

## Chapter 13: Annexation of Korea

### —Did Japan Have Any Other Alternative?—

#### The Korea-Japanese Protocol

Until 1897, Korea was called Joseon (朝鮮). While many in contemporary Korea seem to dislike their country being called that name, Joseon is not a name to be so averse to. At the start of the Yi dynasty in 1393, its founding king (Taejo of Joseon) Yi Seong-gye (李成桂) asked Ming if the new kingdom's name should be Joseon, which the legendary Chinese sage Jizi (Gija in Korean, 箕子) was believed to have ruled, or Hwaryong (和寧), where Yi Seong-gye was originally from. Ming's emperor chose the former name for its beauty as well as its ancient origin.

But because the very act of asking Ming to choose the kingdom's name implied Yi Seong-gye's acceptance of subjugation to the Chinese kingdom, the name Joseon was changed to Daehan-jeguk (大韓帝國, Greater Korean Empire, or Han) in 1897 when Qing's suzerainty was denied as the result of the First Sino-Japanese War. Thus, the name "Han" carries special meaning for the nationalism of its people—freeing themselves from the control of Qing—and it is correct and proper to refer to that country after this period as "Han."

As it is obvious from the process toward the war, the greatest objective for Japan in waging the Russo-Japanese War was to put Korea under Japan's control. Also, because the battle ground at the initial stage of the war was on the Korean Peninsula, it was imperative for the Japanese military to secure freedom of movement on the peninsula.

Thus, immediately after the eruption of the war in February 1904, the Japanese minister to Korea negotiated with the Korean government to sign the Korea-Japanese Protocol (日韓議定書). This protocol enabled Japan to take necessary actions to defend Korea and, at the same time, barred the Korean government from providing similar arrangements to a third country (i.e. Russia). With this protocol, the Japanese side obtained free use of the Korean territory for military purposes while restricting Korea's foreign policy. This was Japan's first step toward converting the country to a protectorate.

Because the Japanese troops landed on Inchon and captured Seoul immediately following the start of the war, there was nothing the Korean court could have done to resist the situation. It should be noted, however, that in those days Koreans did not have such a strong will to resist restrictions on their own sovereignty.

Resistance came exclusively from the pro-Russian faction in the Korean court. There had been a division within the Korean court prior to the eruption of the Russo-Japanese War between the pro-Japanese and the pro-Russian factions. Each faction had been connected to their respective legations in Seoul to receive various kinds of support, including, allegedly, financial assistance. The pro-Russian faction's stance, however, was not necessarily based on blind trust in Russia. It was more of a realistic precaution against by Russia, which could use Korea's agreement with Japan as a pretext to annex Korea when and if it defeated Japan.

Ordinary people in Korea harbored little hostility toward Japan in the beginning. In his *The Tragedy of Korea*, Frederick McKenzie, who severely denounced Japan's occupation of Korea, wrote:

I travelled largely throughout the northern regions in the early days of the war, and everywhere I heard from the people during the first few weeks nothing but expressions of friendship to the Japanese. The coolies and farmers were friendly because they hoped that Japan would modify the oppression of the native magistrates. A large section of better-class people, especially those who had received some foreign training, were sympathetic, because they credited Japan's promises and had been convinced by old experience that no far-reaching reforms could come to their land without foreign aid.<sup>1</sup>

What McKenzie saw was the Korean expectation that a pressure from Japan would promote political reform within Korea. His book is about the process through which the Korean people's expectation that Japan would assist Korea's independence was betrayed in no time and the people's

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Arthur McKenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1908), p. 111.

discontentment became rampant as abuses by the Japanese became frequent.

The Korea-Japan Protocol was easily concluded without much commotion while key members of the pro-Russian faction were sent to Japan for a tour by king's order, a maneuver engineered by the pro-Japanese faction. From this point forward, throughout the entire duration of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan consistently pursued the expansion of its discretionary power on the Korean Peninsula through behind-the-scenes diplomacy while, on the surface, pretending to promote Korea's independence.

### **Theodore Roosevelt, Man of Power Politics**

The number one priority among the “absolutely nonnegotiables” that Komura had been instructed on when he departed for Portsmouth was to “make the Russians accept Japan's discretion on the entire Korean affair.”

