dominance through mechanisms such as the most-favoured-nation clause, unequal treaties, or diplomatic coercion, an apt description of Korea during the 1880s [3]–[4]. The *buffer state* theory concerns small territories situated between great powers, serving to prevent direct conflict and often possessing limited sovereignty, as exemplified by Siam and, to some extent, Korea, positioned between Russia, a rising Japan, and China [5]. The *agency of small powers* presents small states’ ambition to decide autonomously despite their geopolitical constraints. By exploiting great-power rivalries, such states could negotiate and manoeuvre to protect their sovereignty, a strategy evident in Korea’s cautious diplomacy of seclusion and balance among Russia, Japan, Qing China, and Britain [7]–[8]. Lastly, *rival imperialism* describes overlapping claims among competing empires, a condition that characterised Korea in the late 19th century, where Qing suzerainty, Japanese expansionism, Russian ambitions, and Anglo–French anxieties over Russian advances converged [9]–[10].

These theoretical perspectives show the reasons for Western failure in Korea. Previous scholars, such as Luong Ninh [11], Yong-tae [12], Larsen [2], and Schmid [8], have examined Western imperial rivalries and local responses in East Asia. Studies on France’s 1866 campaign (Zuber) [13] and Britain’s Port Hamilton occupation by Kim [14], Sangpil [15], Royle [16], and Yong-gu [17] have contributed to this field. Yet, no existing work has systematically interpreted the Anglo-French failure to fill East Asia’s power vacuum through the lens of their competition over Korea.

2. Content

2.1. Regional Context and the Power Vacuum in East Asia in the 1860s–1890s

The engagement of Western powers in East Asia profoundly transformed the regional power structure and the nature of international relations. Southeast Asia and other strategic maritime regions rapidly became prime targets for Western imperial expansion with an increasing demand for raw materials, labor, and markets. Japan and China were potential markets for Western powers.

Confronted by threats to their sovereignty and growing domestic pressures, both Japan and China initially adopted isolationist policies. The Tokugawa shogunate implemented the *Sakoku* policy (1635–1853) [18], and the Qing dynasty enforced the *Haijin* (maritime prohibition) to restrict foreign trade. The *Haijin* effectively reinforced China’s tributary trade system, through which it maintained hierarchical relations with surrounding states as Korea, Vietnam, and the Ryukyu Kingdom. This arrangement preserved the traditional *Sino–barbarian* (*Hua–Yi*) order, with China at its center and neighbouring “barbarian” states, *Rong*, *Di*, *Man*, and *Yi*, expected to receive investiture, send tribute, and recognise the supremacy of the Chinese emperor [19].

China's defeat forced the Qing to sign the Treaty of Nanking with Britain, pay indemnities, cede Hong Kong, open trading ports in Canton, Amoy, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai, and grant Britain extraterritorial privileges and favored treatment [20;1]. This Treaty was the first of many *unequal treaties* that China would be compelled to sign. China's autonomy in domestic and foreign affairs was drastically curtailed [21;44]. China was gradually transformed into a semi-feudal, semi-colonial polity. The Treaty of Nanking led to unequal treaties followed in Asia: between Japan and the United States (1854, 1858); between the Ryukyu Kingdom and the United States, France, and the Netherlands (1854, 1855, 1859); between France and Vietnam (1862, 1874); and between Korea and Japan (1876). These agreements forced East Asian states to open their ports to Western trade and grant extraterritorial privileges. A dual international order emerged during this transitional period, one based on *tributary relations*, the other on *treaty relations* [12;139].

In Indochina, France embarked on a phased conquest from 1858 to 1893, beginning with Cochinchina, then Cambodia, Tonkin, and eventually Laos. France established the *Indochinese Union* in 1887, transforming Indochina into one of its most important colonies in Asia. Britain refrained from direct intervention, prioritising the consolidation of its rule in India and its campaigns in Burma. In Yunnan and Tonkin, British and French interests clashed over trade routes. France ultimately prevailed, having gained direct control over Vietnam, a colony it viewed as the strategic gateway to southern China, and dismantled the traditional *Vietnam–China tributary relationship*. After the Treaty of Tientsin (1885), China renounced its traditional influence over Tonkin and recognized all existing treaties between the Nguyễn dynasty and France [22;394]. This treaty ended the tributary system between Vietnam and China [23;10].

