

Milieu of the Great Game

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Abstract

Historical instances offer rich evidence of transitions the existing global order has undergone. Governed by a constant struggle for territorial expansion, transformations have been driven by an endless quest for power. Sufficient data points to the revival of this quest, evident in the politics of major empires of the 19th century, primarily the British and Russian empire. In this view, this paper uses a historical trajectory to establish an understanding of the altered dynamics of the great game politics in the present times with a keen attention to the rise of Russia as a major power contender. It establishes that the only distinction in the great power politics in the past and the one in order is rooted in the regional setting(s), the actors involved and their motives.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Britain, Central Asia, Great Game, Russia

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Introduction

The term great game indicates a period of Anglo-Russian imperialist rivalry in Asia during the 19th century from 1813 to 1907.¹ It also provides a true manifestation of William Shakespeare's famous line 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to Gods; they kill us for their sport'. In this case Russia and Britain are wanton boys or gods and Afghanistan, Central Asia and local Indians are flies. Secondly this great game or sport was never played over God's territory i.e. in Russia or in Britain. Instead the wanton boys i.e. Central Asia and Afghanistan took the blow and continue to suffer till date. It was a political and diplomatic wrangling between the two mightiest empires of its time; the British and Russian Empire in Central Asia, and Afghanistan in South Asia. It has now been over a century since the old game ended.

However, a new great game has begun in the same region with different actors and different objectives. The only thing common is the mutual suspicion and paranoia of the actors involved. The origin of the term great game is not obscure but still requires some elaboration. As far as the old great game is concerned, having an advantage of hindsight, there are instances of the domino fall and subsequent chain of action. It is intriguing to identify as to why the British Government at London and Calcutta was so insecure of an enemy (i.e. Russia) so far and away. Secondly, it is equally intriguing to make sense of the Russian expansion southward from Siberia to Central Asia. It was over this very expansion that the famous 19th century Russian historian Soloviev commented, 'If nature was a stepmother to Russia, she was equally ungenerous to Central Asia'.

Thucydides Trap

The insecurity of the British Empire vis-a-vis expansion of Russia in Asia and Central Asia fuelling its suspicions and paranoia of a new rising power can be best explained using the notion of Thucydides Trap. Drawing reference(s) from the concept, a new rising power, in this case the Russian Empire, caused suspicions and fear in an already established power which led to the great game.

¹ Konstantin Penzev, "When Will the Great Game End?," *New Eastern Outlook* 4 (2010).

Historical evidence offers striking similarities between the great game and the Peloponnesian War. As Graham Allison stated, 'Thucydides went to the core of the matter, focusing on the unavoidable structural stress caused by a rapid shift in the balance of power between two rivals'.² It must be noted that Thucydides identified two key drivers of this dynamic. On one hand, he placed the rising power's growing entitlement, sense of its importance, and demand for greater say and sway, and on the other hand, he placed fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo, engendered in the established power. Napoleon's defeat in Russia and its exponential rise to power caused stress amongst the British establishment. A similar perspective can be traced in the work of Sir Robert Wilson titled 'A Sketch of the Military and Political Power of Russia'. The book helped in creating a phenomenon which was subsequently nurtured and raised by the Forward School.

Origin of the Metaphor

The term great game was rarely used when this game was actually being played. Instead it was made popular and became a household name in the English speaking world through Rudyard Kipling's novel titled *Kim* published in 1901. The novel was written in the backdrop of the rivalry between the Russian and British Empire over Central Asia and Afghanistan. The novel expounded upon the intelligence services employed by both the British Indians and Russians along the Grand Trunk Road and other highways to India.³ The term great game in its now widely used connotation was coined by Captain Arthur Connolly, who first used it while writing in July 1841 to Major Henry Rawlinson, saying, 'You have a great game, a noble game before you'.⁴ He thought that Rawlinson had a chance to work for the advancement of civilization in Afghanistan.⁵ It must be highlighted that Major Henry Rawlinson was appointed as Political Agent in Kandahar as a result of the first Afghan War from 1839 to 1841.

² Graham Allison, *The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?* *The Atlantic*.

³ David Fromkin, "The Great Game in Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 4 (1980): 936-951.

⁴ Seymour Becker, "The 'Great Game': The History of an Evocative Phrase," *Asian Affairs* 43, no.1 (2012): 61-80.

