

ARTICLES

Unified Libertarian Theory and the Russo-Japanese War

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This article applies unified libertarian theory (ULT) to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, a conflict often dismissed or overlooked in modern scholarship. In reexamining the war, this study argues that Japan's initiation of hostilities met the threshold of justified coercion under ULT's standards. Justified coercion does not mean morally correct but rather that the *casus belli* falls within the descriptive framework of state behavior outlined in "Unified Libertarian Theory: Genesis" (duHoffmann 2025) and will likely not incur the costs associated with unjustified coercion. During the lead-up to the war, Japan was surrounded by hostile empires, vulnerable to economic strangulation, underestimated, and facing a deteriorating security environment. Its interest in securing Korea as a defensive buffer and deterring Russian encroachment was grounded not in an ideology of expansionism but in the preservation of national autonomy. The failure of diplomacy and the demonstrated bad faith of the Russian Empire created a condition of necessity through Russia's eastward expansion in which preemptive action became the only viable path to survival. Finally, the war's execution was restrained, targeted, and concluded with a negotiated peace, satisfying the requirement of proportionality. Under ULT, the Russo-Japanese War emerges as a case in which offensive war functioned as a defense of liberty. When evaluating Japan's strategy and situation holistically and as a response to structural vulnerability rather than simply as a bid for domination, the result is a picture of disciplined statecraft. In doing so, this article affirms ULT's central claim that force, when bound by ethical clarity and strategic restraint, can serve the cause of liberty without corrupting it.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 is often remembered as a turning point in global power dynamics. It marked the first time an Asian power decisively defeated a European empire in a conventional war. For many, it is a historical outlier viewed through the lens of imperial rivalry or early militarism. Conventional scholarship typically focuses on a bid for domination rather than a response to structural vulnerability. Yet such a reading fails to capture the deeper logic behind Japan's decision to initiate hostilities.

Conventional historiography frequently frames the Russo-Japanese War as the debut of Japanese imperialism, indistinguishable in nature from the expansionist aggression that would characterize Japan in the 1930s. Prominent



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historians such as Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka have situated the war as the foundational moment of a deliberate imperial project, arguing that Japan was eager to secure parity with Western colonial powers by carving out spheres of influence in Korea and Manchuria (Matsusaka 2001). Similarly, standard texts by scholars such as William G. Beasley portray the conflict as the first step in a continent-oriented policy of aggression that inevitably led to the colonization of Korea. This article challenges that continuum, arguing that the 1904 conflict was distinct in motive and execution, functioning as a defensive safeguard rather than an imperialist acquisition while remaining silent on the wars that followed.

This article applies unified libertarian theory (ULT) to the case of Japan in 1904, reexamining the Russo-Japanese War as a possible instance of justified preemptive conflict. Within the architecture of ULT, the war presents not a story of unchecked ambition but one of calculated necessity. It does not argue that Japan was blameless or moral, nor does it romanticize the use of force. Instead, it seeks to understand whether, in an anarchic world structured by strategic uncertainty, Japan's decision to strike first can be defended as a rational and ethically bounded act of statecraft. In doing so, it challenges conventional readings and affirms ULT's core claim: that liberty, when threatened, may demand strategic force so long as that force remains constrained by purpose, clarity, and restraint.

Unified Libertarian Theory: The Analytical Framework

It is important to clarify the scope of this inquiry. Libertarian scholarship often rejects the legitimacy of the state entirely, viewing it as an entity founded on coercion. Consequently, many libertarians view all interstate warfare as criminal. However, this argument is ineffective in this instance. ULT does not necessarily disagree with the moral sentiment. After all, since the state itself is criminal, why should anyone be surprised that a criminal organization engages in criminal acts? ULT therefore operates as a tool for understanding the world between criminals, leviathans, and mafias—in essence, a world of states (duHoffmann 2025). It does not seek to validate the state as a moral ideal but rather to analyze state conduct within international anarchy. This analysis utilizes the framework of ULT as outlined in duHoffmann (2025). Unlike the strict noninterventionism traditionally associated with thinkers such as Murray Rothbard, ULT posits that a state, though an imperfect vehicle, may legitimately use force if that force is strictly responsive to a legitimate threat to its liberty.

ULT emerges from a structural gap between classical libertarianism and realist approaches to international relations. The libertarian tradition offers a coherent philosophy but struggles to account for the behavior of states in a competitive system. Realism provides a clear description of strategic action but often lacks a normative foundation and cannot explain why certain actions produce long-term instability (duHoffmann 2025). ULT resolves this divide by

integrating normative and empirical analysis. At its foundation, ULT begins with the individual as the primary unit of analysis. Individuals possess sovereignty prior to the state. States therefore arise as aggregates of individuals whose consent varies in degree and form. This ontological choice shifts the evaluation of state behavior away from abstractions and toward the experiences of people affected by state action. It allows the theory to apply ethical and strategic reasoning consistently since both emerge from the same foundational assumption of individual agency.

The nonaggression principle functions within this framework as a structural rule rather than a purely moral claim. ULT interprets nonaggression as a boundary condition of stable political and international order. When states initiate force, they introduce systemic volatility. When states constrain the use of force to reciprocal and retaliatory purposes, they restore predictability (duHoffmann 2025). This shift moves the principle from a philosophical ideal to a practical determinant of long-term stability.

ULT incorporates key realist mechanisms while reframing their implications. States operate in an environment defined by self-help, competition for security, and the accumulation of resources and capabilities. Realism accurately describes these incentives. The framework retains this descriptive power but evaluates state choices according to whether they uphold or violate the structural rule of nonaggression (duHoffmann 2025). This produces a dual mode of analysis. It acknowledges what states do while assessing whether these actions reinforce or undermine systemic stability. An action that is rational from a narrow realist perspective can still destabilize the broader system if it violates the principle of nonaggression.

