German statesman Otto von Bismarck once envisioned nineteenth-century Anglo-Russian conflict as a duel between an elephant (Russia) and a whale (Britain). Although the German chancellor’s metaphor did not include France or smaller powers, it aptly described much of the Crimean War. When Britain and France joined the Ottoman Empire in this struggle against Russia in 1854, a unique example of a geographically expansive yet strategically limited conflict ensued among vast empires at different stages of economic and technological development. The British and Czarist Empires were already concerned with ruling on a transcontinental scale by the 1850s, though neither had yet reached its territorial apogee. Outside of Africa, in fact, an adversarial Anglo-Russian relationship prevailed everywhere in the world, albeit often at a distance. The vast distances that still separated Czarist and British territory instead ensured that Anglo-Russian conflict during the mid-nineteenth century manifested itself in conflict over so-called intermediate areas in the Baltic, Ottoman Empire, Caucasus, and Pacific. These areas became especially important during the Crimean War, when circumstances challenged Britain and France to attack the Czarist Empire outside Central Europe.

Neutral Prussia and the Habsburg Empire separated the warring states in Europe while entire oceans and vast expanses of Central Asia and China performed a similar function for the belligerent powers’ colonies. The Russian Czars’ principal harbor on the Kamchatka Peninsula at Petropavlovsk, for instance, was over 6,600 kilometers from Russia’s Imperial Capital at St. Petersburg, not to mention 13,350 kilometers from the British Pacific Station’s base at Callao, Peru.1 Captain Ivan Izylmetiev of the Russian frigate Aurora, for one, simply referred to Petropavlovsk as “the end of the World.”2
Unsurprisingly then, the Crimean War’s naval campaigns outside the Baltic unfolded in areas that fit British first lord of the Admiralty Sir Charles Wood’s description of the Northern Pacific as “a part of the world of which very little was known.”

Unlike the geography of some regions far from Europe, it was well known in the 1850s that the size of a country’s population did not always determine its geopolitical power. An entire third, or estimated 420 million, of the Earth’s 1.2 billion people in 1854 occupied the same Qing China that the British, French, and Russian Empires successfully coerced. Japan’s 27.2 million residents in 1852 also compared well to the number of inhabitants in the United States and Britain, yet both independently compelled Japan to change its policy of strict isolation within three years. The losing power in the Crimean War, Russia, boasted more than 70.6 million subjects in 1854, though only 1.68 million of them resided in Finland. Nevertheless, these Finns wielded far more influence than their share of the population would suggest. Russia’s total was more than the combined populations of France, at 36.23 million, and the British Isles, with 27.68 million, while the United States had yet to surpass 25 million inhabitants. Sweden-Norway and Denmark, whose respective populations numbered only 5 million and less than 1.5 million, were undeniably constrained by their limited pools of human resources. Ultimately, though, the most important indicator of military capability in the 1850s was technology.

Conflict among three of Europe’s leading powers came at a moment in which the economies of its largest belligerents were markedly different. In the mid-1850s, Britain was a world leader in industrial production with France attempting to catch up and Russia lagging far behind. Consider the production of pig iron, or iron refined to an intermediate state—this material served as backbone of arms manufacturing and infrastructure including bridges, railways, and frames for large buildings. In 1854, Britain produced 3,119 metric tons of pig iron, to which France added 771 metric tons. Combined output in Russia amounted to only 213 tons, and the Grand Duchy of Finland produced 8 tons compared to Sweden-Norway’s 146. Concerted Russian iron purchasing programs in Belgium, which produced 285 metric tons in 1854, and the German States, at 390 metric tons, could not overcome such a formidable disparity. Even before the conflict began, then, Russia already found itself at a pronounced technological and therefore military disadvantage. The American minister to Russia from 1850 to 1853, for one, did not let his personal admiration of Nicholas I stop him from noting that Russia “could not boast