⁵ Malcolm Yapp, *The Legend of the Great Game* (London: The British Academy, 2001).

A Prelude to the Great Game

As if French support for the American Revolution (1778-1783) and ultimate defeat of British colonial forces was not enough, France, after the rise of Napoleon, had opened political and economic avenues against British interests in Europe and India. The French Revolution fuelled by a newly found sense of nationalism enhanced anti-British sentiments.

Rise and Fall of Napoleon

The end of the 18th century saw the rise of Napoleon in France. Nationalism, personal loyalty to their Commander Napoleon and expansion of the empire were the underlying causes of motivation for the French Army. Napoleon had planned the Egyptian campaign (1798-1801) to challenge British trading interests in the Middle East, finally linking up with his ally in India, Tipu Sultan to drive the British out from India. Napoleon eventually called off the campaign without achieving his goals. The Egyptian campaign proved to be unsuccessful, but gave young Napoleon valuable experience for the future.⁶ Napoleon's move rang alarms in London as the British position in India was still far from secure.

A failed Egyptian campaign did not deter Napoleon from perusing his ambitions of driving the British out of the Indian subcontinent. By the beginning of the 19th century, the British East India Company (EIC) was a major power in India, controlling most parts of the subcontinent, a consolation after losing a major colony; America. However, the EIC's role was laden with vulnerabilities; a long line of communication prone to disruption, which did not escape the watchful eyes of Napoleon.

In 1801, Paul I of Russia decided to execute a pre-emptive strike at the supposedly weakest spot of the British Empire. He directed Cavalry General Vasily Petrovich Orlov, Ataman of the Don Cossacks Troops, to invade India by first conquering Central Asian Khanates. The joint invasion plan of the Indian subcontinent across Turkestan (Central Asia), Persia and Afghanistan to the Indus River was agreed by Napoleon and Tsar Paul I, though could not be materialised due to the death of Tsar Paul I. A few historians even argue that with the exception of Paul I aspirations, Russia's southward expansion towards

⁶ William E. Watson, *Tricolor and Crescent: France and the Islamic World* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

Central Asia was not subcontinent centric and had started well before the British had developed interests in India.⁷

In 1807, Napoleon dispatched General Claude Matthieu, Comte de Gardane on a French military mission to Persia. The mission was planned with a special intent to persuade Persia to participate in the invasion of India. The Persian Shah signed a treaty with Napoleon's envoy in May 1807 for the safe passage of French forces to India, and the declaration of war on Britain. The same year Napoleon tried to persuade Paul I's son, Tsar Alexander for an invasion on India but Napoleon's refusal to grant Constantinople to Alexander led to a major disagreement over the plan. The proposed plan between France and Russia was the seizure of Constantinople by defeating Turkey and through manipulating friendly ties with Persia, invasion of the Indian subcontinent via Balochistan and Afghanistan.

Britain responded to Napoleon's suggestion to use Persia by dispatching military advisers on diplomatic missions to Persia and Afghanistan under Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1808. These missions helped in averting French and a possible Russian threat. Though the invasion did not transpire, the ambitions of France and Russia caused great consternation in London and Calcutta among British policymakers regarding the need to defend India.

British officers started their spying activities, secretly getting information of the land route most likely for French invasion.⁸ For Hopkirk, it was a rehearsal for the great game, when Lieutenant Henry Pottinger and Captain Charles Christie disguised as Muslim horse traders secretly undertook an EIC funded expedition to map and research the area through Balochistan, Kalat, Nushki, Herat, and Kerman in South Persia in 1810. In early 1812, Napoleon attacked Russia instead of India and was defeated. A threat of French invasion on India via Persia had been lifted.⁹ Napoleon's defeat gave way to an exponential rise of the Russian Empire and its interest in Turkey, Persia, Central Asia and the neighbouring Indian subcontinent. This was just the beginning of a hazardous game.

⁷ David Fromkin, "The Great Game in Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 4 (1980): 936-951.

⁸ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game, on Secret Service of High Asia* (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd, 1990).

⁹ Ibid.