The principle of reciprocity sits at the point where ethics and strategy converge. Reciprocal force is ethically justified because it responds to aggression rather than initiating it. It is also strategically necessary because failure to respond invites further predation. Reciprocity therefore serves as a major stabilizing mechanism that aligns libertarian ethics with realist deterrence. It addresses the traditional challenge within libertarian thought concerning legitimate defense while avoiding utopian pacifism (duHoffmann 2025).

ULT evaluates state action through a triad of legitimacy. Does the action fall within the *interests* of the populace of the initiating state? How *necessary* is the action for maintaining the liberty of the populace? And finally, is the state using its resources in a manner that is *proportional* to the need at hand? Together, these principles form a diagnostic tool that links legitimacy to predictability and systemic health rather than to idealism alone (duHoffmann 2025).

The framework identifies several conditions that typically generate instability. These include the initiation of aggression, the rise of security dilemmas, spirals of illegitimacy in which rulers depend increasingly on coercion, resource-based

coercion, and the export of ideological missions across borders. ULT predicts that aggression invites balancing coalitions, coercion produces long-term instability, and rights-respecting systems tend to outperform others in innovation and economic growth. These outcomes follow from the combined ethical and strategic architecture of the theory (duHoffmann 2025).

In synthesis, ULT is neither utopian nor strictly descriptive. It offers a unifying framework that connects ethics, strategy, and political economy. Its analytical model provides stable criteria for evaluating state behavior, understanding conflict, and assessing the conditions of order. This foundation supports the empirical and policy-focused sections that follow.

The Strategic Setting and the Road to War

The geopolitical landscape of East Asia shifted dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating the impetus for Japan to act defensively to secure its autonomy. Regional instability and the expansion of European empires led Japan to prioritize security and deterrence.

The Geopolitical Environment of East Asia, 1890–1904

By the final decade of the nineteenth century, East Asia had become a theater of opportunism. The decline of the Qing Empire, once the dominant power in the region, created a vacuum that drew in European empires eager to expand their influence. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) exposed the Qing dynasty's fragility and demonstrated that the region was no longer stable but instead occupied a precarious position. From Japan's perspective, the war was an assertion of sovereignty aimed at preempting Chinese instability from spilling into Korea, a region vital to Japanese security. Japan's subsequent diplomatic humiliation, however, reframed its understanding of the international system. Consistent with the perspectives of realists, liberals, and ULT alike, it came to view the system as anarchic and one in which security was paramount.

Following its victory, Japan acquired the Liaodong Peninsula under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Yet within weeks it was compelled to surrender this gain under pressure from the Triple Intervention, a coalition of Russia, Germany, and France. This episode was a critical turning point. As Beasley (1987, 115) notes, "Japan had been denied the fruits of its victory not by treaty obligation, but by raw power politics." For Japan, it was not just a diplomatic reversal; it was a revelation that international legitimacy could not be secured through compliance with the international order alone.

In the years that followed, Western powers intensified their scramble for territorial and commercial concessions in China. Germany occupied Jiaozhou Bay. Britain seized Weihaiwei. Russia claimed Port Arthur. These actions, though framed in civilizational or commercial terms, were little more than a series of imperial acts. As Pyle (1996, 141) observes, "the Western powers were

not practicing what they preached. They condemned Japan's assertiveness in Asia even as they carved up China themselves." This left Japan with two critical realizations. First, the regional order was being shaped not by principle but by the application of force. Second, no external actor would preserve Japanese autonomy if Japan did not secure it itself. Japan's modernization had been framed as a path to parity, but the reaction it received suggested that equality among states was performative rather than structural. As Matsusaka (2001, 42) writes, "the lesson Japan drew from the Triple Intervention was not that it had overstepped, but that it had done so without the requisite power to defend its claims." The balance of power in East Asia had tilted decisively against China and, by extension, against any non-Western actor that failed to assert itself.

Russian Expansion into Manchuria and Korea

In the aftermath of the Triple Intervention, Japan did not merely lose territory. It lost the illusion that its regional autonomy could be preserved through diplomacy alone. This lesson became more urgent as Russia expanded its presence in northeast Asia with increasing audacity. Under the guise of protecting Chinese sovereignty during the Boxer Rebellion, Russian forces entered Manchuria in 1900. Although these deployments were presented as temporary, Russian troops remained in the region long after the crisis ended. By 1903, Russia had constructed rail and military infrastructure throughout Manchuria, including the South Manchurian Railway, with its terminus at the newly fortified Port Arthur.

Russia's entrenchment in Manchuria altered the balance of power in East Asia. Not only did it threaten Japan's interests in the region; it also created the possibility of encirclement. Korea, the linchpin of regional security from Tokyo's perspective, now faced pressure from both the north and west. William G. Beasley (1987, 99) notes that "Japanese leaders came to see the Korean Peninsula as a dagger pointed at the heart of their country." To allow Russia to dominate Korea was, in the minds of Japanese policymakers, to accept future subjugation.

Negotiations between the two countries repeatedly failed to yield a stable agreement. Russia refused to recognize Korea as falling within Japan's sphere of influence even as it continued its military buildup in adjacent territories. Yoshihisa Matsusaka (2001, 41) explains that by the early 1900s, "Russia had made clear its intention to dominate Manchuria and to deny Japan equal standing in the region." These moves were interpreted in Japan not as routine jockeying for position but as structural signals of coercive intent. The prospect of a hostile Russian presence on the Korean frontier presented not only a diplomatic challenge but also a direct threat to Japan's independence.

The urgency of the situation was compounded by Russia's diplomatic posture. Although it professed an interest in peaceful resolution, Russia continued to delay troop withdrawals and refused to clarify its long-term intentions.