The weakening of the Qing dynasty created favourable conditions for Britain to fill the power vacuum in Burma, which had long maintained peaceful and friendly commercial relations with the Qing. Britain gradually annexed Burma through three Anglo–Burmese Wars, ultimately transforming it into a colony and thereby blocking further French influence in the region. In 1886, the Viceroy of India officially proclaimed the annexation of Burma, making it a province of British India [11; 352–353]. This triumph extinguished French ambitions to advance from Indochina into Burma, and allowed Britain to fill the vacuum in China's southwestern periphery.

The Opium War also decisively ended Siam's tributary missions to Beijing. Between 1854 and 1881, Siam's foreign policy underwent a fundamental transformation from traditional diplomacy to Western-style treaty diplomacy [24;38–39]. Siam became a *buffer state* between British colonies in Burma and Malaya and French Indochina. The Anglo–French Agreement in 1896 divided Siam into two spheres of influence: the western region of the Chao Phraya River, under British influence, and the eastern region, under French influence, while the central zone remained under Siamese sovereignty [25; 178].

Russia also intensified its Eastern strategy, focusing primarily on Manchuria and Mongolia. Between 1890 and 1904, Russia constructed the Siberian Railway to strengthen its ties with the East. In 1898, it secured permission to use the port of Dalian (China) and, alongside the Eight-Nation Alliance, deployed troops to Beijing in 1900 to capitalize on the unfolding situation. However, following its defeat by Japan in the 1904–1905 war, Russia was forced to concede its competitive influence in the region.

For the United States, imperial expansion in East Asia was characterized by a series of strategic interventions that progressively solidified its regional presence. The process began with compelling Japan to sign the Treaty of 1854, marking an early assertion of American influence. The subsequent victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898 enabled the United States to acquire the Philippines as a colony. In 1900, the United States' participation in the Eight-Nation Alliance's intervention in Beijing allowed it to reinforce its status as a major power in the region.

Through this involvement, the United States advocated for the “Open Door” Policy, seeking equal access to the Chinese market and positioning itself in direct competition with other imperial powers.

Thus, in the late 19th century, Western powers had conquered and colonised nearly all of Southeast Asia and southern China, filling the region’s power vacuums. The final unfilled void remained in Korea, the tributary state of China [24; 35]. As Qing power waned and the traditional *Hua–Yi* order collapsed, Korea became the focal point of regional contestation until Japan confirmed its dominant position in East Asia. In the competition in East Asia, the European and American powers failed to anticipate Japan. Initially, Japan restricted foreign trade and kept only a narrow gateway open to the Netherlands, the sole Western nation allowed to trade with Japan [26; 52]. By the mid-19th century, Japan signed a series of diplomatic and commercial agreements with twenty nations and territories, including thirteen European, three Asian, and four American states [26; 55]. However, through the Meiji Restoration (1868–1913), Japan emerged as a modern, Western-style nation-state, distinctly different from China’s archaic institutions, philosophies, and customs [27; 37]. Japan modernised its military and embarked on an assertive foreign policy of expansion, identifying Korea as its primary target.

2.2. The Failure of Britain and France in Korea

By the mid-19th century, Korea was a “hermit kingdom”, an isolated and enigmatic land largely unknown to the West [28]. Since the 1860s, France was the first Western nation to attempt to “open” Korea, but failed.

2.2.1. The Failure of the French Invasion of Korea in 1866

Protecting Catholic missionaries and converts became the legal and moral pretext that provided the basis for France’s intervention in Korea, where Christianity had been officially proscribed since the 18th century. The rapid spread of Catholicism after 1784 alarmed the *Joseon* court. The first anti-Christian edict was issued in 1791 and was more rigorously enforced from 1800 to 1834. Korea reaffirmed both its anti-Christian and isolationist policies in the late 19th century [29; 80]. Nine of the twelve French missionaries residing in Korea, including two bishops, Siméon-François Berneux, head of the Korean diocese, and Marie-Nicolas-Antoine Daveluy, were executed. More than 8,000 Korean Catholics were also reportedly killed in a massive persecution [30; 25]

In late June 1866, one of the three surviving missionaries, Father Félix-Claire Ridel, escaped to China. Upon hearing of the massacre, the French commander of the Far Eastern Squadron, Rear Admiral Pierre-Gustave Roze, resolved to launch a punitive expedition. His initiative received strong support from Henry de Bellonet, the French acting consul in Beijing, who argued that Korea was a country that “must be educated by punishment, as one would discipline a child,” a task he deemed France’s civilising responsibility [30]. However, Roze’s decision was spontaneous and lacked authorization from Paris. While French diplomatic representatives exerted pressure on the *Joseon* court indirectly through the Qing authorities, Admiral Roze independently prepared for a military expedition against Korea.