President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States supported Japan's Korea policy from the beginning to the end. He was an exceptional statesman in American diplomatic history; he understood power politics at work in international relations and was a staunch opponent of the Wilsonianism that became one of the guiding principles of American diplomacy throughout the 20th century. Roosevelt accused Woodrow Wilson and his followers with such relentless criticism as:

I am of the view that trust in a visionary peace treaty or a piece of paper that is not endorsed by power, an attitude manifested by the likes of Woodrow Wilson, is detestable. As far as foreign policies are concerned, I am convinced that the tradition of Friedrich the Great and Bismarck is far better for the well-being of a state as well as the world than the Wilsonian attitude. To become elated by justice without endorsement of power is much more harmful than power that ignores the pretext of justice.

As for the annexation of Korea by Japan, Roosevelt continued by stating:

Korea is absolutely Japan's. To be sure, by treaty, it was solemnly covenanted that Korea should remain independent. But Korea was

itself helpless to enforce the treaty, and it was out of the question to suppose that any other nation . . . would attempt to do for the Koreans what they were utterly unable to do for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Roosevelt reiterated his conviction on the uselessness of a piece of paper (i.e. treaty) that is not endorsed by power and declared that the United States would not make an effort to enforce the stipulations of the treaty.

Before Wilsonianism thinking became the mainstream in the United States, this line of argument was not found too much out of place. U. S. Minister to Korea Horace Allen was a typical well-meaning American who arrived in the country as a Presbyterian missionary and later joined the diplomatic corps. He remained so pro-Korean, defending Korea vis-à-vis the American government and persuading the Korean court to rely more on the United States, that Roosevelt found it necessary to replace him with the more pro-Japanese Edwin Morgan in 1905.

Even Allen eventually grew disillusioned with the corruption and intrigue within the Yi court and concluded that the Korean people were incapable of self-rule. While not avowing himself a Japanese sympathizer, he nonetheless regarded Korea as being better off under Japanese control and wrote to Washington that annexation by Japan would be in the best interests of the Korean people and the cause of peace in the Far East.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Taft-Katsura Agreement**

On July 29, 1905, an agreement was exchanged between Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Tarō (桂太郎) and the visiting U.S. Secretary of War William Taft that reciprocally recognized the Philippines as a possession of the United States and Korea as Japan's protectorate.

A protectorate was a form of colonial government during the age of imperialism—that is, while a protectorate's autonomy was in principle respected, its foreign relations and military affairs were controlled by its suzerain. In terms of international politics, forming a protectorate was an act of putting a country within the suzerain's sphere of influence.

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<sup>2</sup> John Morton Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Tsunoda (1967). p. 136.

In a consultation with Taft, Katsura emphasized the need to make Korea Japan's protectorate. Katsura contended that if Korea was left to conduct its own diplomacy, it would return to the tradition of "improvidently" making promises to foreign countries, stirring up international issues as it used to before the Russo-Japanese War. Taft concurred with this view.

This view was an expression of Japan's genuine concern. The government policy toward Korea that received imperial sanction on June 11 stated that a dangerous and highly unpredictable situation that might occur if Koreans were entrusted with their own diplomacy. Nobody in the Korean government, the policy stated, would sacrifice himself for the cause of the state. Officials made empty promises left and right for their own financial and/or personal gains, and the Korean court was full of conspiracies.

It should be recalled that during the First Sino-Japanese War the then foreign minister Inoue Kaoru visited Korea in order to promote domestic reforms there, placing high hopes on cooperation with the pro-Japanese reformist elements in Korea. Inoue, however, had to abandon his mission because "justice is neither within the conservatives nor the reformists, both of whom are just having a power struggle," and "either side would run to the Russian minister for help if we interfere and take sides with one or the other." This observation found an echo in Horace Allen's disillusionment with the corruption and intrigue within the Yi court twenty years later. It appeared that American diplomats must have gone through similar experiences with the Koreans as Inoue had done.

In the current world of national self-determination and sovereign equality, what Inoue and Allen deplored does not in any way constitute a reason to violate the sovereignty of a nation. Moreover, it is absurd to aspire to conquer such a cumbersome country. But at the apex of imperialism, the argument that any Western power could at any time advance on such an instable country as Korea, posing a serious threat to Japan, was quite an acceptable notion.

Thus, both Britain and Russia recognized Korea as Japan's protectorate by the Second Anglo-Japanese Alliance, revised on August 12, and the Treaty of Portsmouth, signed on September 5, 1905. In both cases the signing parties went over Korea's head, but those were the days when a lesser latecomer to

international relations, particularly a country of non-white, non-Christian people, was not treated as an equal actor in international law. Subsequently, Japan began nullifying Article 3 of the Korea-Japanese Protocol, which guaranteed the independence and territorial integrity of the Greater Korean Empire, by restricting Korea's sovereignty little by little, paving the way for the eventual annexation of Korea.

