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### CONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF THE «GREAT GAME» IN CENTRAL ASIA

**Annotation.** The study of the problem of Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia and the Middle East has a fairly solid history. Various aspects of this issue have been considered in both domestic and foreign historiography. At the turn of the XIX-XX centuries, when the events of Anglo-Russian relations ceased to cause fierce disputes, quite serious scientific research began to come out, for which the source base was much wider, and certain results of the studied processes were evident.

Kipling's famous expression «East and West will never come together» has been confirmed many times, but has been refuted many times, especially by researchers of modern and modern times. And this is understandable, because the process of the most intense rapprochement, or rather active contacts, despite the fact that it was the result of wars, began in the XIX century. This was determined, first of all, by the colonization of Central Asia by the Russian Empire. This issue has almost always been studied one-sidedly: in the Soviet period, as unambiguously positive, it was called the annexation of Central Asia to Russia, which brought civilization and culture here, as it was believed, in the modern period – as unambiguously negative, and is interpreted as the transformation of Central Asia - called Turkestan in the colonial period into a colony and its economic enslavement.

**Keywords:** *Great Game, geopolitics, geostrategy, Central Asia, East and West, emissaries and agents, colonization.*

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## **ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ «ҰЛЫ ОЙЫН» ҰҒЫМЫН ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУ**

**Аңдатпа.** Орталық Азия мен Таяу Шығыстағы ағылшын-орыс қатынастары мәселесін зерттеу елеулі тарихқа ие. Бұл мәселенің әртүрлі қырлары отандық та, шетелдік те тарихнамада кеңінен қарастырылған. XIX–XX ғасырлар тоғысында ағылшын-орыс қатынастарының оқиғалары өткір пікірталас тудырмайтын жағдайға жеткенде, бұл тақырыпқа арналған алғашқы ауқымды ғылыми еңбектер жарық көре бастады. Ол кезде зерттеу жұмыстарының дереккөздік базасы едәуір кеңейіп, қарастырылып отырған үдерістердің нақты нәтижелері де айқындалған еді.

Киплингтің әйгілі «Шығыс пен Батыс ешқашан тоғыспайды» деген сөзі көптеген рет дәлелденсе де, соңғы және жаңа кезең зерттеушілері оны бірнеше рет жоққа да шығарған. Бұл – заңды құбылыс, себебі екі тарап арасындағы ең белсенді жақындасу, дәлірек айтқанда, қарқынды байланыстар XIX ғасырда басталды. Бұл үдеріс, ең алдымен, Ресей империясының Орта Азияны отарлауымен байланысты болды. Аталған мәселе көп жағдайда біржақты сипатта зерттелді: кеңестік кезеңде бұл оқиға тек оң тұрғыдан бағаланып, Орта Азияның Ресейге қосылуы деп аталды және бұл аймаққа мәдениет пен өркениет әкелді деп есептелді. Ал қазіргі кезеңде бұл үдеріс көбінесе теріс тұрғыдан бағаланып, Түркістан деп аталған аймақтың отарлыққа айналуы және оның экономикалық тұрғыда тәуелділікке түсуі ретінде қарастырылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** «Ұлы ойын», геосаясат, геостратегия, Орталық Азия, Шығыс пен Батыс, эмиссарлар мен агенттер, отарлау.

**Иномджон Мамадалиев**

## **ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ КОНЦЕПЦИИ «БОЛЬШОЙ ИГРЫ» В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ**

**Аннотация.** Изучение проблемы англо-русских отношений в Центральной Азии и на Среднем Востоке имеет достаточно солидную историю. Разнообразные аспекты этого вопроса рассматривались как в отечественной, так и в зарубежной историографии. На рубеже XIX–XX веков, когда события англо-русских взаимоотношений перестали вызы-

вать ожесточенные споры, начали выходить вполне серьезные научные исследования, для которых и источниковая база была намного шире, и определенные результаты изучаемых процессов были налицо.