From Japan's perspective, this ambiguity was strategic. It allowed Russia to consolidate its position while forestalling international criticism. Dmitrii Pavlov (2004, 13) acknowledges that "St. Petersburg did not seriously intend to abandon its hold on Manchuria." The lack of transparency, combined with military expansion, contributed to a growing consensus in Tokyo that Russia's presence in northeast Asia could not be resolved through negotiation alone.

This kind of strategic ambiguity is a hallmark of power politics in an anarchic system. For Japan, the choice was not between peace and war in the abstract but between preemptive defense and eventual subordination. Russia's advance into Manchuria and its posture toward Korea created conditions in which Japan's interest in preserving autonomy could not be protected through institutional restraint.

The Role of Western Imperialism

As Japan sought to assert its sovereignty and secure its regional interests, it confronted a global order shaped less by principle than by precedent. The international norms promoted were not applied universally. They were selectively enforced, often to the advantage of those already in command of military and economic power. In East Asia, European empires operated with few constraints. Britain controlled Hong Kong and dominated commercial routes through the Yangtze River. France held Indochina and pressured China's southern frontier. Germany seized Jiaozhou Bay in response to missionary killings, using the incident to justify a permanent military presence. These actions were not exceptions. They were paradigmatic of the era and illustrated the structure of the anarchic system.

What distinguished Japan from the empires it faced was not its ambition but its exclusion. As a non-Western state, it was subjected to scrutiny and criticism that European powers rarely encountered. This stemmed from the perception that non-Western powers were weak and possessed little ability to resist a modern empire. As a result, Japan's efforts to build strategic capacity and assert influence were framed as destabilizing even as similar actions by Britain or Russia were accepted as routine.

Japan's response was not to reject the international system but to adapt to it on its own terms. Its adoption of a more assertive strategy emerged from a sober reading of structural conditions. As Matsusaka (2001, 45) observes, "the logic of preemption and self-help became internalized not because Japan rejected international norms, but because it could not afford to trust them." Given Japan's position, it could not assume that restraint would be interpreted as virtue. More likely, it would be perceived as weakness.

By the early twentieth century, Japan had ceased to rely on rhetorical appeals to equality or mutual recognition. It understood that such norms would not restrain rival powers and that alliances offered only conditional support. In this environment, the defense of sovereignty required not deference to ideals but

the credible threat of independent action. The moral double standard Japan faced did not justify imperial overreach. Rather, it clarified that liberty, if it was to be preserved, required leverage. It was not granted; it had to be secured.

Strategic Isolation

By the early twentieth century, Japan stood largely alone. Unlike the Western powers that operated through vast global colonial holdings and multilateral arrangements, Japan's imperial reach was largely confined to Taiwan, leaving it without the deep institutional buffers or geographic insulation enjoyed by its European rivals. It had no formal alliance network to guarantee its security and no assurance that international agreements would be respected. This structural isolation made expansion not merely a preference but a condition for survival.

The unequal treaties imposed on Japan earlier in the century had already revealed the fragility of Japanese sovereignty. Although many of these constraints were gradually rolled back through negotiation and reform, they left a lasting lesson. Sovereignty without enforcement was symbolic. As Richard Sims (2001, 76) writes, "Japan's experience with the treaty system made it clear that formal independence could be rendered meaningless if not backed by the capacity to resist external coercion." This realization informed Japan's approach to external affairs in the decades that followed.

The prospect of Russian dominance in Manchuria and uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula gave this lesson immediate urgency. Japan lacked strategic depth, and its home islands were within reach of any hostile fleet. The development of military capacity had addressed part of this vulnerability, but it had not resolved the underlying asymmetry of power. Although the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 successfully isolated Russia by deterring French or German military intervention, it did not obligate Britain to fight on Japan's behalf in a one-on-one conflict. Japan's response, therefore, was to institutionalize strategic self-reliance. It did not expect protection from law, nor did it trust the neutrality of the Western powers. Instead, it pursued a doctrine of autonomous deterrence. Kenneth Pyle (1996, 82) explains that "only by demonstrating its power could the nation earn respect and secure its interests in a system that favored strength over equity." This was not a doctrine of expansion for its own sake but one of insulation from coercion.

Japan's leadership understood that remaining passive in the face of encroachment was not neutrality. It was a significant risk. By 1904, Japanese foreign policy had been reshaped by the recognition that liberty could be defended only if supported by force. The collapse of Qing authority, the entrenchment of Russian forces, and the unwillingness of other powers to intervene had created a structure in which survival could not depend on appeals to fairness. As Matsusaka (2001, 39) writes, "survival depended on being feared as well as respected." The prevailing view was that the defense of autonomy required more than readiness. It required action.

Russian Strategic Calculus in Manchuria and Korea

To understand the full scope of the Russo-Japanese conflict, one must also assess the rationale behind Russian expansion into Manchuria and Korea. From the Russian perspective, these moves were not merely acts of imperial overreach but calculated efforts to secure long-term strategic interests in a volatile region. The collapse of Qing authority, the threat of European competition, and the desire for warm-water access to the Pacific all contributed to a perception in St. Petersburg that northeast Asia was both a geopolitical opportunity and a defensive necessity.

The Russian Empire had long sought a stable outlet to the Pacific that would remain ice-free year-round. Vladivostok, its primary eastern port, suffered from harsh winters and limited utility. By contrast, Port Arthur offered strategic depth and all-season access. Historian John W. Steinberg explains that “Russia’s pursuit of Port Arthur and the Liaodong Peninsula was driven as much by maritime necessity as by imperial ambition” (Steinberg et al. 2005, 76). From this perspective, the acquisition of Port Arthur and the subsequent rail development in Manchuria were viewed as defensive infrastructure designed to protect Russian commercial and military assets in the Far East.