This was, of course, a process that had completely ignored the will of the Korean court or its people. The Japanese government resorted to both threats and placation to counter and eliminate resistance from the Koreans.

### **Koreans Did Show Resistance**

Quite a number of history books in the pre-World War II era attributed Korea's ruin to the lethargic attitude on the part of the Korean people, on the grounds that they had yielded to Japan's pressure without any resistance.

But, as recorded in various historical documents including Itō Hirobumi's correspondences with the Korean side, Korean monarchs and court officials were far from being nonresistant. They tried to defend their nation and the court both overtly and covertly. Many volunteers took up arms to salvage Korea from foreign domination, including the Confucian scholar Choi Ik-hyun (崔益鉉) and An Jung-geun (安重根), who later assassinated Itō. These volunteers became quite a nuisance for the Japanese military.

We should be warned, though, that to characterize these resistances as anti-imperialistic struggles, as was fashionable among the post-World War II Leninist-Wilsonian historical views, would obstruct our understanding of the true meaning of history. Considering the educational background of these Koreans, their conduct must be attributed to genuine feelings of self-sacrificing patriotism. Such sentiment had run through Oriental thought from ancient times and found manifestation in historic figures. Yue Fei (岳飛), a 12th-century North Song military general, fought to salvage the kingdom from the Jin (金) dynasty's invasion, only to be betrayed by corrupt officials headed by Qin Hui (秦檜); he died in imprisonment, leaving the inscription, "Heaven knows everything" on the wall of his cell. Wen Tianxiang (文天祥), a 13th-century South Song scholar-general, followed South Song to the grave, leaving behind the famous classic "Song of

Righteousness” (天地正気の歌) as his refusal of Kublai Khan’s offer of a post in the Yuan (元) dynasty.

But at the dawn of the 20th century, imperialism was at its apex. The Korean volunteer resistance was buried in total oblivion, along with contemporary independence movements in Vietnam and Burma, failing to make any impact on the main flow of international relations at the time.

The despair and desperation of these patriots and the hardship and humiliation of the Koreans who later lost their own country deserve our deep sympathy. And these emotions became the genesis of the Korean people’s grudge against the Japanese, which is still deep and strong even today.

Subsequent developments can be summarized as follows: By May 1904, the Japanese government had decided on the policy to make Korea its protectorate, and the Korean government agreed at the Japan-Korea Agreement in August 1904 to consult with the Japanese government on every aspect of finances and foreign relations.

After the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, the Japanese government concluded the Eulsa Treaty (or Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty) with the Korean government in November, in order to materialize its gains from the victory in the Russo-Japanese War. With that, the Japanese government took over Korea’s diplomacy. Itō Hirobumi was appointed the first Resident-General of Korea.

In a desperate effort to use foreign leverage to restrict Japan’s oppression, the Korean court dispatched an emissary to the Hague Peace Conference in 1907. The emissary was ignored by countries participating in the conference, and exposure of his scheme forced the Korean emperor to resign. Under the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1907 (also known as the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty), jurisdiction of the Resident-General of Korea was expanded to include not only diplomacy but also the entire Korean domestic politics.

After the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War, Komura had been stationed in London, but he was appointed again to the post of foreign minister in the second Katsura cabinet in 1908. As foreign minister, Komura in March 1909 drafted a policy to annex Korea at an appropriate time, and the policy received imperial sanction.

Itō was transferred to the post of the President of the Privy Council in June 1909, and Deputy Resident-General Sone Arasuke took over Itō's post in Korea. On October 26, Itō was traveling in Manchuria, when he was assassinated by a Korean nationalist/independence activist An Jung-geun at the Harbin Railway Station. Cashing in on this incident, the Japanese government further advanced its preparation for a full annexation of Korea, encouraged by the benign responses from the Western powers. The government replaced Sone, who was skeptical about the annexation, with Terauchi Masatake. Korea was officially annexed to Japan in August 1910.

### **Protectorate or Annexation?**

Itō Hirobumi remained cautious about the annexation of Korea until the very last minute.

