It is a commonplace observation that the Russo-Japanese War marked a turning point in modern history. Japan's victory not only shook the domination of the Western powers in Asia and beyond, but it also cast doubt on the legitimacy of their claim to be the driving force of history on account of their cultural and scientific achievements.

In spite of the geographical distance, the Russo-Japanese War, by its diplomatic sequels, also durably affected the balance of power in Europe and contributed directly to the shaping of the situation that nurtured the First World War. For France, it appeared at once as a threat to the still precarious restoration of her influence on the international scene. Since the calamitous war she had launched against Prussia in 1870, which caused the loss of her two eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, along with the payment of heavy indemnities, the bulk of French energies had been devoted to the reinforcement of national defence and to the building of a colonial empire in Africa and Asia. Meanwhile French diplomacy had endeavoured to contain the continental hegemony and colonial ambitions of Germany through the working of various agreements with other European countries, among which Russia stood in the first place. The latter's involvement in a conflict with Japan was in itself a matter of serious concern to the French government, for it reflected a weakening of her interest with the European situation. But when the conflict turned out to be a complete military disaster for the precious ally, it is the core orientation of the French foreign policy that could seem to have led it up a blind alley.

This article aims at describing how the course and aftermath of that conflict eventually resulted in both the confirmation of France's escape
from diplomatic confinement and the strengthening of an alliance strategy meant to isolate the central empires, the logic of which would eventually lead, barely a decade later, to another tragedy on a much grander scale.

PRE-WAR POSITIONS: FRANCE’S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND JAPAN

Since the 1890s the linchpin of France’s foreign policy was her alliance with Russia. Such a partnership between the secular French Republic, heir to the Revolution, and the Holy Russia did not fail, at first, to appear somewhat surprising to more than one observer. Tsar Alexander III himself, who had no liking for republican regimes, had shown some reluctance to endorse an official linkage between countries so disparate politically, although, thereafter, they were soon to be celebrated as ‘sister nations’.

The idea of entering into an alliance with Russia in order to counterbalance Germany’s power dated back to the years following France’s humiliating defeat of 1870. Yet, it is not until 1890, when Russia was already heavily dependent on French loans to improve her industry and transportation network, that Germany’s renunciation of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, in the wake of Bismarck’s resignation, offered a breeding ground allowing the French government to place its cards on the table.

The negotiations started at a sluggish pace, and for some time the prospect of reaching an agreement remained uncertain. Eventually, in addition to the discreet financial pressures exerted by the French government, two events prompted the Russian authorities to conclude an alliance with France: the renewal, in May 1891, of the Triple Alliance, or Dreibund, binding Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy, and the disclosure by the Italian government of the existence, since 1887, of a so-called ‘Mediterranean Agreement’ between Britain, Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Concluded on 27 August 1891 in Paris, the agreement, not yet a formal treaty, was completed by a military convention, or ‘Defence Pact’, signed on 17 August the following year in St Petersburg. That convention had no binding effect until January 1894, when the tsar officially approved its diplomatic ratification. Although its exact details were kept secret, it was known that it required from both countries ‘an immediate and simultaneous mobilization’ in case either one would be attacked, understandably by Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such a military agreement, by forcing Germany to fight on two fronts, appeared as a perfect guarantee against the risk of a war. Later on, though, it was to assume a more offensive character.

Despite France’s initial willingness to conclude an alliance with Russia, and the frequent visits of officials that subsequently took place in Paris or in St Petersburg – among which the much feted visit of Nicolas II with the Tsarina to the French capital in October 1896 – little attention was