

Yi Pŏmjŏn, Korea's Diplomatic Minister to Russia, and his Role in Korean-Russian Relations

Kim Young-Soo

Yi Pŏmjŏn's diplomatic career has received less scholarly attention in Korea than his political career. However, as he was directly in charge of implementing Korea's foreign policies from 1899 to 1905, the period of Russo-Japanese confrontation, a full examination of his actions will shed light on Korea's foreign policy at the time. During a period of intense rivalry and confrontation between Japan and Russia, Yi Pŏmjŏn remained faithful to King Kojong's diplomatic strategy of either maintaining Korean neutrality or embarking on an alliance with Russia. Leveraging his connections in the royal household department, Yi Pŏmjŏn formed his own political network with people from Hamgyŏng Province and gained political clout through the support of the Min family.

In March 1898, Yi, as Korea's minister to the United States, proposed to James Scarth Gale plans for reforming Korea in the fields of politics, education, industry, military, police, civil service, social class system, and dress. Despite serving as Korean minister to the United States at that time, Yi did not advocate American-style reform measures, except for industry. Moreover, although Yi had argued for Korea's alliance with Russia, he attempted to implement a reform plan for Korea that did not rely on one specific country's reform measures but combined the strengths of the reform measures of all major Western powers. Yi, under King Kojong's orders, strove to get a guarantee for Korea's neutrality in case war broke out between Russia and Japan. However, when both Russia and Japan refused to offer such a guarantee, Yi began concentrating his efforts on concluding an alliance treaty with Russia. Yi Pŏmjŏn, in other words, was a key player who tried unceasingly to build a close, cooperative alliance between Korea and Russia.

Keywords: Yi Pŏmjŏn, King Kojong, alliance treaty with Russia, Korea's neutrality, Korean-Russian Relations

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Introduction

A little over a century ago, the world's attention was focused on the main actors in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia and Japan, for two reasons. First, the world was interested in finding out which country would emerge victorious. Second, none of the major world powers at that time considered Korea their equal but merely a potential target for colonization. Ultimately, Korea became Japan's colony after Japan's victory in this war. As such, the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was an important period in the history of all three nations, particularly for Korea, whose very survival was at stake. At that time, Russia, sharing a border with Korea, was one of the axes of the Far Eastern regional order. Naturally, Korea reacted sensitively to Russia's foreign policies. The Korean government's stance on Russia's foreign policies is a topic that must be scrutinized when analyzing Russia's Korea policies. In other words, Korean-Russian relations should not be studied merely as one-sided relations dominated by Russia; the mutual back-and-forth dynamics between the two nations must also be scrutinized.

Until now, Yi Pömjin has only been remembered in Korea as but one of the nation's many politicians of the modern era. This is because Yi, who had assumed the post of Minister of Justice immediately after King Kojong's flight to the Russian legation in February 1896, was considered to have been ousted from power with his appointment as Korea's minister to the United States in June 1896. Thus, Yi Pömjin the diplomat has been long forgotten in Korea. However, as he was directly in charge of implementing Korea's foreign policies from 1899 to 1905, the period of Russo-Japanese confrontation, a full examination of his actions will shed light on Korea's foreign policy at this time.

A. P. Izvol'skiy, Foreign Minister of Russia from 1906 to 1910, assessed that "Yi Pömjin was the last Korean secret agent residing in Russia."¹ Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly remembered Yi's activities. Count V. N. Lamsdorff, who served as Russia's Foreign Minister between 1900 and 1906, arranged for Yi to be awarded the Order of Saint Stanislaus.² In contrast, the Japanese government was extremely wary of Yi. Komura Jūtarō 小村壽太郎 labeled Yi an "extremist" and argued for his elimination.³ Furthermore, upon

1. Archives of Foreign Policy of Russian Empire (AVPRI). F.283. Op.766. D.106. L.9-11.

2. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.74. L.55.

3. Kuksa p'yönch'an wiwönhoe, *Chuhan ilbon kongsagwan kirok* [Diplomatic Documents of the Japanese Legation in Korea, hereafter CIKK]. Vol. 9 (Kwach'on: Kuksa p'yönch'an wiwönhoe,

his death in 1911, the Japanese government refused to allow his body to be transferred to Seoul for a funeral.⁴ Why were the assessments of Yi Pömjin by the Russian and Japanese foreign ministers so conflicting? What was Yi's influence on Russia and Japan's Korea policies? In order to understand Russia and Japan's divergent assessments of Yi, Yi's political and diplomatic activities as well as his plans for modernization need to be analyzed. Of particular relevance are Yi's diplomatic policies around the time of the Russo-Japanese War.

Research on Yi Pömjin in Korea so far has failed to ascertain the influence he exerted on Korea's relations with Russia and Japan. Previous studies on Yi are significant in that they have succeeded in reconstructing the conventional biography of Yi Pömjin.⁵ However, they have only examined his activities in a piecemeal fashion and thus have not been able to reconstruct Yi's biography in its entirety because his personal memoirs and works could not be located in Korea. Japanese military police often searched Yi's residence in Seoul, so his wife had destroyed all letters and other records by and about Yi.

The Russian scholar Y. I. Piskulova was the first in Russia to undertake a study of Yi's life.⁶ A new book about Yi's life has recently been published in Russia.⁷ This work's significance derives from its analysis of the Russian records on Yi. Nevertheless, the work fails to pay adequate attention to the formation of Yi's political power following the assassination of Queen Min in October 1895 and to Yi's foreign policies at around the time of the Russo-Japanese War. Most importantly, the researchers were unable to locate any sources on Yi's reform plans.

This article traces the process of Yi's entry on the political stage and his diplomatic activities in order to better elucidate Korea's foreign policies around the time of the Russo-Japanese War by analyzing certain newly discovered materials on Yi's plans for Korea's modernization. Furthermore, whilst

1995), 420.

4. Speech (*Rech'*), 01/19/1911.

5. Pang Sönju, "Sö Kwangböm kwa Yi Pömjin," in *Ch'oe Yönghüi sönsaeng hwagap kinyöm Han'guk sahak nonch'ong* [Festschrift for Prof. Ch'oe Yönghüi] (Seoul: T'amgudang, 1987); Kang Ingu, "Rösia charyo ro pon chu-Rö Han'guk kongsagwan kwa Yi Pömjin" [The Korean legation in Russia and Yi Pömjin in Russian documents], *Yöksa wa pip'yöng* 57 (2001); O Yöngsöp, "Ülmi sabyön ijön Yi Pömjin üi chöngch'i hwaldong" [The political activities of Yi Pömjin before the assassination of Queen Min], *Han'guk tongnip undongsa yön'gu* 25 (2005).