Additionally, Russia viewed its eastern expansion as a buffer against rising instability in the region. Russia had genuine security concerns regarding its distant and sparsely populated Far Eastern territories. The vital Trans-Siberian Railway, Russia’s only lifeline to the Pacific, ran perilously close to the Chinese border, making the tsars highly sensitive to instability in Manchuria that could sever their empire in two. The Boxer Rebellion, the subsequent intervention by foreign powers, and the fragility of the Chinese state created an opportunity. Russian officials, though deeply committed to the empire, saw themselves as stabilizers in a deteriorating frontier. Dmitrii Pavlov (2004, 12) notes that “Russian policymakers genuinely believed they were bringing order to a space threatened by chaos and foreign manipulation.” This self-perception, however flawed, lent a veneer of legitimacy to Russia’s prolonged presence in Manchuria, even after the stated reasons for intervention had expired.

Russia’s presence in Korea was less developed than its foothold in Manchuria, but the strategic logic was similar. Control of, or influence over, the Korean Peninsula offered an additional layer of insulation for Russian holdings in the Far East. According to Matsusaka (2001, 44), “Russia did not seek to colonize Korea outright, but it did seek to prevent hostile powers, namely Japan, from using it as a springboard against Russian interests in Manchuria.” In this sense, Korea was not an end in itself but a strategic buffer meant to prevent encirclement and preempt rival influence.

However, although Russian actions may have been grounded in strategic rationale, their execution betrayed an underestimation of Japanese resolve and a misreading of regional dynamics. The failure to withdraw from Manchuria

after the Boxer Rebellion, combined with evasive diplomatic behavior, signaled to Tokyo not strength but duplicity. As Geoffrey Jukes (2002, 18) explains, “Russian delay tactics convinced Japanese leaders that St. Petersburg would not relinquish its position voluntarily.” The result was not deterrence but provocation.

Russia’s maneuvers were not perceived as stabilization; they were read as encroachment. In an anarchic system, intention matters less than interpretation. The absence of trust, enforcement, or shared standards transformed Russia’s strategic calculus into a structural threat—one that Japan, acting from its own position of insecurity, could not afford to ignore.

Internal and External Dynamics of the Conflict

Both Japan and Russia approached the conflict with distinct underlying assumptions—Japan with a calculated sense of strategic necessity and Russia with fatal overconfidence. The domestic political framings adopted by these empires reveal a contrast in institutional discipline and strategic clarity.

Domestic Political Framing in Japan

Japan’s decision to initiate hostilities against Russia in 1904 was not taken lightly, nor was it framed domestically as an act of imperial conquest. Rather, it was presented to the Japanese public as a reluctant but necessary defense of sovereignty, modernity, and national dignity. Internal political discourse reflected a deep anxiety about Japan’s place in the international system and a determination to prove that the Meiji state was capable of both strategic autonomy and moral restraint. Within this framework, the war was cast not as an expression of expansionist will but as the culmination of disciplined statecraft in the face of an existential threat.

The Meiji Restoration had already launched a national project of modernization rooted in the belief that Japan’s survival depended on internal reform and external credibility. As Richard Sims (2001, 86–88) explains, “Japanese leaders viewed the Russo-Japanese War as a litmus test for their program of national renewal,” one that would determine whether Japan could operate on equal footing with Western powers. The war, therefore, was not presented as an opportunity to expand the empire but as a demonstration of Japan’s capacity to defend its independence using the tools of modern statehood: negotiation, diplomacy, and, only when those failed, calibrated force.

Public discourse emphasized this logic of necessity. In speeches, newspapers, and parliamentary debates, Japanese leaders portrayed the conflict as a defensive response to Russia’s repeated encroachments in Manchuria and Korea. Government officials highlighted the failure of diplomacy and the persistent threat posed by Russian military infrastructure near Japanese waters. According to Kenneth Pyle (1996, 88), “the Japanese leadership was careful

to construct a public narrative in which war was the last resort after patient negotiation, not the first instinct of an aggressive state.” This narrative was critical in securing public support for a war that would demand national sacrifice.

Moreover, the framing of the war was closely tied to the Meiji regime’s broader efforts to cultivate a disciplined, modern citizenry. War mobilization was accompanied by appeals to civic duty rather than nationalist fervor. There was a conscious effort to avoid the rhetoric of racial superiority or civilizational mission that often accompanied Western imperial wars. Matsusaka (2001, 56) notes that “the Japanese government understood that presenting the war as an ideological crusade would undercut its claim to be acting out of strategic necessity” and that maintaining a restrained tone was central to legitimizing the conflict. This strategic modesty was not merely rhetorical; it reflected a belief that Japan’s international credibility depended on appearing rational, reactive, and morally restrained.

Although the Meiji Constitution reserved the prerogative of declaring war for the emperor, the government relied heavily on the Imperial Diet to pass the emergency budgets required for mobilization, reinforcing the image that the conflict was a national decision backed by political consensus and constitutional procedure rather than mere executive overreach. This stood in contrast to the style of Russian governance, where military adventurism was more insulated from public scrutiny. As Sims (2001, 105) points out, “the war was one of the first in Japanese history to be publicly debated and formally authorized within a modern legislative framework.” In this way, Japan signaled that it had internalized the procedural norms of Western statecraft even as it confronted the structural inequities of the international system.

This domestic framing does not absolve Japan of all ambition or moral complexity, but it reveals a government keenly aware of its precarious position and committed to justifying its actions within both national and international norms. The war was narrated not as a campaign of domination but as a reluctant act of self-preservation, framed within a modern constitutional structure and supported by a public conditioned to value order over aggression. This internal restraint and institutional deliberation further underscore the legitimacy of Japan’s strategic choices as a defense of sovereignty under extreme conditions.