Perceptions on Russia: A Monster in the Making

A decorated general and a veteran of many campaigns, Sir Robert Wilson was a significant figure in the creation of Russian bogey. During Napoleon's Russian campaign, he was a British observer, camped with Russian armies. In 1817, four years after his return from Russia, he published a book titled 'A Sketch of the Military and Political Power of Russia', in which he asserted that a sudden rise in power had emboldened Russia. In the view of his assessment, Constantinople and other parts of the Ottoman Empire would be conquered following India. He linked this change with Peter the Great's desire of world conquest. His writings achieved bestseller status with five successive editions. This book was based on unsound assumptions but had successfully sown seeds of Russophobia.¹⁰

Such suspicions and paranoia can be best explained using the Thucydides Trap in which a new rising power, in this case the Russian Empire caused suspicions and fear in an already established British Empire which led to the great game. Russia's expansionist designs substantiated Britain's suspicions when, by the end of 1820 Russia had annexed further areas of the Ottoman and the Persian Empire. A settlement as a result of the Treaty of Turkmenchay and Treaty of Adrianople after the Russo-Persian War (1826-1828) and Russo-Turkey War in 1828-1829 respectively, brought more territories in Asia under direct Russian control. Lord Wellington, the then British Prime Minister, thought of Ottomans as barriers against Russian advance towards Central Asia.¹¹ By 1929, the situation had changed to an extent that Lord Wellington had begun considering Afghanistan as a possible invasion route that Russia might follow to attack India.¹²

Russian Quest for Warm Waters

The long-standing Russian quest to reach warm waters, for convenience in trade and military maneuvering was restricted because of long winters and snow covered routes. The most obvious choice was the Black Sea and control over the Bosphorus through control over Constantinople, which would have ultimately given access to the Mediterranean. Pursuit of such an objective put

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

¹¹ Sir J.A.R. Marriot, *Anglo Russian Relations 1689-1943* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1944), 104-108.

¹² Ibid., pp. 936-951.

Britain in a position to the rescue of Turkey. A second option to reach the Indian Ocean through Persia was the Euphrates valley, but in this case Britain would have guarded her interest even more tenaciously than the access to the Mediterranean. A strong British reaction deterred Russia from further following success in Persia towards the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf was most vital for protecting trade sea lanes to and from India and beyond.

Russia had access to the North Pacific since the end of 17th century, but it was not until 1860 that it established itself at Vladivostok. By the 20th century, the Trans-Siberian Railway connected Vladivostok, Moscow and Europe. The Siberian route did not attract any suspicions from Britain because by this time, the great game was already over.¹³

Russian Expansion in Central Asia

The conquests of Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in 1552 and 1556 opened the way for Russia via Central Asia towards the Kazakh steppe. In 1558, the first Russian Ambassador visited Central Asia and on his return the following year, he was accompanied by the envoys of the Khanates of Balkh, Bukhara, and Khwarizm (Khiva). Subsequently, diplomatic exchange was carried on at frequent intervals given Bukhara's and Khiva's focus on commerce. The Russians had two goals, the primary goal being to secure the release of Russian slaves, fishermen and merchants who were captured near Caspian by Turkoman and Kazakh raiders and then sold in Bukhara and Khiva. Whereas the secondary aim was to gain information regarding trade routes to India. Russia had little success on both accounts. During the reign of Peter I in 1717, an expedition was sent to Khiva to persuade the Khan to accept his suzerainty but it failed and the entire expedition was slaughtered. Subsequent governments avoided direct interaction with Central Asia and instead focussed on traditional goals like improving trade, opening a trade route with India, and resolving the Russian slave issue. However, the first goal was achieved, while the latter remained unfulfilled.

In the first half of the 19th century, Russia finally gained effective control of the Kazakh steppe. In 1847, it established a fortress on the mouth of Syr Darya (river). This brought Russia in direct contact with Khiva and Kokand in her

¹³ Ibid., pp. 109-110.

quest for secure borders at the threshold of Central Asia.¹⁴ From 1864 to 1868, Samarkand and Tashkent was captured, and the Khanates of Bokhara and Kokand brought under the dominion. Russia captured Khiva in 1873, Turkmenistan in 1881, Merv Oasis and Eastern Turkmenistan in 1885 and occupied the Pamirs during the years 1893-1895. The search of secure borders had eventually brought Russia to the Afghan neighbourhood. Russian expansion in Central Asia unnerved British Indian Empire, especially from late 1820s and onwards.

The Snowball Gets Bigger

Insecurity germinated out of Imperial Russia's gains in Central Asia, further heightened by the Treaties of Turkmenchay and Adrianople. During the 1830s, the British Government adopted the policy of sustaining the territorial integrity of Ottoman and Islamic rulers against any encroachment from Russia or any other European power.