6. Y. I. Piskulova, "Koreyskiy politik i diplomat Li Pom Chin," *Problemy Dal'nevo Vostoka* 6 (2000): 109-116.

7. Yu. V. Vanin ed., *Li Bomdzhin* (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies RAS, 2002).

previous research accepted that Yi committed suicide in 1911, I will highlight some facts that cast doubt on this conclusion.

Yi Pömjin's Entry into Politics and His Political Life in Korea

Born in 1852, Yi Pömjin was the son of a concubine of Yi Kyönggha, who was the chief training officer of the royal palace. He saved the life of Queen Min in the attempted military coup d'état of 1884, thereby raising his standing with the queen and permitting him to form close ties with the Min family.⁸ After the coup, Yi was promoted to the position of librarian (*chikkak*) at the Kyujanggak (Royal Library) at the special order of King Kojong, and was appointed to key positions within the Department of the Royal Household after the Triple Intervention,⁹ such as master of the king's wardrobe (Sangüisa *chang*), head of local specialty products management (Cheyöngwön *chang*) and Vice-Minister of the Royal Household Department (Kungnaebu *hyöpp'an*).¹⁰ After gaining the trust of the king and queen, Yi took refuge in the Russian legation after the assassination of Queen Min and focused on resolving the difficult quagmire King Kojong was trapped in.¹¹

After the Triple Intervention, Yi Pömjin established close ties with the Russian legation and began to bring together those who had been marginalized in domestic politics. The Royal Household Department, a key government organ at the time, was thus staffed with people from Hamgyöng province with ties to Russia. This became clear at the time of the Ch'unsang-mun Incident later that year (Nov. 28, 1895 – see below); most of those involved were new officials who had been appointed to government positions without passing the *kwagö* (government civil service exam). Among them, Chu Söngmyön and Kim Hongnyuk were from Hamgyöng Province, and their connection to the Russian legation became clear during the Ch'unsang-mun Incident. Kim Toil and Cho Yunsöng, who were appointed to government positions right after the king's

8. *Kojong sillok* [Annals of King Kojong], 12/ 28/1884 (To indicate the date, the month/day/year format is used in this article. The Chosön government began to use the solar calendar from January 1896. Dates before January 1896 follow the lunar calendar.)

9. Intervention by Russia, Germany and France in 1895 to force Japan to retrocede the Liaodong peninsula, which it had just obtained as a result of the Shimonoseki Treaty.

10. *Kojong sillok*, 10/21/1884; 12/28/1884; 10/25/1888; 11/29/1888; 10/15/1889; 05/28/1895; 06/29/1895.

11. John M.B. Sill, "New Korean Minister to Washington," 06/23/1896, 1-2 (National Archives and Records Administration, hereafter NARA, FM 134 Roll 13 No. 224).

escape to the Russian legation (Feb. 11, 1896), though not from the Royal Household Department, were also from Hamgyöng Province, and Yi Hakkyun and Yi Pyöngghi had ties to the Russian legation at the time of the Ch'unsaeng-mun Incident.¹² These relationships show that Yi Pömjin had established his own network of people within the Royal Household Department by bringing together those from Hamgyöng Province with ties to Russia. This was facilitated by the fact King Kojong tried to reinforce his own political power base by appointing persons from the Hamgyöng region to positions in the Royal Household Department, because those from this northern province had so far failed to establish a political faction within the royal court.¹³

Yi Pömjin organized the "National Inauguration Day" event in September 1895, immediately after being appointed Vice-Minister of the Royal Household Department. The event was hosted within the Department, and both King Kojong and Queen Min attended. King Kojong himself delivered the opening speech and promoted officials of the Department who were involved in organizing the event.¹⁴ Foreign members of the organizing committee for the event included General C. W. Legendre,¹⁵ advisor to the Department; Madam Antoinette Sontag, who also worked at the Royal Household Department and was the sister-in-law of the Russian minister K.I. Waeber; and A.I. Seredin-Sabatin, an architect. General Legendre entertained foreign guests in his official capacity of honorary committee member with the title of committee chair, Madame Sontag was in charge of the table decorations and meal preparation,

12. Kuksa p'yöngch'an wiwönhoe, CIKK Vol. 11 (1995), 222-224; Gustave Mutel, *Mwit'el chugyo ilgi* (Le journal de Mgr. Mutel) 07/25/1896 (Seoul: Han'guk kyohoesa yön'guso, 1993-2008)

13. A study about the geographical distribution of members of the State Council shows that among the 86 *munkwa* passers of Hamgyöng Province from King Chöngjo (1752-1800) to King Ch'ölchong (1831-1864), no one was appointed as State Councillor. In late Chosön, the elite from Hamgyöng Province had been largely alienated from the central government, exerting no significant political force. See Nam Chidae, "Chungang chöngch'i seryök üi hyöngsöng kujo" [Formation of the central political forces in late Chosön], *Chosön chöngch'isa* Vol. 1 (Seoul: Korean History Research Association, 1990), 158. Some Hamgyöng people were able to master the Russian language thanks to geographical proximity. They were associated with the Russian legation in Korea as translators and staff, thus joining Yi Pömjin's political faction.

14. Yun Ch'ihö, *Yun Chi-ho's Diary = Yun Ch'ihö ilgi*, 04/09/1895 (Kwach'ön: Kuksa p'yöngch'an wiwönhoe, 1974-); Kojong sillok, 07/16/1895.

15. In March 1890 C. W. Legendre left Japan to take up an appointment as Vice-Minister of the Korean Home Ministry. Upon judge O. N. Denny's resignation later that year, Legendre became adviser to the royal household department, holding that position until his death of apoplexy in Seoul on September 1, 1899.

and Sabatin oversaw decoration of the event venue.¹⁶ “National Inauguration Day” was a symbolic event organized with the real intent of weakening Japan’s influence and reinforcing the political influence of King Kojong’s government. The Russian and American dominance was so conspicuous in the ceremony that Sabatin saw this event as Kojong’s move to assert his ruling position at the expense of Japanese influence over Korea.