Russian Miscalculation and Strategic Overconfidence

Although Japan approached the war with a sense of strategic urgency and institutional caution, the Russian Empire entered the conflict weighed down by miscalculation, internal division, and a fatal underestimation of its adversary. From the outset, Russian decision-makers failed to grasp the seriousness of Japanese concerns, interpreting Japanese diplomatic firmness as posturing rather than principled resolve. This misreading was compounded by

a broader sense of imperial entitlement and an overconfident belief that Japan, as a non-European power, would ultimately yield to pressure. The result was not just a strategic blunder but a demonstration of how great-power status, untempered by prudence, can produce disastrous outcomes.

Russian perceptions of Japan were shaped by cultural condescension and systemic inertia. Military officials and policymakers viewed the Japanese state as a regional upstart, incapable of mounting a serious challenge to one of Europe's great empires. As Dmitrii Pavlov (2004, 15) explains, "Russia's strategic elite operated under the assumption that Japan, though modernizing rapidly, lacked the institutional capacity and political will to engage in a protracted war with a European power." This assumption blinded Russian leaders to the strategic implications of their own actions, including the military buildup in Manchuria and the refusal to recognize Japanese interests in Korea.

Compounding this error was the internal disorganization of the Russian regime. Unlike Japan, which operated under a relatively coherent chain of command, Russia's policy toward East Asia was fragmented and inconsistent. Key decisions were influenced by overlapping authorities in St. Petersburg, the War Ministry, and the imperial court, each pursuing different priorities. Geoffrey Jukes (2002, 10) notes that "Russian decision-making during the prelude to war was marked by delays, contradictory signals, and bureaucratic confusion," which not only undermined diplomacy but also signaled weakness to observers abroad. This dysfunction created a vacuum in which policy drifted rather than developed, further emboldening Russia even as Japan prepared for war.

Russian diplomatic behavior also conveyed a lack of seriousness about reaching a negotiated settlement. Despite multiple rounds of talks, Russia offered no concrete reassurances that it would withdraw from Manchuria or limit its influence in Korea. Instead, it engaged in a pattern of delay and equivocation that, from Tokyo's perspective, appeared deliberately provocative. As Matsusaka (2001, 47) observes, "St. Petersburg's unwillingness to clarify its intentions was interpreted in Japan not as indecision, but as strategic deceit." This pattern of ambiguous engagement convinced Japanese leaders that diplomacy had become a tool of obstruction rather than resolution.

Internally, Russia's confidence was buoyed by flawed intelligence and an overreliance on naval superiority. The Russian Pacific Fleet, based at Port Arthur, was believed to be sufficient to deter aggression. However, its operational readiness and logistical support were severely overestimated. According to John W. Steinberg, "Russian military planners had little understanding of the logistical complexities of a war fought thousands of miles from the imperial core," and they underestimated both Japanese readiness and regional support (Steinberg et al. 2005, 92). This strategic myopia revealed a deeper institutional weakness: a failure to integrate military capability with geopolitical context.

The Russian public narrative, unlike Japan's, was largely reactive and lacked coherence. Censorship and autocratic control over public discourse limited serious debate over the war's legitimacy or rationale. The tsarist regime framed the conflict as a defensive measure against Japanese aggression but failed to provide a clear or consistent justification. Diana Shendrikova (2012, 57) explains that "Russian media coverage of the war was vague and paternalistic, offering little in the way of critical engagement or explanation." This ambiguity mirrored the regime's broader strategy: opaque, slow-moving, and premised on the assumption that time and size would favor the empire.

Ultimately, Russian miscalculation was not simply a matter of flawed analysis. It reflected a structural complacency rooted in great-power arrogance and bureaucratic drift. The empire did not recognize the limits of its own capacity, nor did it appreciate the clarity and resolve of the Japanese position. From a ULT perspective, this failure exemplifies the dangers of unconstrained state behavior. Russia acted not out of necessity or proportionality but out of presumption. Its failure to accurately assess threats, manage power, or maintain institutional discipline contributed to the outbreak of a war it neither anticipated nor was prepared to fight effectively.

Global Response and Normative Impact

The Russo-Japanese War produced not only a dramatic shift in regional power but also a recalibration of how legitimacy, restraint, and sovereignty were perceived on the global stage. Japan's performance—calculated, measured, and effective—was met with a combination of admiration, caution, and surprise. For the first time in modern history, an Asian power decisively defeated a European empire. Yet it was not victory alone that earned respect; it was the sheer one-sided nature of the conflict that amplified its effects.

Western observers were struck by the contrast in posture between the two combatants. Whereas Russia appeared disorganized, imperious, and vague about its objectives, Japan presented its case with clarity and restraint. Diana Shendrikova (2012, 60) observes that "international opinion generally viewed Japan's war conduct as professional and its objectives as comprehensible, if not entirely endorsed." This perception was bolstered by Japan's deliberate use of legal and diplomatic channels prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Japan's efforts to negotiate were not viewed as performative but as genuine attempts to avoid war. Their failure, followed by a precise military campaign and a swift declaration of war, lent Japan a level of legitimacy rarely granted to rising powers.

Perhaps even more significant was the shift in how international norms were interpreted. Japan's actions, though clearly rooted in strategic calculation, did not evoke the same accusations of wanton aggression that often followed colonial campaigns. This was partly due to Japan's avoidance of ideological justifications. The war was framed as a security imperative rather than a

civilizational mission or racial crusade. John W. Steinberg notes that “Japan’s avoidance of grandiose claims allowed its war aims to appear more legitimate, particularly in contrast to European empires that often cloaked conquest in universalist rhetoric” (Steinberg et al. 2005, 81). In other words, Japan was judged not just by its strength but by the restraint with which it applied that strength.