Counter Russian Expansion

Practically, this meant the creation of a vast buffer zone of Islamic Asia against Russian expansion. These buffer states included Turkey, Persia and the Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara.¹⁵ The creation of trading outposts in Central Asia by moving British goods to the *bazaars* of old Silk Road was an opportunity waiting to be explored by the British traders. The EIC officials believed that their goods, being superior in quality and cheaper in price, would eventually eliminate Russia out of Afghan and Central Asian markets.¹⁶ Beyond the buffer states was another line of defence starting from the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan to Herat. The EIC required a trade route through Sindh and Punjab to gain access to Persia or Afghanistan for military mobilisation as well as for trade. As mentioned earlier, Afghanistan was to be transformed into one state, instead of a group of small warring tribal confederations. It was to serve as a close ally and its foreign relations were to be dealt by the Indian Governor General or the British Foreign Office. This was the Forward Policy of the British Empire.

¹⁴ Seymour Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 9-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 938.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-152.

Significance of Afghanistan

The centrality of Afghanistan began to resonate with the Russians, slowly but surely while they were inching closer to Central Asia and Persia. Arthur Conolly, personally responsible for coining the term great game, and an archetypal great game player himself was of the view that the invader would pass through Afghanistan either via Kabul, Khyber Pass, and Peshawar route, or via Herat, Kandahar, Quetta and Bolan Pass. In the former case, holding of Herat by Russia or annexed by friendly Persia would have had very serious implications for India. Herat could sustain a sizeable force for years, and the presence of a hostile force in Herat would be enough to unsettle natives of India against the EIC rule.¹⁷ In 1832, Captain Alexander Burnes, another important great game player dispatched on a mission to Bukhara, also highlighted the possibility of a Russian attack on India through Bukhara and Kabul via the Khyber Pass.¹⁸

Road to the First and Second Anglo-Afghan War

The Afghan ruler Dost Muhammad lost Peshawar to Ranjit Singh in 1834. The following year, Dost Muhammad approached Tsar Nicholas for help in recovering Peshawar. Tsar Nicholas appointed Vitkevich as his emissary to establish friendly relations with Kabul. Dost Muhammad would have preferred an alliance with the British, his near neighbour instead of Russia, under the condition that he was supported in recovering Peshawar from Ranjit Singh. Lord Auckland, the Governor General of India preferred to support Ranjit Singh over Dost Muhammad, as he was more vital to the interests of the British. Dost Muhammad was advised to abandon his plan to recover Peshawar and end his quarrel with Ranjit Singh. The former was left with no other option but to receive Vitkevich. The British desired such a person on the throne in Kabul, who was amiable and allowed them control over external affairs of Afghanistan. Dost Muhammad was quite the opposite in policy and narrative to the British. He did not allow the British envoy to be placed in Kabul, whilst simultaneously strengthening relations with Russia. This was seriously alarming for proponents of the Forward Policy.

¹⁷ Arthur Conolly, *Journey to the North of India, Overland from England, Through Russia, Persia and Afghanistan*, (India: Asian Educational Services, 2001).

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 130, 131, 150 & 151.

In April 1838, as the dice of the Afghan civil war rolled, Burnes was departed back to India.¹⁹ In March 1839, troops from the subcontinent comprising 21,000 British and Indian soldiers crossed the Bolan Pass and reached Quetta, finally establishing their camp in Kandahar in April 1839. Dost Muhammad offered tough resistance, however, Kabul was conquered in August 1839. Dost Muhammad was exiled to India and was replaced by Shah Shuja, the previous ruler. Two years later, in the winter of 1842, the people of Kabul revolted against the British forces stationed there and killed Alexander Burnes, who was serving as Britain's political officer. British troops, approximately 8,000, were forced out of Kabul, with most of them killed enroute Jalalabad. Over 100 English soldiers, 2,000 Indian sepoy, few women and camp followers were taken hostage by Dost Muhammad Khan's son Akbar Khan.²⁰ A punitive expedition was sent in April 1843, which recaptured Kabul followed by a massacre and freedom of the captives. The new Governor General Ellenborough ordered the withdrawal of entire British garrisons from Afghanistan and Dost Mohammad Khan was enthroned again after his return to Kabul. Sindh and Punjab were annexed by the EIC in 1843 and 1849 respectively and became an immediate neighbour to Afghanistan.