Of the 47 officials involved in organizing the event, 41 were from the Royal Household Department.¹⁷ Among them, Ch’oe Yŏngha and Chu Sŏngmyŏn would take part in the Ch’unsaeung-mun Incident along with Yi Pŏmjŏn. After the queen’s assassination, Yi Hakkyun took refuge in the Russian legation with Yi Pŏmjŏn, while Hyŏn Hŭngt’aek and Yi Myŏngsang maintained very close ties with the Russian legation.¹⁸ It seems that following his appointment as Vice-Minister of the Royal Household Department, Yi Pŏmjŏn wanted to use the “National Inauguration Day” event to expand his connections within the Department in that the event would bolster his ties to Yi Hakkyun, Ch’oe Yŏngha, Chu Sŏngmyŏn, Hyŏn Hŭngt’aek, and Yi Myŏngsang.

On the day of the assassination of Queen Min on October 8, 1895, Yi Pŏmjŏn faithfully followed the order of King Kojong to “seek help from the Russian and American legations.” Yi Pŏmjŏn found the walls between the Ch’usŏng-mun Gate and the Yŏngch’u-mun Gate of the palace already surrounded by Japanese and Korean soldiers. Next he went to the Kwanghwa-mun Gate, which was also surrounded by Japanese soldiers. He then went to the Tongsipcha-gak Watchtower, which was at the southeastern edge of the Kyŏngbok palace, and found the guard post was rather lax here. He waited for the two Japanese soldiers standing guard to move far enough away from the watchtower and jumped down from a height of 4.5 meters (15 feet). The walls of the palace were rather high and Yi injured his leg, but he managed to limp to the American and Russian legations to inform them of the situation.¹⁹

The tension between the pro-Japanese cabinet under Kim Hongjip and its pro-Russian and pro-American opponents led to the Ch’unsaeung-mun Incident on November 28, 1895, when the opponents attempted to rescue Kojong from the hands of the Training Unit, which had been used in Queen Min’s assassination, and was still guarding the palace. But the opponents were stopped at the Ch’unsaeung-mun gate of the Kyŏngbok Palace. After the

16. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.6. L.133.

17. *Ilŏngnok* [Record of Daily Reflections], 07/15/1895.

18. Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, CIKK Vol. 11 (1995), 222-224.

19. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.6. L.68.

Ch'unsang-mun Incident, Yi Pömjin fled to the suburbs of Seoul. Despite the failure, Yi confirmed King Kojong's intent to escape to the Russian legation and with the help of Yi Yunyong and Yi Wanyong, who had taken refuge at the U.S. legation, sought ways to challenge the cabinet formed by Kim Hongjip. Yi Pömjin reaffirmed the support of the Russian minister and reported to Kojong that there might be a "disaster within the palace."²⁰

Through Yi Kidong – who was a junior official (*kakkam*) at the Kyujanggak Royal Library – Yi Pömjin was able to persuade his cousin, who was a palace lady, to use a palanquin (*kama*) to enter the palace, even though the same plan had failed during the Ch'unsang-mun Incident. Using his ties to Palace Lady Yi, Yi Kidong was able to act as a guard of the palanquin used by her when she went into the palace. Yi Kidong and Lady Yi managed to gain easy access to the inner courts of the palace without raising any suspicions from the palace guards.²¹ Yi Pömjin was also able to mobilize the engineering battalion through the officers Yi Sŭngik and Kim Wöngye, a maneuver he had been unable to pull off during the Ch'unsang-mun Incident. Yi ordered the soldiers to stand guard at the gate and along the path to the Russian legation.²²

In the early morning of February 11, 1896, King Kojong fled in the palanquin used by Lady Yi from the Kyöngbok Palace to the Russian legation in Chöngdong district. Having successfully escaped, King Kojong appointed his close aides to the cabinet. His most trusted confidante, Yi Pömjin, was appointed as Minister of Justice. Kojong then ordered Minister Yi to resume the full investigation into the queen's assassination.²³

Following the success of the king's escape, Yi Pömjin focused his attention on solidifying his own political base by promoting his close associates from the Royal Household Department. After his appointment as minister of justice, Yi hired Yi Pyönghwi, who took part in the Ch'unsang-mun Incident with him, as prosecutor of the Ministry of Justice and appointed him as chief detective of the Ministry of Justice the very next day.²⁴ After securing control over the

20. Yun Hyojöng, *Hanmal pisa* [Secret History of the Taehan Empire] (Seoul, 1995), 177-178.

21. Ibid, 177-178; Karneyev and Mikhailov, *Poyezdka general'novo shtaba polkovnika Karneyeva i poruchika Mikhailovoa po Yuzhneye Koreye v 1895-1896 gg.* (S-Petersburg, 1901), 185.

22. Kuksa p'yönc'h'an wiwönhoe, CIKK Vol. 9 (1995), 144.

23. Kodŭng chaep'anso (High Court of Taehan Empire of Korea), "Kaeguk obaek sanyön p'alwöl sabyön pogosö" [Report of the assassination of Queen Min in the eighth month of 1895] (dated 04/15/1896), 1-2. This document is preserved at the Changsögak archives in the Academy of Korean Studies.

24. *Üjju* 議奏 (Report from the State Council) Vol. 4, 291, 02/23/1896 (Kyujanggak Library, *Kyu*

Ministry of Justice, Yi Pömjin arrested 13 suspects of the queen's assassination to eliminate some of the figures linked to the cabinet of Kim Hongjip.²⁵ Yi Pömjin also attempted to appoint Chu Söngmyön as director of the Ministry of Education and Kim Hongnyuk as Vice-Minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although these attempts failed owing to the opposition by Yun Ch'ihö and others, they were able to gain positions as officers of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Royal Archives, respectively, at a later date.²⁶

While trying to expand his political clout, Yi Pömjin also used his personal connections to conduct various diplomatic maneuvers aimed at using Russia to negate Japan's influence. He sent a Korean representative to the coronation ceremony of the Russian tsar to reaffirm Russia's support. He also used his ties to Chu Söngmyön and Kim Hongnyuk to promote Kim Toil, officer at the ministry of foreign affairs, to the position of third secretary at the Korean mission sent to Russia. Yi Pömjin's group sent Kim Toil to Russia to build its own intelligence network.²⁷

King Kojong, on the other hand, began to favor Lady Öm (a lady-in-waiting of the royal palace) after the queen's assassination. Lady Öm maintained close ties to the Russian legation by, for example, sending it various gifts.²⁸ Fully aware of this, Yi Pömjin sent Kim Myöngje, who was in charge of the Royal Kitchen at the Royal Household Department, to contact Lady Öm immediately before the king's escape in order to persuade her to support the attempt to secure royal refuge.²⁹ This became the occasion of Yi's close ties to Lady Öm: he would become her sponsor at court. After the success of the king's refuge at the Russian legation, Lady Öm was able to take advantage of her closeness to Kojong to exert indirect political influence on him.³⁰ She also gave birth to Yi Ün (later Crown Prince Yöngch'in) to earn the honorary title of *kwün*,³¹ further increasing her own political clout.³² In sum, the political network of Yi Pömjin included Yi Hakkyun and Hyön Höngt'aek as sponsors,

17705); *Üju* 議奏 Vol. 4, 303, 02/24/1896 (Kyujanggak Library, *Kyu* 17705).