Известное выражение Киплинга «Восток и Запад не сойдутся вовек» много раз находило свое подтверждение, но много раз и опровергалось, особенно, исследователями нового и новейшего времени. И это понятно, потому что процесс самого интенсивного сближения, вернее активных контактов, несмотря на то что это было результатом войн, начался в XIX в. Это определялось, в первую очередь, колонизацией Российской империей Средней Азии. Этот вопрос почти всегда изучался односторонне: в советский период, как однозначно позитивный, и назывался присоединением Средней Азии к России, принесшей сюда, как считалось, цивилизацию и культуру, в современный период – как однозначно отрицательный, и трактуется, как превращение Средней Азии – именуемой в колониальный период Туркестан в колонию и его экономическое закабаление.

**Ключевые слова:** «Большая игра», геополитика, геостратегия, Центральная Азия, Восток и Запад, эмиссары и агенты, колонизация.

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon known as the «Game of Shadows», or more commonly referred to in historical and political scholarship as the «Great Game», continues to captivate researchers due to three primary factors: (1) its chronological scope, (2) its geographical expanse, and (3) the enduring relevance of the global actors involved. The absence of a scholarly consensus, both historically and in contemporary discourse, underscores the complexity of this topic. In my view, these divergences arise from differing theoretical and ideological frameworks employed by researchers.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Most historians, from a methodological perspective, remain outside the realm of

postcolonial critique. Their analyses, both temporally (in terms of historical scope) and spatially (in terms of geographic focus), are often confined to narrow segments. Moreover, many scholars addressing the «Great Game» have not treated it as the primary object of their research. Additionally, there has been a notable lack of engagement with theoretical frameworks—particularly ideological ones – as analytical tools for elucidating

the problem. For instance, the application of «political theory», which offers an analytical and methodological examination of key political paradigms, or «political realism», a foundational theory in international relations, has been largely absent. In a geopolitical context, the «Heartland Theory» would serve as an apt starting point for analyzing the clash of interests among global empires. The integration of such theoretical frameworks provides a robust foundation for substantiating hypotheses as historical truths.

This study proposes several hypotheses concerning the «Great Game»: (1) Can it be defined geographically? (2) Does it encompass military-political dynamics? (3) How should it be delineated spatially and temporally – that is, when did it begin and end, and within what historical and geographical contexts did it unfold? These questions are supported by historical evidence and the diverse approaches of various scholars.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the concept of the «Great Game», which continues to provoke debate and engages contemporary scholars – including myself – I offer several observations. Much of the scholarly focus has centered on the rivalry between two empires – Britain and Russia – in Central Asia. However, I contend that such a narrow framing oversimplifies and distorts the broader historical dynamics. Regrettably, domestic scholarship has produced relatively few works dedicated to the «Great Game» in Central Asia, and those available often exhibit a one-sided perspective. During the Soviet era, foreign interpretations, which frequently addressed issues neglected by official Soviet historiography, were dismissed as «bourgeois historiography», subjected to blanket criticism, and remained largely inaccessible to Soviet academics.

It is worth noting that the «Great Game», particularly Russia's interactions with Central Asia during the colonial period, has been the subject of considerable research in both Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship. As early as the 19th century, during the emergence and peak of Central Asian geopolitics, this topic was extensively debated by politicians, diplomats, military figures, and others. Given the vast body of literature, I will restrict my references to key works. A notable example is N.A. Khalfin's *Russia's Policy in Central Asia (1857–1868)* (1960, 272), which meticulously examines the motivations behind Russia's colonial policy, its economic benefits, and the inevitability of rivalry with the British Empire. Other significant contributions addressing Russia's annexation of Central Asia and its confrontation with Britain include works by F.Kh. Yuldashbayev (1963, 181), E.L. Shteinberg (1951, 212),

G.A. Khidoyatov (1969, 456), P.P. Ivanov (1958, 247), G.A. Akhmedzhanov (1995, 217), O.R. Ayrapetov (2018, 904), S.N. Brezhneva (2012, 26–31), M.K. Baskhanov (2015, 328), and others. However, many of these studies are ideologically driven and reflect class-based perspectives. Post-independence scholarship has sought to move beyond such ideological constructs, though it often remains framed within an imperial lens. Tajik scholars, including B.I. Iskandarov (1961, 84–103), Kh. Pirumshoev (2005, 282–378), V.V. Dubovitskii (1998, 89), I.A. Mamadaliev (2013, 400), Mohammadreza Khamedi (2013, 154), M.M. Alimshoev (2003, 26], A.V. Postnikov (2003, 205], R. Masov (2005, 288), and the collective academic volume *History of the Tajik People* (2010, 1123), have also contributed significantly to this discourse.