Due to insufficient intelligence regarding Korea, Roze’s operations proceeded slowly. He first conducted a reconnaissance mission along the Korean coastline, particularly surveying the waterways leading to the capital, Seoul, in late September and early October 1866. He opted to seize and occupy Ganghwa Island, located approximately 50 km from Seoul. By controlling this strategic chokepoint, Roze hoped to blockade river traffic to the capital and thereby compel the *Joseon* government to offer reparations. On 11 October 1866, Roze led the frigate *La Guerrière*, accompanied by two avisos, two gunboats, and a small corvette, to attack Ganghwa Island. After seizing Ganghwa, Roze intended to negotiate with the *Joseon* court over the execution of French missionaries and to secure a commercial treaty with Korea. However, Korea viewed France’s

occupation of Ganghwa as an act of aggression and military intrusion into its sovereign territory [30; 31]. Admiral Roze subsequently sent an ultimatum to the *Joseon* court demanding:

“1. The severe punishment of the three ministers who took the principal part in the massacre of the French missionaries; 2. The dispatch of a plenipotentiary ambassador to establish the foundations of a treaty between the two nations. If the Korean government wishes to avoid the misfortunes, it must comply with the above demands. Otherwise, the Rear Admiral Commanding-in-Chief will hold the Korean Government responsible for all the consequences that may result from war” [30; 31]

Roze was not merely retribution for the missionaries’ execution but rather the establishment of commercial relations, an “opening” of Korea. Yet his pressure proved insufficient to compel *Joseon* to yield. The French admiral never succeeded in establishing direct contact with the court. The French forces shelled the surrounding areas and advanced up the Han River toward Seoul. French marines captured several defensive positions and looted various treasuries, storehouses, and libraries, carrying off numerous valuable manuscripts [31]. When no response came, French artillery bombarded the royal palace, compelling the *Daewongun* to release the captives. On 13 November, the French forces terminated the expedition, destroying several facilities before withdrawing from Korea.

Although Roze claimed success in avenging the slain missionaries and in compelling *Joseon* to reconsider its policies toward French priests and native Catholics, the expedition was a failure. The French forces’ defeat stemmed primarily from their poor understanding of Korea’s geography and coastal conditions, characterised by treacherous tides, complex waterways, and rugged terrain. The expedition also suffered from logistical shortages: it operated far from France’s main East Asian base in Cochinchina, without official government support or adequate resupply. Moreover, the French troops faced determined resistance from Korean soldiers and civilians alike, forcing them to withdraw without achieving any political or commercial objectives [32].

In December 1866, Paris received formal reports of the campaign. The Minister of the Navy and Colonies, Chasseloup-Laubat, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charles de La Valette, quickly agreed not to dispatch further forces to Korea, recognising that such an undertaking would require naval resources already committed to Chinese waters. Roze’s withdrawal was thus deemed a military setback that tarnished France’s prestige in Korea and the broader Far East. The expedition presents the French limitation of naval power, its lack of knowledge and experience in the region, leading the Paris government to conclude that Korea did not represent a strategic priority on par with China or Vietnam. Following the failed campaign, French attention shifted toward consolidating control in Indochina, extending occupation from Cochinchina to Cambodia.

The French retreat after only a single engagement convinced the *Joseon* authorities that they had successfully repelled a Western invasion. This perception fostered renewed confidence that Asian nations could similarly resist Western imperial incursions. Korea widely proclaimed the French withdrawal as a great victory in its campaign against the *yang’i* (Western barbarians), reinforcing the “closed-door” and “anti-Western” policies, intensifying the suppression of Catholicism, and strengthening internal measures against foreign intrusion. The events of 1866 demonstrated that Korea could actively resist Western aggression in defence of its independence. Regionally, the French failure left Korea as one of the remaining *power vacuums* amid Western imperial expansion. It suggests that Asian states could still repel Western military forces. However, it merely postponed the inevitable collapse of conservative monarchies and could not reverse the broader trend of “openings by cannon fire” pursued by Western powers.