25. *Mwit'el chugyo ilgi*, 02/23/1896.

26. *Yun Ch'i-ho's Diary*, 02/25/1896; *İlsöngnok*, 01/21/1896; 03/30/1896.

27. *Yun Chi-ho's Diary*, 03/30/1896.

28. CIKK Vol. 10 (1995), 90.

29. CIKK Vol. 9 (1995), 114.

30. Isabelle B. Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbours* (New York: Revell, 1897); translated by Yi Inhwa, *Han'guk kwa kü iut nardül* (Seoul: Sallim, 1994), 420-423, 486-488, 492-493.

31. This title corresponded to the junior first rank in the hierarchy of the female royal household.

32. *Kojong sillok*, 10/20/1897; 10/22/1897.

along with Hong Chong'u, Chu Sōngmyōn, Kim Hongnyuk, Kim Toil, Cho Yunsūng, Yi Pyōnghwi, Ch'oe Yōngha, and others as key actors. The base of Yi Pōmjīn's political power was the Royal Household Department, and he faithfully executed King Kojong's instructions to actively form a closer alliance with Russia.

In April 1896, owing to the opposition, which was pressing for a closer alliance with the U.S., Yi Pōmjīn's position was changed from minister of justice to chief of the Royal Library (Kyujangwōn). Nevertheless, Yi continued to intervene in government affairs even after assuming his new post, but the faction aligned with the Independence Club devised ways to weaken his influence. It succeeded in having him appointed as minister to the U.S. in June 1896 so that he could no longer hold any political sway over domestic affairs.³³ The Club probably did not want to support Yi's appointment as minister to the United States, but at this stage its power was too weak to completely remove a powerful figure like Yi, so the Club seems to have been content to remove him from central politics by sending him to one of only two foreign posts available at the time (i.e., Tokyo and Washington D.C.). Yi responded by writing an appeal to the king in July 1896, requesting a retraction of his appointment to the U.S.

At the same time, however, the Russian minister Waeber urged Yi to take up the position in the U.S. because he was concerned lest Japan be given a pretext for becoming more directly involved in Korean affairs should any political confrontation evolve into political upheaval or a coup.³⁴ King Kojong ultimately rejected Yi's resignation, saying that the "Court is well aware of the contributions made by Yi Pōmjīn."³⁵

Yi Pōmjīn's Reform Plans and Foreign Policies

Yi Pōmjīn arrived in Washington D.C. in December 1896 and began his life as a diplomat.³⁶ His American sojourn lasted till March 1899, when he was appointed Korea's minister to Russia. Until 1899, Korea only had diplomatic ministers stationed in Tokyo and Washington D.C. After the Boxer Rebellion,

33. John M.B. Sill, "New Korean Minister to Washington," 06/23/1896, 1-2 (NARA FM 134 Roll 13 No 224).

34. *Yun Ch'i-ho's Diary*, 03/30/1896.

35. *Ilŏngnok*, 05/22/1896; 05/23/1896.

36. Note from the Korea legation in the United States. 12/09/1896, 1-2 (NARA FM 166 Roll 1).

an acute conflict developed between Russia and Japan over Korea and Manchuria. The fact that Yi, who had been serving as Korea's minister to the United States, was appointed to serve as the Korean minister to Russia indicates that he was trusted by King Kojong as a key figure in the execution of Korea's diplomatic activities.

In March 1898, Yi, as Korean minister to the United States, proposed to James Scarth Gale plans for reforming Korea in the fields of politics, education, industry, military, police, civil service, social class system, and dress. In terms of the foreign political systems that the Korean government should benchmark, Yi pointed out the need for Korea to undertake "political reform founded on British and German laws." Here, we are offered a glimpse into Yi's thinking. After the king's flight to the Russian legation, Yi advocated aligning with Russia. He then served as minister to the United States for more than two years. Thus, Yi attempted to analyze Western political systems in a rational manner without favoring any country. With the British parliamentary system and Germany's constitutional monarchy in mind, Yi seems to have envisioned for Korea a limited monarchy that recognizes the authority of the monarch but has a strong parliament.

In terms of Korea's military power, Yi assessed that Korea was "not yet ready to compete with major Western powers," and believed that for Korea, "military might was needed for the maintenance of domestic order." He contended that among foreign armies, Korea should learn "about the army from the Germans, the navy from the British, and the cavalry from the Russians," suggesting that he considered Russia's army and naval foundations to be inferior to those of Germany and Great Britain, respectively. Yi believed that for Korea to build its military might, it did not need to adopt one country's military system at the expense of another. Rather, he was of the opinion that Korea could learn from the respective strengths of various countries. Regarding the modernization of the Korean police force, Yi proposed the Japanese police system as the model for Korea. Although he opposed Korea's political alignment with Japan, he demonstrated a willingness to adopt Japan's strengths when it came to modernizing Korea.

Yi actively encouraged industrial development and deemed that "Western industries will eliminate the bias against new things." Among foreign-inspired industrial reform measures, Yi argued that Korea should learn from the "British about finances, Americans about steam power and electricity, and the Chinese about the silk industry." Yi judged that Korea's existing industries were outdated and that the only solution to the problem was Korea's adoption of Western industries.

Yi criticized Korean education, claiming that “it had only left the people ignorant and superstitious.” Yi proposed the need for “banning Chinese characters and establishing *hangŭl* (Korean alphabet) as the national script.” He also argued for the active adoption of Western knowledge. Thus, Yi’s proposal for education called for eliminating Chinese influence and the building of Korea’s unique educational system through the adoption of Western knowledge.

