The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made Asia and the Western Pacific the scene of intense competition between nations disputing each other colonial expansion and spheres of influence. Great Britain and Germany quarrelled over New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, Fiji and Samoa. France and Great Britain competed over control of continental Southeast Asia and island groups in the South Pacific. The United States was entangled in a dispute over Samoa and became a colonial empire by annexing the Philippines and Hawaii. Technology had facilitated these developments. Steamships and trains made fast and frequent long-distance transport of goods and troops possible. The Suez Canal shortened sea routes. The still undug Panama Canal promised the same. Fear of the hostile intent of other nations, not always realistic expectations of economic gain, and national pride provided the motive. Around 1900 the prospect of the disintegration of China added a new dimension to international rivalries, making for speculation about war on an unprecedented scale involving the powerful nations of the day. By then Japan had become a power in its own right. It went to war with Russia over Manchuria and Korea. Japan building a strong navy raised the question of who would become the master of the Pacific; the start of a naval race between the United States and Japan.

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