Japanese attacks. In exchange, Russia received rights to build a railroad across Manchuria linking Harbin with Port Arthur.

In Korea, the Japanese remained thwarted by Queen Min’s faction at the royal court (which now had the support of the Russians). They quietly plotted her assassination with the help of the Taewon’gun. In the early morning of October 8, 1895, a band of assassins stormed the palace, found the Queen and stabbed her to death. An immediate cry of outrage rose from the diplomatic community, two of whose members had witnessed the crime. In a daring countermove, the Russian minister in Seoul, Alexandre de Speyer, formed an armed escort which took King Kojong from his palace and placed him under the protection of the Russian legation.

After this, Russia began to establish ever-closer ties with the Korean government, training its army and financial experts while guaranteeing the security of the King. By 1898 all commands in the new Korean army were being issued in Russian. Yet no nation, including Russia, approached Japan in its ability to aggressively dominate Korea’s overseas trade, three-fourths of which was with Japan by the turn of the century. Japanese railways, Japanese timber industries, Japan’s telegraph services, and many other business interests controlled by Japan dominated life in Korea.

**The Boxer Rebellion**

At this point, a domestic antiforeign uprising emerged to play a pivotal role in the politics of Asia, one that grew out of the rage of the common people over their displacement and exploitation at the hands of foreigners and the incapacities of their traditional government to prevent it. Called the “Boxers” from a mistranslation of the Chinese name, Yehthuan, (United in Righteousness and Harmony), the movement soon established a covert alliance with the Manchu court which saw it as a force to drive out the Westerners. By 1900 the so-called rebels had laid siege to the foreign legations in Beijing and Tianjin after killing thousands of Christian converts and 250 foreigners, mainly missionaries, throughout China.

Inside the legation walls in Beijing, the foreign diplomats, businessmen, and their families ate their racing ponies one by one as they awaited relief from a force made up of soldiers from virtually every nation represented in China. Japan contributed the largest number of troops to this effort, but soldiers also participated from Russia, Great Britain, France, and the United States. Eventually, they succeeded in freeing all the foreign legations and went on to thoroughly loot the city of Beijing. The Empress Dowager and the young emperor fled to Xi’an to permit things to cool down.

In his last diplomatic negotiation, and perhaps his most ignominious, Li Hongzhang penned over the fact that the Empress Dowager had supported the Boxers. The protocol he signed with the imperialists powers in 1901 kept the treaty system intact and prepared for yet more concessions, heaping another monstrous indemnity on China’s already crushing burden of foreign payments. He died a few weeks later.

**Russo-Japanese Tensions**

Russia used the Boxer crisis to considerable advantage. While sending a few troops to the Beijing relief expeditions, the Japanese argued that the railroad from Port Arthur must be protected from falling into rebel hands. Large Russian forces were moved into Manchuria, where they became a virtual army of occupation.

With Russia now her chief rival for hegemony in Asia, Japan sought to find a counterweight. The obvious choice was Great Britain, the czar’s ubiquitous competitor in the “Great Game” of empire. Japan persuaded Britain to renegotiate their “unequal” commercial treaty (a pattern soon to be followed by other nations), and eventually the British agreed to a formal Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902), the first between an Asian nation and a European power. The stage for the Russo-Japanese War was now set.

Russia, besides widening its ties to the Korean court, gave even greater priority to its interests in Manchuria, where both China and Japan had requested Russian troop withdrawals. Tensions rose over Russia’s continued Manchurian deployment.

A few leaders on both sides sought to avoid war. Prince Ito, convinced that Japan could not

**MEIJI JAPAN AND THE FAILURE OF THE KABO REFORM, 1894-1896**

Japan’s victory in its war with China in 1894 opened up a new opportunity for it to promote a reform-minded, pro-Japanese government in Korea. Working with Korean reformers, the Japanese persuaded the Taewon’gun to lead the new government, thereby appealing to the Tonghak insurgents who remained a formidable proto-nationalist force in Korea. The result was a short-lived but important movement known as the Kabo ("1894") Reform. Lasting from July 1894 to February 1896, the movement was led by many key figures in the Korean "enlightenment" politics of the 1880s (the period of the abortive "Kapin Coup"). These were people who had studied or lived in Japan and the United States and were committed to nationalism, egalitarianism, and modern capitalism.

Meiji Japan was a model for this idealistic reform movement during which 210 reform bills were adopted by a special Deliberative Council and a dozen royal edicts, setting forth the goals of the reform, were promulgated by King Kojong. The Reform had the following objectives:

1. **Full Korean independence as a nation.** Unequal treaties with China were abrogated and Chinese privileges in Korea abolished. A new Ministry of Foreign Affairs was created and plans were made for establishing foreign legations. Education reforms emphasized schooling that would instill a sense of Korean national identity and the use of the national hangul script was encouraged.

2. **A cabinet-centered constitutional monarchy.** Seven new ministries were established under a Japanese-style Cabinet. Local administration was revamped to provide greater control from the center under the supervision of the home minister.

3. **Increased national wealth.** Fiscal authority was concentrated in the new Ministry of Finance and a modern taxation system was introduced. Modern banking and monetary systems were established. Legal restrictions on private entrepreneurs were eased and plans were made for state support of new industries and national infrastructure.

4. **Strengthened military security.** A new military command system was created. Plans were laid for a Military Academy and officers training school. Modern police units and administration were introduced in all major cities.

5. **A new system of education.** The traditional government examination system was abolished and in its place an integrated system of modern elementary schools, high schools, and colleges was introduced. Some two hundred students were sent to Japan for education at government expense.

6. **A modern judicial system.** Executive powers were separated from judicial powers. A modern court system was introduced and criminal rights, as well as the rights of the families of criminals, were improved.

7. **Sweeping social reforms.** Class distinctions between the yangban elite and commoners were abolished along with slavery. Early marriage was prohibited (no sooner than twenty for men; sixteen for women). The western calendar was adopted. Most controversially, an order was issued — and briefly enforced — that Korean men cut off their traditional topknot.

The Kabo Reforms, which occurred during a period of political turbulence and intense foreign rivalry in Korea, encountered stiff resistance from the Koreans themselves. This was partially due to Confucian conservatism, but anti-Japanese passions were enflamed during the reform period when the Japanese murdered Queen Min. King Kojong subsequently fled to the protection of the Russian legation and the reform movement collapsed. Two pro-Japanese cabinet members were murdered; the others fled to Japan. Yet the memory of the Kabo Reform movement did not die. Early in the next century many of its goals were to be revived by a new generation of Koreans this time in defiance of their colonial masters, the Japanese.