Yi had serious concerns about the corruption in Korea’s bureaucracy. He claimed that “Korea is brimming with civil servants who receive monthly wages without providing any services.” He was of the opinion that those in sinecures be dismissed and that every government ministry should be granted effective authority in order to strengthen government offices. Yi aimed to put an end to bureaucratic corruption by strengthening individual government ministries and enhancing the checking mechanism among them. Furthermore, Yi even suggested the “abolishment of the upper class” as a means of eradicating government corruption. Yi maintained that “only those holding government office should be recognized as holding superior positions” and be allowed to enjoy special privileges. That is, Yi proposed the dissolution of the upper class in order to end privileges bestowed upon the descendents of government officials.

Yi even called for a “ban on white in everyday attire” and proposed reforming daily dress as a symbol of Korea’s modernization. Despite serving as a Korean minister to the United States at that time, Yi did not advocate American-style reform measures, except on the industrial front. Moreover, although Yi had argued for Korea’s alignment with Russia, he attempted to implement a reform plan for Korea that did not rely on one specific country’s reform measures but combined the strengths of the reform measures of all major western powers.³⁷

On March 15, 1899, Kojong appointed Yi as the Korean minister to Russia, France, and Austria.³⁸ Yi informed U.S. Secretary of State John Hay in writing of his appointment and departed for Europe in March 1900.³⁹ He passed through London and then departed for Vienna from Paris on June 11,

37. James Gale, *Korean Sketches* (1898), 220-221. Gale noted that Yi Pömjin communicated to him the ten-point reform program needed by Korea on March 3, 1898. Probably Gale met Yi in Washington D. C. while Yi served as the Korean minister to the United States.

38. *Kojong sillok*, 03/15/1897.

39. Note from the Korea legation in the United States. 03/26/1900, pp.1-2 (NARA FM 166 Roll 1).

1900. He arrived in St. Petersburg, Russia's capital, on July 3, accompanied by Kim Toil, his senior aide, and Nam P'iru, his secretary.⁴⁰ On July 23, 1900, Yi submitted Kojong's a letter of credence in the presence of Russian Emperor Nicholas II.⁴¹

From the second half of 1900, Yi set out to undertake his work as Korea's minister to Russia at Nord, a hotel located in St. Petersburg. He received 7,870 yen from the Korean government in December 1900 for the operations of the legation.⁴² Yi tried to meet frequently with Russia's Foreign Minister in order to strengthen Korean-Russian relations. In March 1901, Yi headed to Vienna and Paris from St. Petersburg to present the top honor bestowed by the Taehan Empire of Korea to the Emperor of Austria and the President of France. Yi also met with Austria's Vice Foreign Minister to strengthen Korean-Austrian ties.⁴³

On March 12, 1901, Kojong appointed new diplomatic ministers to Great Britain, Germany, and France to bolster Korea's diplomatic relations with Europe. Just as Kojong had been disillusioned with the overbearing interference from Qing officials in the 1880s, so he feared the Japanese ambition of taking Korean affairs into its own exclusive hands after the Sino-Japanese War. He tried to revive the previous strategy of bringing in Western, especially Russian, forces to counter the dominant power (this time Japan). There was also a new appointee for the post of Korean minister to the United States. Yi Pömjin, the minister to Russia, was the only incumbent to maintain his position.⁴⁴ Kojong strove to enhance Korea's ties with Europe through the newly appointed ministers with the aim of securing the support of major Western powers for "Korea's neutrality."

Russia was very important in Kojong's plan for the realization of Korea's neutrality. At the time, Kojong was carefully watching Russia's foreign policy direction concerning the Far East. In September 1901, a report by the *Hwangšong sinmun* (Imperial Capital Daily) on Russia and Japan's discussions regarding swapping Manchuria for Korea came to Kojong's attention. He immediately sent a telegram to Yi asking for more detailed information and Yi's opinion on the matter.⁴⁵

In December 1900, N.G. Matyunin, who had assumed the position of

40. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.69. L.6.

41. *Pravitel'stvennyy vestnik*, July 1, 1900.

42. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.69. L.15, 22.

43. CIKK Vol. 16 (1997), 444-445.

44. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.11. L.38-39.

45. CIKK Vol. 16 (1997), 343.

Russia's minister to Korea in 1898, requested the Korean government for an extension of Russia's timber-cutting rights in the Yalu River area. Matyunin had already made the following requests to Yi in August 1900: setting the effective period of Russia's timber-cutting rights to 12 years and supporting a three-year period for Russia in the border regions around the Yalu River, given the conclusion of the peace treaty between Russia and China. Yi had Kim Toil, who was returning to Korea via Manchuria, deliver a letter to Kojong and Korea's Foreign Minister. In the letter, Yi recommended approving the extension of Russia's timber-cutting rights.⁴⁶

In a description of Seoul's political situation to Matyunin following his return to St. Petersburg in January 1901, Yi stated that Kojong had received Yi's letter but was unable to make a decision regarding the extension of Russia's timber-cutting rights because he was surrounded by pro-Japanese forces. Yi suggested that Matyunin send a telegram to A.I. Pavlov, Russian minister to Korea, requesting Kojong to entrust Yi with the authority to conclude additional agreements pertaining to Russia's timber-cutting rights.⁴⁷ Japan was vehemently opposed to the rights and interests granted to Russia by Korea in the Yalu River area because it was concerned that Russia might use the Yalu River region for military purposes. Yi, for his part, was wary of Japan's policies toward Korea. Yi supported Russian, rather than Japanese, timber-cutting rights in the Yalu River basin. Eventually, on April 11, 1901, the Korean government granted Russia a three-year extension on its timber-cutting rights. While Russians rejoiced at acquiring this lucrative economic concession, King Kojong expected that Russians' vested interests in Korea would act as an effective check against Japanese ambitions on Korea.

In early October 1903, Secretary Kwak Kwanghŭi of the Korean legation in Russia arrived in St. Petersburg from Seoul. He delivered a letter to Yi from Kojong concerning the latter's plans for maintaining Korea's neutrality in anticipation of a potential war between Russia and Japan. Yi met with Deputy Foreign Minister V.S. Obolensky in order to deliver Kojong's letter to the Russians. Obolensky promised Yi that Russia would review the plan for Korea's neutrality but did not offer guarantees regarding Russian support for the plan. That evening, Yi met with Japan's minister to Russia and tried to ascertain Japan's stance on Korea's plan for neutrality. However, the Japanese minister remained silent on the matter and only emphasized that Japan, China, and Korea should cooperate in order for Korea to achieve independence.⁴⁸ Yi

46. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.134. L.150.

47. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.134. L.155.

realized that should a war break out between Russia and Japan, neither nation would support Korea's declaration of neutrality. Yi came to the conclusion that under the circumstances, it would be more advantageous for Korea to conclude an alliance treaty with Russia. In consideration of the state of affairs, Yi's assessment was that Japan was the greatest threat to Korea. Accordingly, he delivered a secret letter from Kojong concerning a Korean-Russian alliance to Foreign Minister V. N. Lamsdorff.⁴⁹

In January 21, 1904, Kojong issued a statement declaring that Korea would remain neutral should there be a clash between Russia and Japan. However, Yi did not send the contents of Kojong's neutrality declaration to Lamsdorff because the declaration contradicted the contents of the November 1903 letter that Kojong had sent to Emperor Nicholas II via Hyŏn Sanggŏn, a special envoy, requesting a Korea-Russia alliance. Also, Yi was concerned about the diplomatic friction the declaration might cause between Korea and Russia.⁵⁰

On February 1, 1904, Yi sent along a letter to P.G. Kerberg, a Russian diplomat stationed in Korea, and requested that it be delivered to Kojong and Hyŏn Sanggŏn. The key points of the letter were as follows. First, Yi was planning to send a new type of telegram in order to avoid it being intercepted by Japan's secret agent in Seoul. Second, the conditions made it difficult for Yi to deliver the statement declaring Korea's neutrality to the Russian foreign ministry. Third, should a war break out between Russia and Japan, Korea had no choice but to enter into an alliance with Russia. The reason for the third point was that Korea's neutrality would render Korea's alliance treaty with Russia null and void.

Yi believed that Russia would annex Manchuria and control the borders along the Yalu River. He also assessed that Great Britain and the United States would attempt to limit Russia's influence in China's northeast for their own respective national interests. Yi was of the opinion that Korea should secure its own national independence through an agreement with Russia.⁵¹ He was convinced that Russia was the only country that would support Korea's independence. He hoped that Russia would work toward Korea's independence in the Far East in the same way that it had liberated Bulgaria and Serbia in the Balkan Peninsula through the Russo Turkish War (1877-1878).⁵²

48. CIKK Vol. 20 (1997), 358-360.

49. "Dnevnik A. N. Kuropatika, 24 Nov. 1903," *Krasnyy Arkhiv* 2 (1923), 85.

50. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.52. L.90.

51. CIKK Vol. 18 (1997), 438, 440-441.

52. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.60. L.149-150.

Kojong aspired to secure a guarantee for his plan of maintaining Korea's neutrality around the time of the Russo-Japanese War. However, when Western powers did not recognize Korea's declaration of neutrality, Kojong pursued a Korean-Russian alliance. He had decided to announce Korea's alliance with Russia should Korea's neutrality be compromised due to a war between Russia and Japan. However, Kojong was unable to realize a Korea-Russia alliance. He was being pressured and threatened by the Japanese government and the pro-Japanese forces in the Korean government. Accordingly, the circumstances were such that Kojong was forced to issue a statement reaffirming Korea's neutrality. Yi, under Kojong's orders, strove to obtain a guarantee for Korea's neutrality in the case a war broke out between Russia and Japan. However, when both Russia and Japan refused to offer such a guarantee, Yi began concentrating his efforts on concluding an alliance treaty with Russia.

Diplomatic Efforts of Yi Pömjin after the Russo-Japanese War and His Death

After the Russo-Japanese War, Yi Pömjin tried hard to keep the Korean legation in St. Petersburg operational. It was financially hard-pressed, and Yi sought financial assistance from the Russian Foreign Ministry.⁵³ Japan tried to stymie all diplomatic efforts by the Korean legation in Russia. Hayashi Gonsuke, the Japanese minister to Korea, requested the Korean Foreign Ministry to immediately summon home the Korean diplomats in Russia on April 16, 1904. Hayashi was particularly vocal in his objection to Yi Pömjin remaining in St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia.⁵⁴ Bowing to the pressure of Japan, King Kojong ordered the closure of the Korean legation in Russia and summoned Yi Pömjin back to Korea.⁵⁵ The Korean Foreign Ministry sent a telegram to the Korean legation ordering Yi Pömjin to return to Korea.

Yi refused to obey the Korean government's order to abandon the Russian capital, and Hayashi reported Kojong's summons of Yi Pömjin to the Foreign Ministry of Japan.⁵⁶ However, on May 27, 1904, Kojong requested the French chargé d'affaires to Korea, Vicomte de Fontenay, to help deliver a secret order to Yi Pömjin, in which the king urged Yi Pömjin not to follow his earlier order

53. AVPRI. F.150. Op.493. D.143. L.5.

54. CIKK Vol. 22 (1997), 261-262.

55. *Kojong sillok*, 05/18/1904.

56. CIKK Vol. 22 (1997), 263, 269.

to cut diplomatic ties with Russia – an order he issued under Japanese pressure – but to continue carrying out consular affairs in Russia and to remain in St. Petersburg. Kojong then promised his own private financial support for the continuing operation of the Korean legation in Russia.⁵⁷ This, to Yi Pömjin, meant political exile. Despite the attempted interference by the Japanese minister to Korea, Yi Pömjin persevered and mounted a diplomatic response to Japan. Among other things, in September 1904, Yi hosted a party to celebrate the birthday of Kojong and continued to act as the official Korean minister to Russia.

