

The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire

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agreement, similar to one signed in the Balkans in 1895 and valid for ten years, effectively 'neutralised' the latter area against the encroachments of railways for more than a decade.²⁵

For the next six years Russia was preoccupied with events in the Far East and with revolution at home. Her involvement in co-operation with Britain in Manchuria, but the programme of economic reform drawn up at Peking in 1905 was only slowly implemented by the Tsar.²⁶ The Great Question was not seriously raised during these years. The railway gave increased Chinese access to goods because of the access for the opening of the South by means of the Russian Trans-Siberian line – that progress private enterprise – but, even at the height of the war against Japan, Russia continued to observe the claims of the South. The Black Sea Fleet was then present as well committed to neutrality, but the conditions remained very attractive.²⁷ In 1905, Russian foreign policy was represented by Count Witte, a member of the Council of the Foreign Ministry, who argued that Russia's interests called for the claims of the South for many years yet. When the time was ripe for change he recommended that Russia should seek to combine the principle of claims with the exclusive right of passage for her own railways. The opening of the South could only be maintained when Russia's presence could provide Black Sea Fleet, if foreign naval bases were located from the Black Sea, and if the South were satisfied.²⁸

Russia's handling of Japan was followed by the revolution of 1905, which compelled the Tsar to set up a constitutional government, the Duma, and also demanded a radical reorganisation of foreign policy. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, A. F. Gorchakov, wanted that Russia settle her rivalry with Britain and Japan for supremacy in Central Asia and the Far East in order to secure her full attention to the area of real importance in Russia – the Far East, where the main power would greatly be supported by Chinese expansion, by British Indian Britain following the Kangaroo Creek war in 1905 and by the opening of South Africa and Belgium colonies in Manchuria.²⁹ An agreement with

Japan settling spheres of influence in the Far East in July 1907 was followed in August by the convention with Britain covering Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet.²⁸

Count Witte, following the revolution of 1905, Russia's relations by a big leap forward in 1906 to take the government over the demands of revolution, was strongly criticised by influential circles in the court, the military and civil bureaucracy and the more conservative landowning nobility. These groups believed that a restoration of the claims of the South and European colonies would lead to a more effective suppression of revolutionary and liberal forces.³⁰ The more responsibility of carrying on the old struggle with Britain, however, the encroachment of the Central Powers on Russia's traditional interests, the hostile French and British support of the revolution were to be considered, and the increased financial dependence on France all caused the big leap forward in the Special Conference set up to define the claims.³¹ The pro-French orientation was also strongly supported by public opinion, representing the interests of the land-owning nobility, the commercial, industrial and professional middle classes represented in the Duma by the moderate right Constitutional Party and the Constitutional Democrats.³² It is important to note that the liberal political society in being able to place the pro-German lobby and maintain good relations with Germany despite the fact towards the Germans. The legend is repeated