We can trace Itō's thinking through his remarks. Prior to his departure for Seoul in January 1906 to become Japan's Resident-General, Itō told newspaper reporters that he wished to accomplish his mission in cooperation with the Korean officials and people. It is particularly noteworthy that Itō spent half of the interview criticizing the Japanese conduct in Korea as follows:

There is much to be denounced about the conduct of some of our people in Korea so far. They have been insulting the Korean people with the worst kind of affronts imaginable. Korean people are forced to swallow their tears and endure the humiliation. . . . These cruelties are the very conduct that the Japanese residing in Korea must refrain from most of all. . . . It would be highly regrettable if such conduct has made the Korean people obedient on the surface but caused them to harbor a grudge against the Japanese underneath, thus adversely affecting Japan-Korean relations. . . . As Japan's Resident-General of Korea, I intend to exercise strict control over such undesirable conduct.

These remarks by Itō reveal the fundamental problem of Japan's rule in Korea. While ruling India, the British government allowed only the well-educated and well-respected British citizens to immigrate to India. When petty merchants arrived in India full of thirst for money, they were

deported by the order of the British Viceroy and Governor-General of India as “undesirable British.” Those who were only interested in land and money had a choice to head for Australia or other colonies.

Unfortunately for Japan, overseas destinations were limited for Japanese settlers because all the fertile frontier lands, such as Australia, had already been taken by Western powers. Also, because President Roosevelt wished to accept only the educated Japanese immigrants, people from the lower strata of the Japanese society were rejected by the United States on the basis of the Japan-U.S. Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908. These people flocked to Korea to seek opportunities.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there was some imperialistic intention on the Japanese side, particularly on the part of Komura. In the March 1903 memorandum written at the time of the official decision to annex Korea, Komura suggested that Japan should migrate as many Japanese citizens as possible to Korea in order to provide a deeper root for Japan’s power.

Needless to say, Komura alone was not guilty of thinking this way; the majority of the Japanese in those days were thinking along the same line. A high-ranking Japanese official that McKenzie met had the following to say:

There are two types of colonial rule. One is the India-type, and I am convinced that India will liberate itself from British rule some day. The other type aims to assimilate local people into Japan by teaching them the Japanese language and establishing Japanese institutions there, and this is the type that Japan intends to adopt.

In those days it was predominant among the Western powers to refer to underdeveloped areas as “the white man’s burden” and regard their colonial rule as “protection and guidance provided by the rulers.” In order to make a foreign land as its own permanent territory, however, a colonial power could only resort to a policy of assimilation, which is basically the same as the Sinonization policy that China has been currently pursuing in Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regions.

As McKenzie had observed, once Korea became a protectorate of Japan, thousands of ambitious Japanese rushed to the Korean Peninsula to try their luck. Uninhibited by Japan’s domestic regulations, these Japanese

audaciously abused the Korean people and exploited their lands and other rights. Still, these Japanese were under the protection of the Japanese authorities. At this point, the only person in Japan who was endowed with the integrity and authority to fearlessly remonstrate these developments was Itō.

Even with the authority of Itō, however, the overall trend was unstoppable, especially when all of Itō's subordinates thought and acted like Komura. While McKenzie respected the arrest and deportation of undesirable Japanese as genuine accomplishments by Resident-Governor Itō that earned him the trust of the local people, McKenzie observed that, judging from the overall behavior of the Japanese, "It has become obvious that Japan's true aim is nothing but the full annexation of Korea and the complete obliteration of Korean racial characteristics."

Itō made several remarks opposing the annexation of Korea. In a July 1907 speech in Seoul, he proclaimed that Japan was satisfied with seeing the Japanese and Korean flags flying side by side and that there was no need for Japan to toil for Korea's destruction. He continued to say, admitting it would be extremely cumbersome for Japan to annex a country, that Korea must become self-governing, although it would not be able to accomplish sound self-government without Japan's guidance. In another speech in 1908, in front of *yangban* (Korea's traditional ruling class or nobles) Confucian scholars, Itō said,

In the olden days, it was deemed to be the goal for heroes to invade another land and conquer it. But that is not so today. . . . Weak countries are burdens for strong countries. Therefore, strong countries today must assist weaker countries to become prosperous and strong so that they can defend themselves together hand in hand.

It is hard to imagine that, given Itō's frame of mind in those days, he was saying something that he did not mean at all. In fact, Itō made Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl of Cromer, his role model. Baring had put all of Egypt under his de facto control for thirty years between 1877 and 1907, during which he reconstructed the defunct Egyptian finances and made tremendous contributions to the country's modernization, including education and public

health. Thus, it is not hard to conjecture that Itō's true intention was to promote the protectorate administration. His intention was followed by Sone, who succeeded Itō as the Resident-General and had a skeptical view on Japanese annexation of Korea until the last minute.