Yi also released a statement claiming that his summons was a malicious ploy of Japan and kept the Korean legation open even after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War.⁵⁸ Stranded in the capital of Russia, Yi Pömjin focused on getting the latest news on the wars Japan was engaged in. In October 1904, Yi Pömjin sent a summary report on the latest developments of the war unfolding in Korea and an analysis of the situation to Russian Foreign Minister V. N. Lamsdorff. Yi requested Lamsdorff to relay the report to Minister of War Alexei Kuropatkin. The report contained information on the growth of the pro-Japanese faction in Korea, Japanese activities between Seoul and Hamgyöng Province, and the activities of Japanese forces on the Korean peninsula.⁵⁹

In recognition of Yi Pömjin's diplomatic and political activities during the Russo-Japanese War, Russian Foreign Minister Lamsdorff recommended Yi as the recipient of the grade 1 Order of Saint Stanislaus to the Russian government in January 1906. Tsar Nicholas II approved the commendation in recognition of the contributions of Yi Pömjin.⁶⁰ This, in turn, meant that Yi Pömjin could expect 100 rubles in monthly financial support from the Russian government.⁶¹

On November 17, 1905, the Japanese army in Korea surrounded the Kyöngbok Palace where Kojong was residing and forced the king to sign documents accepting Japanese protection of Korea. After coercing the king into concluding a protectorate treaty, the head of the diplomatic delegation of Japan in Korea put Korea under Japanese diplomatic control.⁶² The Japanese

57. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.56. L.85; B.D. Pak, “Zhizn’ i deyatel’nost’ vydayushchegosya Koreyckogo politika i diplomata Li Pomdzhin,” in Yu. Vanin ed., *Li Pomdzhin*, 46.

58. CIKK Vol. 22 (1997), 270-271.

59. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.60. L.149.

60. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.74. L.55.

61. AVPRI. F.283. Op.766. D.106. L.9-12.

62. AVPRI. F.143. Op.491. D.73. L.51.

government also cited the protectorate treaty to force the closure of the Korean legation in Russia. Yi Pömjin could no longer run the Korean legation in St. Petersburg and, instead, rented an apartment in the outskirts of St. Petersburg (Novaya derevnya, "New Village") in November 1906.

Yi Pömjin started his campaign for the independence of Korea in a small town just outside St. Petersburg. His apartment became a frequent meeting place for Korean emigrants to Russia. In particular, in the summer of 1909, over 20 Koreans held a secret meeting at Yi's apartment to launch a more active fight to restore Korea's independence. Yi Pömjin extended financial support to Yi Pömyun to purchase weapons.⁶³ Yi Pömyun was a former Kando supervisor who took an active part in the independence movement in the region, on the border of China and Korea.⁶⁴

Previous research has accepted that Yi Pömjin committed suicide in 1911.⁶⁵ However, a reexamination of the events surrounding his death puts some question marks to the accepted theory. Yi's second floor apartment had six rooms: an office, study, bedroom, dining room, and rooms for his secretary and servant. At noon of January 26, 1911 (January 13th according to the traditional Russian calendar), Yi went into the dining room from his office. A while later, Yi's secretary and servant heard three gun shots from the dining room. Shocked, Im Chint'ae, his secretary, ran into the garden and notified the apartment manager of the gunshots. The manager then went to the local police station to report the gunshots and arrived back at Yi's apartment with Officer Radchenko.

Im Chint'ae went into the room first with the police officer and discovered Yi in a white *hanbok* (Korean traditional clothes) hanging from the ceiling, dead. Yi had written a letter addressed to Chief of Police Kuznetsov as well as three telegrams addressed to Kojong, Tsar Nicholas II, and his own elder brother. In his wallet, a receipt for funeral services at a center on Vladimirski Street was found. The receipt was for 2,500 rubles for the cost of the funeral in St. Petersburg and sending his body to Vladivostok. At the scene, army doctor Vasil'yev pronounced that Yi Pömjin had hung himself from a rope from the ceiling and died within three minutes of kicking away a small table he had been standing on. The doctor also stated that Yi fractured his cervical vertebrae because he pushed the table aside while dangling from the rope.⁶⁶

63. CIKK Vol. 22 (1997), 270-272.

64. AVPRI. F.327. Op.579. D.54. L.67

65. Pak B.B., "Posledniye dni zhizni Li Pomdzhina," in Yu. Vanin, *Li Pomdzhin*, 67-80.

66. Speech, 01/14/1911(Rech', 14 January 1911). Letters written in English, a telegram written in

Yi's secretary, Im Chint'ae, testified to the police during the night of January 26th that Yi had frequently expressed his wish to kill himself because of Japan's forced annexation of Korea. M. P. Koval'skaya, who worked as a translator for the Korean legation in Russia, voluntarily went to the police station on January 27th to state that the letter and the telegrams left behind by Yi had actually been written by herself.⁶⁷ On 10 a.m. on January 28th, an autopsy on Yi's body was done at the coroner's office of Petropavlov Hospital, and suicide was officially confirmed as the cause of death. On January 29th, Yi Wijong, son of Yi Pömjin, held the funeral for his father.⁶⁸

Yi's death was ruled a suicide in Russia, and previous research has accepted that as given. However, there are many facts that cast suspicion on such reasoning. For one, why did the secretary and servant not go immediately to Yi after hearing the gunshots at Yi's residence and instead wait for the police to arrive first? It is hard to understand why the two persons closest to Yi did not immediately rush into the dining room. It is as if they were more concerned about making sure they would not be implicated. Rather than trying to save Yi's life, they were in other words more focused on leaving nothing behind that could be used as evidence against them at a later date.

Yi was not fluent in English or Russian. His writings in both languages were also inadequate. Giving such poor ability in both languages, how could he have written his own will? Koval'skaya revealed that she was the writer of the letter and telegrams right after Yi's death. However, even if Koval'skaya were personally very close to Yi, it is hard to accept that it was she who had written the will on Yi's behalf. Suspicion over the cause of death only grows when the state of Yi's body is considered. The direct cause of death was a fracture of the cervical vertebrae, but such a fracture only occurs in a forced hanging, as done in prison. The coroner who examined Yi at the time argued that the fracture happened when Yi pushed away the table after hanging himself. I think a more thorough medical review would be necessary to confirm whether a cerebral vertebrae fracture can really be caused by strongly pushing a table.

After Yi's death, the Foreign Ministry of Russia sent a secret report on the whereabouts of Japanese military attachés in St. Petersburg to the Police Bureau under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia on May 25, 1911. The report even states the names of Japanese military attachés stationed in Russia before 1910, and the Foreign Ministry requested the Police Bureau to ascertain

Russian (State Archive of the Russian Federation. F.102. Op.241. D.34. L.13).