The 19th century was marked by a series of international events of global significance, yet the military-political confrontation in Central Asia holds particular interest for contemporary regional studies scholars. Central Asia remains one of the most intriguing, strategically vital, yet understudied regions of the world. As a historical crossroads of civilizations and a geostrategic hub in Eurasia, it continues to be a source of geopolitical tension.

To begin, certain terminological issues in the historiography of the «Great Game» require clarification. The territory where Anglo-Russian rivalry unfolded has been described using various terms. Post-Soviet scholarship frequently employs «Middle East» and «Middle Asia», while Western scholarship prefers «Central Asia». This inconsistency complicates comparative analysis of sources and literature. To avoid confusion, I propose using «Central Asia» within a specific geographic scope: Western Turkestan (modern Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), Eastern Turkestan (modern Xinjiang), contemporary Afghanistan, and northeastern Iran (Khorasan Province). The UNESCO definition of Central Asia is broader. However, the «Great Game» project, both geographically and diplomatically, extends beyond these boundaries and intersects with the broader «Eastern Question». Thus, for geopolitical analysis, «Central Asia» is the most suitable term, as the region has historically been – and remains – a zone of strategic competition among global powers, including Russia, the United States, major European states, China, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Iran. These actors have intensified efforts to secure geopolitical and geo-economic advantages, focusing on establishing transport corridors, accessing energy resources, and securing other strategic assets.

It was in this geopolitical arena that serious rivalry between the Russian and British empires emerged in the 19th century, profoundly shaping the development of Central Asian states and marking the onset of a confrontation

between continental and maritime powers. Central Asia's strategic significance arose when territorial ambitions and hegemonic contests in Europe reached an impasse due to the proliferation of competing actors (Gabdurashitova 2009).

Meanwhile, colonial expansion in the Western Hemisphere was concluding, as independence movements in the Americas bore fruit. Consequently, empires that lost their Western colonies redirected their ambitions eastward with renewed vigor, crafting various ideological metaphors to justify their pursuits. Although many scholars frame the «Great Game» as a bipolar contest between Russia and Britain, the reality was far more complex.

As S.B. observes: «This «game» involved two of the largest empires of the time – the British and the Russian. The confrontation persisted until the early 20th century, culminating in the 1907 Convention delineating spheres of influence in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Some researchers extend its chronological scope to include Anglo-Soviet tensions in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran during the 1920s and 1930s» (Panin, 2001).

John Morris emphasized: «The most vulnerable point of the British Empire was the northwestern frontier of India – the cradle of the 'Great Game'... At various times, British strategists viewed Persia or Turkey as the 'key to India,' but the classic «Great Game» unfolded in Afghanistan, where the British constantly perceived threats from the Russian Empire, advancing toward Bukhara and Khiva» (Morris, 260). To legitimize their imperial ambitions, ruling elites crafted ideological paradigms to mobilize public support and transform citizens into agents of expansion. Lord Curzon articulated this vision: «India is a fortress, surrounded on two sides by the ocean as a moat, and on the third by mountains. Beyond lies a glacis of varying depth. We do not seek to occupy it, but we cannot allow it to fall into enemy hands. We prefer it remain in the hands of allies and friends. But should hostile influences penetrate behind our lines, we will act. This is the secret of our position in Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Siam, and Tibet» (Radek, 1934). He further stated: «India is the center of our empire. If we lose any other possession, we may survive; but if we lose India, the sun of our empire will set» (Dutt, 1948). In Russian discourse, similar paradigms existed: «If India was Britain's «gold mine», then Bukhara was Russia's 'Athens of Central Asia,' and Khiva its 'Gibraltar of Greater Tartary» (Matvievsky, 1969).