Following France’s failure, German and American attempts to penetrate Korea likewise proved unsuccessful. In 1868, a German trader named Ernst Oppert attempted to desecrate and exhume the tomb of Prince Namyoon to extort the *Joseon* court into opening trade with the West. The scheme, denounced as grave robbery motivated by greed for gold and antiquities, provoked

widespread outrage among Koreans, further hardening anti-Western sentiment and rendering diplomatic engagement even more difficult [33]. Three years later, the Americans had misjudged Korean motives and resilience, assuming that limited military action would compel submission. Nearly two decades after France's abortive expedition, Britain would undertake its own significant intervention in Korea in an attempt to assert influence in the region after Korea had already begun to open its doors to foreign powers.

2.2.2. The Port Hamilton Affair (1885–1887) and the British Failure in Korea

In the 1880s, Russia represented a particularly distinctive case in Korea's diplomacy. According to the *Tianjin Convention* (1885), both Japanese and Chinese troops were required to withdraw from Korea, a decision reached solely between the two powers without consulting the Korean government. This exclusion led Korea to contemplate a new diplomatic strategy: "*Pro-Russia to expel Qing influence*", using Russia as a third force to break away from tributary dependence on China [34;468]. In 1884, Korea signed a treaty with Russia. Russia's growing presence in Korea soon collided with British interests in East Asia amid the broader context of colonial competition, culminating in the *Port Hamilton Affair (1885–1887)* and British intervention on the Korean Peninsula.

Actually, Britain and Russia were already rivals for influence in Central Asia and territories adjacent to India. For Britain, maintaining control of these frontier areas was essential to protect India. Meanwhile, Russia's territorial expansion southward aimed to reach the Indian Ocean and undermine Britain's strategic blockade [35; 1–5]. This geopolitical contest, known as *the Great Game*, had profound implications for the international balance of power and contributed to Anglo-Russian tensions extending as far as Korea.

In 1885, the *Panjdeh Incident*, Russia's seizure of Afghan borderlands, brought Britain and Russia to the brink of war. British officials feared that Russia could use Vladivostok as a naval base to threaten maritime routes to China, Japan, and India. Seizing Port Hamilton would "lock the gate" to the Sea of Japan, block Russian access, and provide a naval outpost between China and Japan, an East Asian extension of the Great Game [16; 77–79].

In 1875, the British Admiralty had considered occupying Geomundo Island. Naval surveys had already identified Port Hamilton as a strategic anchorage capable of controlling sea approaches to Vladivostok. Nevertheless, Britain refrained from acting for several reasons. First, the Royal Navy lacked detailed hydrographic data of the port and its river mouths. Second, the occupation of inhabited territory within a non-hostile country risked diplomatic controversy and damage to Britain's international reputation. Third, Britain prioritised the protection of India and the major sea lanes of its Asian empire, focusing on threats from Russia and Afghanistan. Fourth, tensions with Russia were not yet severe enough to justify a deterrent action [16].

After Russia's advance into Afghanistan and Britain's consolidation of control along the Burmese frontier, London decided to act. Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone and Foreign Secretary Granville George Leveson-Gower authorised the temporary occupation of a strategic outpost as a naval station, while avoiding open conflict with Russia or direct violation of Korean sovereignty. Geomundo was selected as Britain's forward position in its East Asian contest with Russia. In April 1885, Admiral Dowell, commander of the British East Asia Squadron, ordered two warships and several auxiliary vessels to land and occupy Geomundo. They constructed a small garrison, coal depot, and signal station, officially renaming the site *Port Hamilton*.