This reputational shift had lasting implications. Japan’s victory prompted diplomatic recalibrations across Europe and the United States. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, previously viewed with skepticism, was now seen as a cornerstone of East Asian stability. President Theodore Roosevelt, who later helped broker the Treaty of Portsmouth, described Japan as “a power that has shown both discipline and a sense of balance in pursuit of its aims” (Jukes 2002, 25). Roosevelt’s remarks, while certainly self-interested, nonetheless reflected a broader recognition that Japan’s behavior had conformed to the operational norms of great-power politics without collapsing into excess.

At the same time, global reactions were not uniformly positive. In some European quarters, particularly among conservative and aristocratic elites, Japan’s emergence was viewed as a threat to the racial and civilizational order. The idea that an Asian power could defeat a European empire undermined the ideological foundations of colonial dominance. Kenneth Pyle (1996, 91) notes that “beneath the formal respect for Japan’s achievement was a lingering discomfort with what it signaled about the future of global hierarchy.” This ambivalence shaped how Japan’s later actions, particularly in the 1930s, would be received. Nonetheless, in the context of 1904–5, Japan’s victory was largely seen as earned, rather than stolen or anomalous.

Applying ULT: The Triad of Justified Coercion

Unified Libertarian Theory (ULT) evaluates state action through a triad of legitimacy: interest, necessity, and proportionality. Japan’s initiation of hostilities must satisfy all three criteria to be considered an act of justified coercion under the theory.

Interest

Within ULT, the first threshold for justified coercion is interest. A state may employ force only if it faces a material threat to its autonomy, territorial integrity, or the liberty of its citizens. Interests, in this framework, are not defined by abstract prestige or ideological ambition but by tangible conditions that can place a polity’s liberty in jeopardy. In Japan’s case, the interest at stake in 1904 was not the aggrandizement of the empire but the preservation of sovereignty in an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment.

Korea stood at the center of Japan’s strategic calculus. Its location, adjacent to both Manchuria and the Japanese archipelago, rendered it a natural buffer between Japan and any potential continental adversary. Control of Korea by

a rival power, particularly one with imperial ambitions and naval capacity, was not merely inconvenient. It constituted a direct threat to Japan's ability to defend itself. As Beasley (1987, 99) explains, "Japanese leaders regarded the Korean Peninsula not as a sphere of influence to be exploited, but as a defensive shield whose integrity was essential to national security." In this reading, Korea's fate was inseparable from Japan's survival. Allowing Russia to dominate the peninsula would have placed a hostile force within striking distance of Japan's heartland.

A rigorous application of ULT must also confront the cost of Japan's survival strategy: the subordination of Korea. Critics rightly point out that, in securing a defensive buffer, Japan disregarded the sovereignty of the Korean people. Under a universalist libertarian ethic, this constitutes a violation. However, ULT analyzes the conflict through the lens of *existential necessity* for the primary actor, Japan. Confronted with a binary choice—allow Russia to conquer Korea, thereby turning the peninsula into a staging ground for an invasion of Japan, or preemptively secure the peninsula—Japan chose the latter. Although this resulted in the loss of Korean independence, the alternative was likely the subjugation of both Korea and Japan by the Russian Empire. Japan's action was not a moral triumph for Korea, but it was a strategically coherent act of triage.

Japan's interest in Korea was also shaped by recent history. During the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Japan had intervened in Korea to forestall instability and limit Chinese influence. That war, while militarily successful, ended in diplomatic humiliation with the relinquishment of the Liaodong Peninsula. The lessons that followed transformed Japan's conception of interest from a passive hope for recognition into an active mandate for deterrence. Autonomy would not be granted; it would have to be secured through force if necessary.

The Russian Empire magnified this strategic imperative. The construction of the South Manchurian Railway, the fortification of Port Arthur, and the stationing of troops throughout Manchuria signaled to Japan that Russia was not simply preserving access but building a forward-operating base. Russia's refusal to define its long-term intentions in Korea added to the alarm. This perception of creeping encroachment lent urgency to Japan's interests. Delay risked strategic encirclement.

Beyond geography, Japan's interests extended to the credibility of its sovereignty in the eyes of the world. The international system of the early twentieth century did not operate on the basis of equality among states but on hierarchies enforced by power. The unequal treaties of the past and the conditional nature of alliances made clear that Japan's place in global affairs depended on its ability to assert its interests credibly. Richard Sims (2001, 101) argues that "the war was seen by Japan's leadership as a crucible in which the

nation would prove its right to autonomy and respect.” Interest, then, was not solely about territorial defense. It was also about ensuring that Japan would not be perpetually subordinated within a system that rewarded only strength.

From the perspective of ULT, this meets the interest threshold. Japan did not act to claim distant lands, exploit resources, or spread ideology. It acted to prevent a strategic encroachment that would have rendered its own liberty vulnerable. Its interest was insulation. The Korean Peninsula, though outside Japan’s borders, was functionally part of its security architecture. In this context, failing to secure it would have ceded the initiative to an adversary whose intentions were opaque and whose power was growing. Thus, Japan’s initiation of hostilities was not the pursuit of glory. It was the defense of the space within which a free and modernizing society could continue to exist.

Necessity

ULT does not justify coercion merely because a state has an interest at stake. Interest alone is insufficient. Force may be used only when peaceful alternatives have been genuinely ineffective and when inaction would expose the polity to subordination. The principle of necessity within ULT demands a clear threshold: The state must demonstrate that war is not one choice among equals but the least damaging path available. Japan’s decision to strike Russia in 1904 meets this standard. It followed repeated diplomatic initiatives, occurred within a deteriorating strategic environment, and confronted a rival whose ambiguity functioned as calculated obstruction.