By the late 19th century, following Germany's unification and rising militarism, the «German factor» significantly influenced not only British but also Russian and other European foreign policies. Peter Hopkirk notes:

«Many in Britain realized that armed conflict with Germany was becoming inevitable. Russia, too, was concerned about threats to its interests, fearing Berlin's growing influence in Constantinople, which controlled its Black Sea access, and Kaiser Wilhelm's designs on the mineral-rich Caucasus» (Hopkirk, 431). German intelligence, under the guise of commercial agents, actively engaged in both the Caucasus and Central Asia. This German factor catalyzed Anglo-Russian rapprochement, culminating in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, which delineated spheres of influence in Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet (Hopkirk, 431).

However, many British scholars in the late 20th century downplayed the significance of the 1907 Convention, noting that tensions in Central Asia persisted even during the World War I alliance and continued to shape regional dynamics. They view the agreement as one of several Anglo-Russian accords on spheres of influence, many of which were repeatedly violated. These scholars emphasize that rivalry persisted post-1907 and post-1917 Russian Revolution, subsiding only on the eve of World War II (Klein, 126–147).

The motivations behind the «Great Game» in the 19th century, from a Western perspective, were rooted in Europe's technological, economic, and scientific dominance, coupled with a perceived civilizational superiority over Eastern societies. Europeans often disregarded Eastern social and governmental structures, imposing their own models, as they had in the Western Hemisphere. The term «gunboat diplomacy» emerged, symbolizing the use of naval power to subdue even powerful states. Central Asia's buffer status between Russian and British territories further fueled the «Great Game». However, elements of this rivalry predate the 19th century, rooted in Central Asia's historical and geopolitical multidirectionality (Kazantsev, 4).

This multidirectionality allowed external powers to leverage deep historical ties to the region (Kazantsev, 4).

In the Russian-British confrontation at the beginning of the 19th century, we can already see the outlines of the 'Great Game' that unfolded in the second half of the century. (Postnikov, 205]. A notable episode was the 1800–1801 plan by Napoleon Bonaparte and Tsar Paul I for a joint Franco-Russian expedition to India. This threat materialized when Russia, after withdrawing from the Second Anti-French Coalition, considered Napoleon's proposal for a campaign modeled on his Egyptian expedition (Mitrofanov, 130–145). Later, Napoleon and Alexander I revived the plan, though it, too, failed to materialize (Porokhov, 68).

Nonetheless, the initiative led to the mobilization of the Don Cossack Host on 12 January 1801, dispatched toward India via Central Asia. The

Cossacks endured significant hardships until, on 23 March, news of Paul I's death and Alexander I's order to return reached them in Saratov province.

The historical significance of this plan, despite its failure, lies in its role as both the initial act and a pivotal moment in Russia's entry into the «Great Game». It also highlights France's interest, which reemerged after the Napoleonic Empire's collapse. Through its East India Company (established in 1664), France held territories in India. The plan's duality reflects each party's hidden ambitions: France sought to pursue colonial claims in Asia to expel Britain, while also diverting Russia from Eastern European affairs; Russia aimed to advance into Central Asia, fortify its southern borders, and prevent British incursions, particularly as Britain's East India Company in Calcutta planned invasions of Afghanistan and Herat to penetrate Central Asia.

Herat became a focal point of contention among four powers (notably four, indicating an expanding number of actors, as I.M. notes), having transitioned from Persian control to independence in the 18th century and aligning with Afghanistan. Though it lost its former commercial prominence, Herat retained strategic importance, disputed by Afghanistan and Iran. Britain, fearing a Russia-backed Persia, actively engaged in the issue. Russia sought to restrain the Shah, wary of British-Afghan conflict, but in October 1837, Persian forces under Muhammad Shah besieged Herat. Some scholars view this as a demonstrative act, but Russia was drawn in due to the Shah's demand for a Russian corps of deserters and defectors (Niyazmatov, 313–389).