The British adopted the Backward Policy following the disaster of the First Anglo-Afghan War. After years of relative calm on the Afghan front, the situation changed upon the death of Emir Dost Muhammad in 1863. A succession brawl in Kabul amongst Dost Muhammad's sons and Russian advances toward Amu Darya (Oxus River) escalated a struggle between proponents of Forward and Backward schools in London.²¹ The Backward School advocated remaining within already established frontiers of India, whereas the Forward School advocated for the moving of outposts further towards Central Asia. The purpose was to create a network of Indian agents in Central Asia and position Afghanistan and Iran as buffer states.²² In 1875, the Secretary of State for India embraced the Forward Policy and decided to contain Russia in Central Asia. As per the new policy, Afghanistan, Kashgar and Kalat were to be converted from independent

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 165-174.

²⁰ Zahid Anwaar, "Kipling's Depiction of the Great Game between British India and Czarist Russia," *Al-Idah* 33, (2016).

²¹ Ibid., p. 46.

²² Ibid., p. 188.

buffer states to dependent subordinate states, similar to Indian princely states. Under the same policy, when British tried to place political agents in Afghanistan, Emir Sher Ali Khan refused to allow any such arrangement in Afghanistan. Sher Ali's refusal was considered as an indication of his turning to Russia. Russian annexation of Kokand in 1876 further increased pressure on the Viceroy of India Lord Lytton who tried to force Sher Ali to accept British agents.²³

The Second Afghan War broke out in November 1878 and an alarmed Sher Ali was succeeded by his elder son Yaqub Khan. Yaqub Khan signed the Treaty of Gandamak in May 1879, allowing Britain control over Khyber and Machni Passes. Furthermore, he ceded areas up to Quetta to the British in return of an annual subsidy and promise of assistance in the event of foreign aggression.

There was a recurrence of the violence as the native people rose against British presence on Afghanistan's soil, once again. Sher Ali's nephew, Abdur Rahman returned from exile in Tashkent and asserted his claim over the Afghan throne. He was recognized as the Emir of Afghanistan. The new Emir conformed to the Treaty of Gandamak. This was a high point if not the highest point of the Forward Policy, controlling a huge area up to Machni Pass and in the south up to Quetta along with control of Afghan foreign relations. The only consolation for the Afghans was that there was no provision of a British resident or political agent in Kabul or elsewhere in addition to the protection against foreign aggression and subsidy.

Settling the Borders

As a result of the Anglo-Russian negotiation between 1869-1873, an agreement between Bukhara and Afghanistan was reached. Both powers agreed to recognize each other's sphere of influence; Bukhara under Russian dominion, and Afghanistan under Britain starting from the far bank of Oxus River. Eastern Badakhshan and Wakhan corridor up to Sari Qul Lake were to be Afghan areas. Anglo-Russian Delimitation Protocol of 1885 provided the framework for delimitation of the boundary from Oxus River to the Persian border on Harirud and in the south by a joint Anglo-Russian Commission with no member from Afghanistan.²⁴ On its eastern border, Afghanistan had ceded control of several

²³ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁴ "International Boundary Study Afghanistan – U.S.S.R," *Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research*, no. 22, (1983).

areas to British Raj. An agreement was reached between Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdul Rahman in November 1893 for delimitation of Afghanistan's boundary. With this agreement, a long-living desire of the British Raj to have a scientific border known as Durand Line was fulfilled.

Conclusion

Although the British were able to establish themselves on the far end in India after they were defeated in America, their fear of losing the Indian subcontinent was always clear and persistent. On the other hand, Russia's sudden rise and its expansion towards Turkey, Persia and Central Asia also heightened British insecurities. The expansion of Imperial Britain and Russia, competing in the great game, came to an end with the delimitation of Afghanistan's borders. However, the phantom of this not very great game haunts us even today in the form of the Durand Line.

As explained earlier, in present times, it is only the means of advancement and the actors pursuing these means that have come to substantially alter the geostrategic and geopolitical dynamics governing the stature of states and their struggle for hegemony. The fundamental tenets characterized by the use of diverse means of expansion and an inherent desire for hegemony remains a constant among the major actors in our times including China and Russia with the US in the driving seat, steering the course of global politics to its advantage.