### **Sudden Change of Itō**

Itō was also well-trusted in Korea. According to McKenzie:

It is noteworthy that, although the Marquis [Ito] has been the main representative of the Mikado in wresting its independence from Korea, he is yet regarded by the responsible men there with a friendliness such as few other Japanese inspire. Everyone who comes in contact with him feels that, whatever the nature of the measures he is driven to adopt because of Imperial policy, he yet sincerely means well by the Korean people. The faults of his administration may be the necessary accompaniments of Japanese Imperial expansion, but his virtues are his own.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, when Katsura and Komura decided on the annexation of Korea, they started to persuade Itō, who, they thought, would most certainly oppose the decision. To their surprise, however, Itō readily admitted that annexation would have been inevitable sooner or later.

This unexpected response demonstrated by Itō has been interpreted in many ways. To those aiming for Korea's independence, it was a reversal from his usual words and promises and a betrayal of the Korean people's trust. From the perspective that Japanese should aspire to increase its national prestige and that imperialistic expansion was a means to do so, which was a historical view prevalent in pre-World War II Japan, Itō's response was interpreted as an indication that Itō after all had not been so weak-kneed.

In my view, this cannot be such a complex issue. The bewilderment and confusion stem from approaching history with the post-World War II values that posit the annexation of a foreign land as evil and preserving a foreign

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<sup>4</sup> McKenzie (1907), p. 142.

country's self rule as good—or vice versa. From this approach, the change in Itō's stance could be seen as a contradiction within a man or as a 180-degree turn from good to evil, or vice versa.

In Itō's mind, perhaps, annexation and the continuation of protectorate status were both realistic options on equal footing. He might have thought that, although continuation of the protectorate was still preferable, it might be too lukewarm to pursue a Japanese protectorate over Korea now that Koreans' distrust of Japan had become so deep, which left only the annexation option to Japan. His perplexity, perhaps, was in facing these two options.

Itō had once converted himself from an advocate of suprapartian government to a supporter of party politics and, in the realm of foreign policy, from a proponent of entente with Russia to an upholder of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Similarly, from Itō's viewpoint, the options of annexation and a protectorate each had their own advantages and disadvantages, but either could be a realistic choice if its disadvantages were attended to and its advantages were further promoted.

Itō, however, remained very adamant in the Manchurian dispute. From his viewpoint, the Korean issue was totally different from the Manchurian issue. Since Japan's discretionary right in Korea had been recognized by Qing as the result of the First Sino-Japanese War, by Russia due to the Russo-Japanese War, by Britain through the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and by the United States as the result of the Taft-Katsura Agreement, Japan's security was in no danger whichever option Japan decided to take regarding Korea, i.e., protectorate or annexation.. Japan's security would be, so to speak, protected by diplomatic relations.

Because Japan was planning to advance to Manchuria against the wishes of the United States, China, and Russia, however, that action was liable to isolate Japan in the international community and, worse than that, corner Japan sooner or later into fighting all three of them, as typically exemplified by the Manchurian Incident in later years. History shows that Japan did have to fight a war against these countries, and this became the cause of the ruin of the Empire of Japan.

In the historical views prevalent in post-World War II Japan, the annexation of Korea and the founding of Manchu State (満州国 or

Manchukuo) are treated equally as the same evils of imperialism. If one thus approaches history solely from an ethical viewpoint, he will not be able to evaluate the skill or lack thereof in diplomacy, or the soundness of the strategy.

Simply put, the annexation of Korea and the maintenance of its protectorate status were both within the latitude of the flexibility of Itō's state policy.

### **Was There Any Other Option Than Annexation?**

Looking back, was there really no other option than annexation? If the Korean side had resisted more thoroughly, there was always a possibility that it would have been conquered by Japan simply by force. That was why the Korean leaders swallowed their tears and made concessions one after another. When the dispatch of the Korean emissary to the Hague Peace Conference in 1907 was disclosed, Itō claimed the action to be a violation of the spirit of the Korea-Japan Protocol and threatened the Korean side with a possible declaration of war. At the Korean cabinet meeting attended by its emperor, pro-Japanese members, fully aware of the futility of doing so, declared that, short of an official apology, Korea would have no other choice than to dauntlessly fight against Japan. If Korea had refused to yield to the threat, it would probably have been annexed by coercion, instead of by agreement, like many other colonies of the Western powers, most typically those of Central Asia. And no Western powers would have objected to Japan's conduct.