In the years preceding the war, Japan made multiple efforts to resolve its concerns through negotiation. It submitted proposals recognizing mutual interests in Manchuria and Korea and suggested a division of spheres that would have preserved a strategic balance. Russia, however, delayed substantive engagement. As Geoffrey Jukes (2002, 14) explains, “the Russian government repeatedly postponed negotiations, offering vague responses while continuing military preparations in Manchuria.” This pattern of behavior steadily eroded Japanese trust.

These diplomatic failures must be understood within the broader context of power asymmetry. Russia’s posture was not merely uncooperative. It was reinforced by continued military buildup, including infrastructure projects, naval expansion, and troop deployments undertaken despite prior promises. Pavlov (2004, 13) notes that “St. Petersburg had no serious intention of reversing its position in Manchuria, despite repeated claims to the contrary.” This created a strategic bind for Japan. Waiting invited encirclement. Acting prematurely risked condemnation. But inaction would have allowed Russian power to become entrenched beyond reversal. In such a situation, delay does not lead to clarity; it creates advantages for the stronger party. Pyle (1996, 87) argues that “Japan’s leaders were acutely aware that every month of hesitation strengthened Russia’s position on the ground while eroding Japan’s capacity to

act credibly.” The decision to initiate war, therefore, was not made in haste. It was the result of a strategic calculus in which delay would ultimately eliminate Japan’s freedom of action.

This logic of preemption is central to ULT’s conception of necessity. A state must act when failure to do so will leave it at the mercy of a rival, especially in a system where there is no recourse to institutional redress. The work of Philip Streich and Jack Levy (2016, 489–511) adds further theoretical support. They argue that “Japan’s offensive was the only credible signal it could send under conditions where diplomatic communication had broken down and mutual commitments were non-binding.” In other words, when negotiation ceases to be reliable, calibrated force may become the only language a rival will heed.

Importantly, Japan’s *casus belli* was not rooted in speculative or distant threats. The proximity of Russian forces, their forward-operating posture, and their rejection of Japanese proposals created a situation in which Japan had no assurance of future safety. Diplomatic channels had not merely stalled; they had effectively collapsed. Matsusaka (2001, 48) explains that “by early 1904, Japanese policymakers concluded that Russia had no intention of accepting a negotiated compromise, and that continued delay would result in the loss of strategic parity.” Within this context, the decision to act first did not reflect opportunism. It reflected the recognition that inaction itself constituted a surrender of autonomy.

Proportionality

The final requirement under ULT for the justifiable use of force is proportionality. Even when interest and necessity are established, coercion must remain bounded. The state must ensure that the means employed do not exceed the objectives pursued, and that the scope of violence remains tightly controlled. Force must be sufficient to secure liberty but not so expansive that it undermines the very order it seeks to protect. Proportionality, in this framework, is not measured solely by casualties or material destruction. It is assessed through the congruence between stated objectives, operational conduct, and restraint. By this standard, Japan’s prosecution of the Russo-Japanese War demonstrates a deliberate effort to limit both the aims and the methods of conflict.

From the outset, Japan defined its war aims in narrow strategic terms. It did not seek territorial aggrandizement for its own sake, nor did it attempt to occupy Russia’s Far East. As Jukes (2002, 22) explains, “Japan’s demands remained consistent throughout the war: withdrawal of Russian forces from Manchuria, recognition of Korea as a Japanese sphere of influence, and reparations for damages incurred.” These objectives, while assertive, were limited and clearly defined.

The conduct of military operations reflected this logic of restraint. Japan employed targeted strikes against strategic positions, including the surprise attack on Port Arthur and the decisive engagement at Tsushima. These operations, while forceful, were not indiscriminate. Civilian centers were not the primary focus of military action, nor was there any effort to impose ideological rule over occupied territories. As John W. Steinberg observes, “Japanese commanders demonstrated tactical discipline and avoided unnecessary escalation, focusing their efforts on degrading Russian capacity rather than inflicting symbolic humiliation” (Steinberg et al. 2005, 106). This operational clarity aligned Japan’s military behavior with its political objectives, reinforcing the proportional character of the campaign.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of proportionality lies in Japan’s willingness to negotiate an end to the war once its core aims had been achieved. Following the fall of Port Arthur and the destruction of the Russian Baltic Fleet at Tsushima, Japan held a position of clear strategic superiority. Yet rather than pressing its advantage indefinitely, the Japanese government accepted mediation by President Theodore Roosevelt and entered into the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905. The treaty’s terms were modest in light of Japan’s battlefield success. Japan gained control of Korea, acquired the leasehold of Port Arthur, and received recognition of its interests in Manchuria. However, it did not demand occupation of Russian territory beyond that zone, nor did it pursue regime change or territorial annexation on the Russian mainland.

As Diana Shendrikova (2012, 61) notes, “the international community was struck by Japan’s willingness to settle the conflict without maximalist demands, reinforcing the perception that it had fought not for conquest, but for strategic necessity.” This posture earned Japan a degree of international respect that extended beyond military victory. It suggested that Japan was operating not merely as a rising power but as a disciplined one, capable of applying force with precision and relinquishing it once its core interests had been secured.

Japan’s domestic conduct also reflected proportionality. Although the war imposed material strain and required national mobilization, the government did not suspend constitutional governance or institute sweeping authoritarian controls. Parliamentary oversight, press engagement, and public discourse continued throughout the conflict. Sims (2001, 108) writes that “Japan’s leaders deliberately maintained institutional normalcy during the war, avoiding the totalizing logic of emergency that characterized later conflicts.” This internal moderation further underscored that the war was conceived as a bounded effort rather than a permanent reordering of state and society.