Britain aimed to isolate Afghanistan from Bukhara and Khiva, prevent Persian involvement, and form an anti-Russian Muslim coalition in the Eastern Caspian (Vasiliev, 3).

This policy alienated Dost Mohammad Khan, whose disillusionment, expressed to Alexander Burnes, led to his oscillation between Russian and British alliances and eventual conflict with Britain: «I see that England does not value my friendship. I knocked at your door, but you rejected me. True, Russia is far, but through Persia... it may aid me... I expected much from your government... Now I am convinced; I attribute this not to England's disfavor, but to fate» (Neumann, 32–34).

S.N. Yuzhakov notes: «While Britain sought to transform Afghanistan into a bulwark for India, Russian officer Vitkevich infiltrated Kabul, was warmly received by Dost Mohammad, and persuaded him to seek a Russian alliance» (Yuzhakov, 177).

British emissary activity intensified in Asia, with tensions rising at any Russian advance toward India or Afghanistan. Russo-Persian and Russo-Turkish wars were framed as threats to British interests, necessitating a stronger stance against Russian policy in Persia to counter aggression and eliminate Russia as a competitor in the Persian market.

Russian actions in the Middle East were not purely altruistic. By fostering ties with Iran and Afghanistan, St. Petersburg sought to pressure Britain for concessions in the Near and Middle East and support in resolving the Turkish question, particularly the Black Sea straits.

In the 1840s, Russia-Britain-Central Asia relations shifted, with Russia consolidating borders rather than expanding, while Britain's Afghan expansion ended in rebellion and the ousting of its appointee (Martens, 65).

The Crimean War (1853–1856) redirected Russia's focus to Central Asia, where, in the late 19th century, it conducted scientific and military expeditions, rapidly incorporating territories into the empire. Britain, alarmed, accused Russia of threatening its colonies but, by the 1890s, lacked the military capacity to counter Russia, leading to agreements on spheres of influence. The «Great Game» waned due to European crises and Germany's aggression, culminating in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, which resolved longstanding rivalries by delineating influence in Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet (1952, 387–388).

In Russian historiography, the «Great Game» is divided into four stages:

- (1) 1813–1838, marked by political and economic positioning;
- (2) 1838–1864, with initial expansion attempts;
- (3) 1864–1885, defined by Russia's annexation of Central Asia; and
- (4) 1885–1907, characterized by political confrontation ending with the 1907 Convention (1952, 264).

Conversely, J. Morgan limits the «Great Game» to 1810–1895, viewing the 1907 agreement as tied to European rather than Central Asian affairs, with influence division completed earlier (Morgan, 264).

## CONCLUSION

Summarizing the materials presented, the following conclusions can be drawn, the analysis of materials indicates the following point of view the «Great Game» persists into the 21st century with new actors (Russia, Britain, France, Germany, the U.S., Turkey, China) and zones (eastern Russia, Central Asia, Chinese Turkestan, Afghanistan, Iran, India). Chronologically, it includes:

- (1) 1800–1810, with the Franco-Russian Indian campaign plan and Britain's entry;
- (2) 1814–1853, shifting focus to Central Asia;
- (3) 1864–1896, ending Anglo-Russian rivalry;
- (4) 20th–21st centuries, subdivided into 1907–1918, 1944–1946, 1946–1991, and post-1991.

Rooted in Central Asia's geopolitical multidirectionality, the «Great Game» remains relevant but not eternal, its future tied to shifts in global geopolitical dynamics.

The study of Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia and the Middle East boasts a robust historiographical tradition. Various facets of this issue have been explored in domestic and foreign scholarship. By the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as Anglo-Russian interactions ceased to provoke intense disputes, rigorous academic studies emerged, supported by an expanded source base and clear outcomes of the processes under scrutiny. Rudyard Kipling's adage, «East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet», has been both affirmed and contested, particularly by modern scholars. The 19th century marked the onset of intensive engagement – driven by conflicts – primarily through the Russian Empire's colonization of Central Asia. Soviet historiography portrayed this as a positive «incorporation» bringing civilization, while contemporary scholarship views it negatively, as the transformation of Central Asia (Turkestan) into a colony and its economic subjugation.

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