Observers of the international situation in those days unanimously agree that, had Japan not fought Russia, Korea would have become a territory of the latter. While the truth of this is almost beyond doubt, the most difficult historical hypothesis to verify is whether, after eliminating Russia's territorial ambitions, Japan would have had the option of retaining Korea's independence and consolidating long-term relations based on mutual trust with Korea. Looking back from the viewpoint of the post-World War II world of decolonization and sovereign equality, obviously that would have been an idealistic choice, but the real issue is whether it was really a realistic scenario in those days.

To state the conclusion first, there was hardly any possibility. To begin with, Japan in those days was far from a situation that could be described as having successfully eliminated Russia's ambition to conquer Korea. The threat of retaliation from Russia hovered over Japan until the ruin of the Russian Empire or until Japan was defeated in World War II—which, as Joseph Stalin declared later, completed Russia's revenge for the humiliation of the Russo-Japanese War.

Nor were the prospects for building long-lasting relations of mutual trust with Korea realistic, either. Koreans had harbored fear and suspicion toward Japan since the assassination of Empress Myeongseong (閔妃), or even since the days of the Japanese invasions of Korea in 1592–98. The Korean court was so obsessed with fear and suspicion over Japan's next move, given its past record, that it even considered positively collaborating with Russia. Viewed another way, there was absolutely no need for Koreans to give Russia an easy reason to annex their country by officially siding with Japan in a next war that was likely to be won by Russia.

Korea must have refused to have any kind of special relationship with Japan—even under the name of friendship. The more demanding Japan became for its special position in Korea, the more the latter would have relied on Russia or China to keep the balance, which would have been quite a natural course for a sovereign nation to pursue diplomatically. If Korea had approached Russia, there was no knowing when and how Russia would come back to intervene with smooth talk and threats. Judging from the Japanese documents that have been introduced in this volume, the Japanese side had well anticipated this possibility. It was, therefore, unthinkable for Japan at that time to easily give up the fruits of the Russo-Japanese War—that is, Korea.

In other words, the situation could be likened to a vicious cycle between Korea's obscure resistance driven by a suspicion of Japan based on history and the Japanese response in the form of increasing threats and coercion—which, in turn, made Koreans more suspicious of Japan. And this vicious cycle became the powerful driving force for Japan's tragic annexation of Korea. It was impossible at this stage to change the course of history.

### **No Safe Haven for a Lesser Country in the Age of Imperialism**

It was a solemn fact that there was no safe haven for countries without power until the age of imperialism—a dog-eat-dog world in which the jungle’s law in the name of “social Darwinism” dominated international relations—ended and was followed by the age of decolonization and, eventually, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Had Japan not won the Russo-Japanese War, Japan itself must have been deprived of its freedom as a sovereign state until the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Siam and Persia, two Asian countries that barely maintained their independence during the age of imperialism, were able to do so as buffer zones between Britain and France and between Britain and Russia, respectively, allowing themselves to be divided up into spheres of influence of these powers. As we have seen earlier, however, Russia had no intention to make Korea into a buffer zone, except for a temporary measure in preparing for an eventual annexation, because its ultimate concern had always been the southern coast of the Korean Peninsula. That being the case, Korea had been destined to be conquered either by Japan or Russia, just like Egypt, which suffered the power struggle between Britain and France when they contested control of the Suez Canal that runs through Egypt.

The least that Japan could have done would have been to strictly refrain from taking the assimilation measures, block the inflow of undesirable Japanese like the way Britain managed India, and respect the Korean people’s lands and rights. Whether these measures, if taken, could have completely broken the vicious cycle of grudges and suppression is uncertain. Nevertheless, judging from the descriptions left by McKenzie, there was a good possibility that Japan could have secured the support of the ordinary people and some of the intellectuals in Korea. If that had happened, Korea could have remained as a protectorate as Itō had originally envisioned, allowing Korea to wait along with such countries as Egypt and Morocco for the arrival of the age of decolonization without losing its right to self-government.

Seen from this perspective, Itō’s idea exhibited a most advanced way of thinking in the days of imperialism. His thinking was also in the direction that experts in Britain and the United States in those days believed to be the best one for the welfare of the Korean people. But Itō passed away in 1909. His death symbolized the end of an era called Meiji, where liberal and

open-minded spirits liberated by the Meiji Restoration thrived, co-existing with the then prevalent imperialism.