The occupation provoked strong protests from the *Joseon* court, which regarded it as a violation of national sovereignty. However, because Korea was still a tributary of the Qing, formal diplomatic protest had to be channeled through Beijing. Russia, for its part, responded diplomatically, declaring and guaranteeing that it had no intention of occupying any Korean port, thereby depriving Britain of justification for its action. The Qing initially condemned Britain's move but later acquiesced, viewing British presence in Korea as a temporary measure to prevent Russian expansion. After a

series of negotiations among Britain, Russia, and China, an agreement was reached in February 1887. Britain withdrew its forces, restoring the territory to Korea. No military confrontation occurred between the major powers. For Britain, the episode underscored both its exaggerated fears of Russian ambitions in East Asia and the limits of its containment policy in the region. Strategically, it reflected the lack of international legitimacy for the occupation and London's pragmatic calculation that the potential benefits did not outweigh the risks of confrontation with Russia. This event exemplified Britain's *short-term tactical logic*, a transient, precautionary manoeuvre rather than a step toward formal control or colonisation. The episode also stands as an example of an "informal empire", a manifestation of *informal imperialism* in which a European power temporarily imposed strategic influence without establishing a formal colony [16; 118–121].

For the regional order, Britain's occupation of Port Hamilton demonstrated the weakening of the traditional *Sinocentric tributary system* and the ascendancy of modern imperial geopolitics. Although the Qing still nominally exercised suzerainty over Korea, it was powerless to oppose Britain's seizure of a Korean harbour. Occurring soon after France's defeat in the Sino-French War, the affair symbolised the collapse of China's central role in East Asian diplomacy. For Korea, the implications were grave: the peninsula became a *strategic theatre* in the rivalries of empires, a geopolitical fault line among Britain, Russia, China, and Japan. Britain's action revealed that Western powers were willing to infringe upon Korean sovereignty whenever strategic interests were at stake. It paved the way for intensified Russo-Japanese competition over Korea and foreshadowed the subsequent conflicts of the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War.

2.2.3. Causes of the Western Failure to Fill the East Asian Power Vacuum

After the Port Hamilton Affair, Korea remained the principal *power vacuum* in East Asia, an empty strategic space that Western powers failed to occupy. Several factors may explain the failure of Britain and France in their attempts to occupy or dominate Korea.

First, the East Asian power structure in the late 19th century was complex, fragile, and fluid. Unlike the early 19th century, when the *Sinocentric tributary order* still defined interstate relations, East Asia became a multipolar arena in which the old powers retained residual influence while the new imperial actors had yet to establish secure positions. The Qing, though weakened and partitioned by Western encroachment, continued to exert authority over neighbouring states. Britain and France, meanwhile, were preoccupied with South and Southeast Asia. Consequently, both powers intervened in East Asia only peripherally. Japan, having rapidly modernised under the Meiji Restoration, and Russia, pursuing expansionist ambitions in the Far East, emerged as the most dynamic and unpredictable forces in the regional system. Any attempt by a Western power to establish a permanent territorial foothold thus risked upsetting the precarious balance among these competing actors. Port Hamilton's location, strategically positioned between Russia's Vladivostok, China's Liaodong Peninsula, Korea, and Japan, made it a geopolitical flashpoint. British occupation would have been viewed as a destabilizing act, provoking adverse reactions from neighbouring powers. In this sense, sustained British presence posed more risks than rewards, potentially undermining London's broader strategic posture and global reputation.

Second, from the perspective of *informal empire* and *buffer state* theory, Korea was never a strategic priority for either Britain or France. For France, the conquest of Indochina in the 1860s, using it as a springboard for access to southern China, was more important. Although the failure of the 1866 expedition damaged French prestige, Paris chose not to allocate further resources to Korea, concentrating instead on consolidating control in Cochinchina and subsequently across the Indochinese Peninsula. Similarly, in the 1880s, Britain's overriding concern was not East Asia but the defence of India. The seizure of Port Hamilton was thus a precautionary move, intended to pre-empt Russian use of the harbour as a naval base in East Asia. Once Russia's assurances in 1886 removed the immediate threat of war, the occupation lost its strategic rationale. Maintaining a distant garrison entailed logistical burdens and political risks, potential conflict with Russia,

Japan, or China, that outweighed the prospective gains. Occupying Geomundo was, therefore, merely a “temporary move,” never conceived as a permanent colonial policy.

Third, the absence of Anglo–French cooperation in establishing a Western colonial presence on the Korean Peninsula also contributed to failure. Although both Britain and France were major maritime empires in Asia, their relationship in the 19th century was defined more by rivalry than collaboration. Their competition in Southeast Asia ultimately resulted in a demarcated buffer zone between British India and Burma on one side and French Indochina on the other. No Anglo–French alliance could realistically emerge to divide influence in East Asia. Consequently, France’s failed expedition to Ganghwa Island and Britain’s unilateral occupation of Port Hamilton occurred in complete isolation, without mutual support or coordination. Each power pursued separate strategic priorities elsewhere, which precluded Korea from becoming a site of joint colonial enterprise.