67. New age, 01/15/1911 (Novoye vremya, 15 January 1911).

68. New age, 01/16/1911 (Novoye vremya, 16 January 1911).

their current whereabouts.⁶⁹ On June 18, 1911, secret police within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Po Osobomu otdelu po 1 Otdeleniyu) sent a secret report on the whereabouts of Japanese military attachés in Russia around 1910 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This confidential document shows that a former military attaché to the Japanese legation to Russia, Colonel Higino Suokichi (Khagino Suokich), had returned to Japan and that another former military attaché of the Japanese legation to Russia, Major Odakiri Nagajuri (Odagiri Nagazuli), was at the time stationed in Warsaw. Furthermore, the military attaché of the Japanese legation to Russia at the time, Colonel Nakajima Masajika (Nakadzima Masatika), was living in Moika in St. Petersburg, and deputy military attaché, Major Ozawa Saburo (Ozawa Sabura), was living in Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg.⁷⁰

As of May 1911, however, Nakajima and Ozawa had moved to a different location outside of St. Petersburg. At the time of Yi's death, Colonel Nakajima was the military attaché of the Japanese legation to Russia. Nakajima was born in Koji Prefecture in 1870 and graduated from the Military Academy in 1890 to be commissioned as a second lieutenant of an infantry division. Nakajima was promoted through the ranks before the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. In particular, as an army lieutenant major, Nakajima even went to France for study from 1906 to 1908 at his own expense, showing his strong commitment to self development. Nakajima was appointed as the military attaché of the Japanese legation in Russia in June 1909. After returning to Japan, Nakajima served as chief officer on the Army Chiefs of Staff before quickly moving up through the ranks to army major general in 1915 and to lieutenant general in 1919.⁷¹

Why did the Russian Foreign Ministry become interested in the whereabouts of Japanese military attachés right after the death of Yi Pōmjīn? Moreover, why are documents bearing such information of the foreign ministry stored at the Russian Archives together with documents on Yi Pōmjīn? Only when these questions can be adequately resolved will it be possible to

69. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). F.102. Op.241. D.34. L.14.

70. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). F.102. Op.241. D.34. L.16.

71. "Nakajima taisa gai 5 mei ryōken kōfu no ken," Meiji 43-nen kon 'ni dai nikki rokugatsu' 中島大佐外 5名旅券交付の件, 明治 43年坤「貳大日記 6月」(Bōeishō bōei kenkyūshō, [The National Institute for Defense Studies] *Rikugunshō dainikki - ni dainikki* 防衛省防衛研究所-陸軍省大日記-貳大日記), 790; "Nakajima hōhei chūsa shihi ryūkaku no ken" Meiji 38 nen kon 'ni dainikki jūchigatsu' 中島歩兵中佐私費留学の件, 明治 38年坤「貳大日記 11月」(Bōeishō bōei kenkyūshō *Rikugunshō dainikki - ni dainikki*), 1389; *Ugaki Kazushige ate shōka shōkan, Nakajima Masataka shōkan* 宇垣一成宛諸家書簡, 中島正武書簡 (Tokyo: Shōwa 昭和 2 (1927)).

determine the true cause of Yi's death.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, Russia and Japan were engaged in a dangerous game of confrontation and negotiation in Korea and Manchuria as their imperial ambitions clashed in the Far East. In June 1896, Russia and Japan agreed to maintain the status quo on Korea through the Moscow Protocol. It seemed that a power balance – albeit precarious – had finally been struck in the Far East, resolving conflicts and confrontations brought about by the Triple Intervention, King Kojong's flight to the Russian legation, and other incidents. However, after Germany's occupation of Jiaozhou Bay in November 1897, Russia took over Port Arthur (Lüshun) in December of the same year in response to the aggressive inroads made by the Western powers into the Far East. Once Port Arthur came under Russian control, Japan no longer believed that Russia would adhere to the balance of power in the Far East. But Japan at the time did not have the wherewithal to wage war against Russia and had to be temporarily satisfied with the Tokyo Protocol, signed in April 1898, which recognized the economic superiority of Japan in Korea.

In the early 20th century, Russia and Japan again locked horns over rights to Korea and Manchuria. After the Boxer Rebellion of June 1900, Russia took Manchuria by force. Japan used the Britain-Japan alliance of January 1902 to exert diplomatic pressure on Russia while demanding that Russia give up its designs on Korea. Russia and Japan continued to negotiate over the political and military privileges of Japan over Korea through 1902 and 1903, but the situation finally deteriorated irretrievably with the Russo-Japan War of 1904. After its spectacular victory in the Battle of Tsushima Straights, Japan signed the Portsmouth Peace Treaty with Russia in September 1905, but Russia still refused to relinquish its hold on Korea to Japan and retained its favored nation status and rights in Korea. However, in the Russo-Japan Agreement of July 1910, Russia approved Japan's annexation of Korea, and Japan recognized Russia's preferential rights in Northern Manchuria and Mongolia.

Amidst such intense rivalry and confrontation, Kojong chose Korean neutrality as the best way to stay away from the possible conflagration and to maintain the security of the country. In case Japan and Russia did not agree to his idea, however, Kojong was leaning toward an alliance with Russia. Thus, Kojong thought he had two alternatives: neutrality or an alliance with Russia, depending on how situation enveloped. Yi Pömjin remained faithful to Kojong's

alternative plans, but he seemed to prefer an alliance with Russia as a more practical and plausible policy than Korean neutrality. Leveraging his connections in the Royal Household Department, Yi Pömjin formed his own political network around people from Hamgyöng Province and increased his political clout with the support of the Min family.

After the Triple Intervention, King Kojong actively supported Yi Pömjin, who had ties in the Royal Household Department, to bolster the monarchy. After the king's escape to the Russian legation, Yi was appointed as minister of justice and led the political scene by punishing those involved in the assassination of Queen Min. However, the members of the Independence Club mounted strong opposition to Yi's power and succeeded in having Yi sent to the U.S. as the Korean minister in June 1896.

Kojong aspired to secure a guarantee for his plan for Korea's neutrality around the time of the Russo-Japanese War. However, when the Western powers refused to recognize Korea's declaration of neutrality, he pursued a Korea-Russia alliance. He had decided to announce Korea's alliance with Russia should Korea's neutrality be compromised due to a war between Russia and Japan. However, Kojong was unable to realize a Korea-Russia alliance. He was being pressured and threatened by the Japanese government and the pro-Japanese forces in the Korean government, and was therefore forced to revoke a statement reaffirming Korea's neutrality.

Yi, under Kojong's orders, strove to get a guarantee for Korea's neutrality in case a war broke out between Russia and Japan. However, when both Russia and Japan refused to offer such a guarantee, Yi began concentrating his efforts on concluding an alliance treaty with Russia. Yi Pömjin, in other words, was a key player who tried unceasingly to build a close, cooperative alliance between Korea and Russia.