Contrast with ULT's View on Moral Imperialism

ULT rejects the notion that military force should be used to spread virtue, impose ideology, or redeem foreign societies. It does not accept the liberal premise that coercion is justified when pursued in the name of democracy, humanitarianism, or global justice. Under ULT, the state's moral responsibility ends where its fiduciary duty to its own citizens is no longer operative. It may use force to defend liberty within its jurisdiction, but it may not sacrifice that liberty in pursuit of moral projects abroad. Japan's conduct during the Russo-Japanese War stands in stark contrast to the moral imperialism that would later characterize interventionism. It employed violence not to uplift others but to safeguard the space within which its own political order could survive.

Japan's objectives throughout the war were framed not in universalist terms but in strategic ones. There was no claim that Russia's political system required reform, nor that Manchuria or Korea needed moral rescue. Japan's leaders did not portray their campaign as a crusade for modernization or civilizational uplift. This strategic minimalism served to narrow the scope of the conflict and constrain its duration, creating a sharp divergence from the moral expansionism that ULT criticizes. ULT holds that when a state uses its power to remake the world in its own image, it risks undermining the very liberty it exists to defend. This is not only because moral crusades are often incoherent or culturally arrogant but also because they invite the expansion of state power beyond its legitimate bounds. The danger is not merely that the state will fail abroad but that it will become unaccountable at home. Japan avoided this hazard by refusing to universalize its goals. It sought outcomes that were intelligible, limited, and rooted in self-preservation.

Even in victory, Japan refrained from converting the conflict into a platform for regional domination. It did not seek to establish a puppet regime in Russia, nor did it claim moral authority over East Asia. The postwar settlement secured strategic interests but stopped short of transforming the regional order. It is the conclusion of this article that Japan's decision to accept the Treaty of Portsmouth—ultimately dropping its demands for financial reparations and further territorial concessions to secure peace—reflected a conscious choice to end the war without moral overreach, prioritizing strategic stability over maximalist geopolitical humiliation (Steinberg et al. 2005, 113). The outcome therefore aligns with ULT's core imperative to use force as a shield, not as a sermon.

Some may argue that Japan's later conduct in the 1930s, particularly in China, undermines this interpretation. The invasion of Manchuria and the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932 represented a clear shift toward ideological expansionism and territorial aggrandizement. The totalizing nature of the Manchukuo project, framed by Japanese elites as a total empire and a radical social experiment, stands in sharp contrast to the limited, defensive aims of the 1904 war. As Louise Young (1998, 3) writes, “at the heart

of the new empire Japan won and then lost in the military engagements of these years lay the puppet state of Manchukuo in Northeast China.” ULT, however, evaluates actions within their own historical context rather than by association with what follows. The ethical question is not whether a state’s future behavior casts doubt on its past decisions but whether, at the time of conflict, its coercive choices were necessary, proportionate, and interest based. By this standard, the war of 1904–5 remains distinct. It did not seek to project ideology. It sought to preserve liberty in a structurally lawless environment, and it did so without moral inflation.

Within the ULT framework, moral imperialism is not only unjustified but also counterproductive. It dilutes the clarity of objectives, undermines domestic consent, and encourages the perpetual expansion of state violence under the guise of righteousness. Japan’s restraint, its refusal to universalize its mission, and its commitment to limited outcomes position its wartime conduct as a rare example of strategic coercion untethered from ideological ambition. In this respect, it affirms ULT’s warning that the state must never confuse the defense of liberty with the temptation to govern others in the name of an abstract good. Nor should it mistake the defense of liberty for a moral crusade. The state must remember that its authority flows from, and is derivative of, the ethos populi and is ultimately little more than an expression of it.

Conclusion

The Russo-Japanese War has often been interpreted through the lens of imperial rivalry or civilizational inversion—a moment when East overturned West and power shifted across continents. Yet such readings often obscure the strategic logic that animated Japan’s decision to act. Through the framework of unified libertarian theory, a different picture emerges, one in which Japan did not seek glory, expansion, or ideological conquest but rather the disciplined preservation of its autonomy within a lawless international order.

ULT provides a stringent standard for the legitimate use of force. It requires that states employ coercion only when their core interests are threatened, peaceful alternatives have failed, and violence remains proportionate to the objective. Japan’s actions in 1904–5, when viewed through this lens, reflect not an abandonment of principle but its strategic application. The interest at stake was clear: the defense of a sovereign space capable of resisting foreign domination. The necessity was real: Diplomacy had stalled, and the threat of encirclement was growing. The proportionality was deliberate: Japan used force to achieve defined aims and ceased hostilities once those aims had been secured.

This is not a claim that Japan’s conduct was flawless. No act of war is free from contingency, error, or moral compromise. But ULT does not demand perfection. It demands restraint. It requires that the state recognize its power

as a tool of defense rather than virtue. In this light, Japan's campaign against Russia appears not as an imperial adventure but as an act of calibrated statecraft within a system that rewarded aggression and punished hesitation.

Perhaps most importantly, the war affirms the deeper insight of unified libertarian theory: that liberty, when confronted by structural disorder, will be defended with force, sometimes even ethically. But that force must be bounded—by prudence, by purpose, and by the recognition that power, once unchained, threatens the very freedom it is meant to secure. Japan's leaders in 1904 did not seek to rule others. They sought to avoid being ruled. That distinction, though often overlooked, marks the line between domination and defense, between coercion that corrupts and coercion that protects.

In a world where moral language is often used to justify strategic excess, the Russo-Japanese War offers a rare case in which violence was employed without ideological inflation. Japan acted not as a missionary but as a sovereign. ULT does not celebrate that choice. It recognizes it as necessary. In doing so, it affirms the principle that liberty, to survive in an anarchic world, may sometimes require protection not only through law but also through the strategic discipline to act only when necessary and only to the extent required.

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