

Lesson 2, Nation Profiles

United States

With instructions from both President Chester Arthur and the Secretary of the U.S. Navy, Commodore Robert W. Schufeldt oversaw American interests in the first successful treaty negotiations between Korea and the US. His primary goal was to secure safety for US vessels, crews, and passengers, if they were shipwrecked on Korean shores. He also attempted, somewhat successfully, to establish trading rights and diplomatic relations. A bonus of this treaty was the admission of U.S. missionaries into Korea. Prior to 1882 they had been prosecuted, and even summarily executed; after the treaty was signed, a new era of Western proselytization in Korea began.

This treaty was significant for the US, not only because previous attempts at establishing trade with Korea had been harshly rejected, but also because they were the first Western nation to establish such trade relations. Although the treaty was concluded with the Chinese, and then signed by King Kojong in Korea, the United States refused to allow a clause declaring China's sovereignty over Korea into the final draft. Schufeldt felt certain that the U.S. Congress would never agree to the binding establishment of the Brotherhood of Nations paradigm. Not only was it not in the United States' best interests politically and commercially, it violated the all-American notion of universal equality. This further established Korea's independent national identity and weakened China politically.

The U.S. had no compelling interest in aiding China: relations between the two countries were rocky at their very best, while the treaties signed with the Japanese were, at the least, financially beneficial.

Korea

The road to opening the so-called "Hermit Kingdom" of the late Choson Dynasty was a rocky one. After the forcible retirement of the profoundly unpopular, but strenuously anti-West Regent, the *Taewon'gun*, a young and inexperienced King Kojong took control of the dynasty, installing his Queen's family in many important positions. Initially, the King followed China's advice regarding relations with other countries, particularly the West. As China's partiality and waning power became more apparent, however, King Kojong began asserting his independent streak. While seemingly acquiescing to Chinese advice, he opened trade relations with the US, only to obtain an end to Chinese sovereignty through the treaty implementation.

Korea both gained and lost by its acceptance of the 1882 Treaty with the United States. Though brokered entirely between the Chinese envoy and Admiral Schufeldt of the US Navy, the Korean treaty with the US firmly established Korea as an independent nation, ended Japan's monopoly of Korean ports, and ushered in similar treaties with other Western powers. Unfortunately for Korea, the art of treaty negotiation, and the precise nature and power of treaties were definitively foreign concepts. Some of the benefits King Kojong believed he was securing for his country, such as the United States' political and military protection from other nations, were completely undelivered by Korea's new "elder brother." Establishing its independence, and thereby weakening China, in order to acquire a stronger patron, Korea inadvertently aided the Japanese annexation later on, since the US had no interest in interfering with East Asian affairs, so long as trade remained uninterrupted.

China

China had a keen interest in treaty negotiations between Korea and the United States. In 1874 it encouraged Korea to open its ports to Western trade, in order to pre-empt possible invasions by the Japanese and Russians. China believed that once Korea established diplomatic ties to the Western world, those powers would protect it from encroachment by its more powerful neighbors, following the same "elder brother/younger brother" Confucian relationship that existed between Korea and China. In this way, the U.S. relationship with Korea would deter Russian and Japanese expansion. China, however, would remain the primary "elder brother" of Korea, thus strengthening its claim to political power in East Asia, which had been waning since its defeat at the hands of the Western nations in the Opium Wars, its loss of Japan as a tributary nation, and Japan's increasing militarism. Once the Japanese forced the Kanghwa Treaty upon Korea in 1876, China actively lobbied for Korea to open its ports to Western trade. Although China did not loudly protest Korea's establishment as an independent entity in the treaty, it pressed its influence with King Kojong and exerted pressure behind the scenes to break Japan's monopoly of trade with Korea, and inhibit any future plans they might have for invasion. They denied King Kojong's 1881 attempt to cease tributary relations with China, and attempted to have a clause in the Korea-US Treaty that affirmed Korea's dependent status.

Japan

Inoue Kaoru, Foreign Minister of Japan. Japan had its own reasons for closely following the Korea-US treaty negotiations. The Meiji government still harbored bitterness about the US opening of Japan and the imposition of treaties and trade agreements they considered unfair, while rapidly adopting Western technology and practices in order to "improve" and "modernize" the nation. In 1871, they pressured a weakened China into a treaty naming Japan as an equal power, rather than a tributary nation. Borrowing Western style gunboat diplomacy tactics, they established the Kanghwa treaties with Korea in 1876, giving them a monopoly on trade with the hermit Kingdom, as well as most favored nation status. In this treaty they also defined Korea as a nation independent from China, an act they felt would both increase Japanese national security by tying the strategically located country more closely to Japan, and unilaterally weaken China's political presence. This treaty appeased many nationalists who felt Japan should simply invade Korea, both as a way to reclaim national honor lost to the Westerners and as a preemptive strike against the Russians and the United States, who they believed had imperialist ambitions towards Korea. Japan's own ambitions were clear in the 1875 Treaty of St. Petersburg, in which Russia agreed to not intervene in the case of a Japanese invasion of Korea.