Fourth, the agency of the *Joseon* dynasty itself, and Japan’s eventual “filling of the vacuum”, played a decisive role in thwarting Western ambitions. Despite its conservatism, military weakness, and nominal vassalage to a declining Qing, *Joseon* still exercised agency in defending its sovereignty. Militarily, Korean forces were able to repel the poorly informed and logistically unsupported French expedition [17]. Diplomatically, the *Joseon* court made clear and consistent protests against both the French invasion of 1866 and the British occupation of 1885–1887, regarding them as blatant violations of sovereignty. Popular resistance further compounded the difficulties of foreign forces. Korean civilians resisted and refused cooperation, making local logistics nearly impossible. King Gojong, advised by German and American counsellors, actively mobilised diplomatic pressure through Beijing, St. Petersburg, and Tokyo to compel Britain’s withdrawal. These acts of defiance demonstrated the capacity of a “weaker state” to resist imperial aggression through a combination of military, diplomatic, and popular means. Nevertheless, the Western withdrawal created a vacuum soon exploited by Japan. By eliminating both the Qing and Russian presence, Japan transformed Korea into a formal colony, its primary stronghold in East Asia. For Japan, a latecomer to the imperial scramble, Korea offered immense strategic and economic value: a platform for continental expansion and a critical source of resources in its late 19th and early 20th centuries pursuit of great-power status.

3. Conclusions

During the global wave of colonial expansion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the *power vacuums* that had previously existed across various regions of the world were gradually filled through the participation of nearly all the imperial powers. In East Asia, the growing presence of Western empires profoundly altered the regional balance of power and the configuration of international relations. The traditional *tributary order* was steadily replaced by a treaty-based system modelled on Western international law and diplomatic practice. Within this transforming environment, Korea remained the final polity in the tributary hierarchy to uphold its isolationist (*sakkoku*) policy toward the West, maintaining loyalty to the Qing court and relying on China’s increasingly fragile protection. This precarious position rendered Korea a natural target for foreign intervention and imperial rivalry. Invoking the protection of religion as a pretext, France launched a military expedition into Korean territory in 1866, an operation that lacked strategic coherence and logistical preparation. Achieving neither political nor economic objectives, French forces withdrew after just over a month of occupation. Two decades later, when Korea had already diversified its foreign relations and signed treaties with several powers, Britain occupied the island of Geomundo (Port Hamilton) for two years as a tactical measure to counter potential Russian encroachment. Its eventual withdrawal confirmed Britain’s failure to transform Korea into a colony, protectorate, or even a trading station of the Western empires.

These failures must be understood within the broader context of Anglo–French strategic priorities elsewhere in East Asia, the regional balance of power involving China, Russia, and Japan, and the persistent diplomatic and military resistance of the *Joseon* court. The combined result was that neither Britain nor France succeeded in filling the *power vacuum* in Northeast Asia (Korea, China, Japan). That vacuum was soon filled by Japan, which eliminated Qing influence through the Sino–Japanese War (1894–1895) and subsequently displaced Russia following the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905).

The failure of the Western powers to fill the East Asian power vacuum, examined here through the case of Anglo–French rivalry on the Korean Peninsula, illustrates a fundamental transformation in the regional power structure: a shift from the *traditional tributary system* to the *modern treaty system*. This transition was driven by both exogenous factors, the penetration of Western imperial powers such as Britain, France, Russia, the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany, and endogenous dynamics, notably Japan’s ascent as a modern imperial state and the limited but significant agency of smaller regional actors. In this sense, the case study of Korea represents more than a failed episode of Western expansion; it marks the intersection between short-term “naval experiments” by Britain and France and a longer-term *structural transformation* of East Asia’s international order at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. The shift from imperial testing to systemic reconfiguration paved the way for a new regional hierarchy, one increasingly dominated by Japan and defined by modern treaty relations rather than Confucian tributary norms.

***Note:** This research is funded by the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 601.01-2021.04.

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