

**AFGHANISTAN AS A STRATEGIC BUFFER IN
RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY****Akramova Yulduz Ulugbek kizi**

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ABSTRACT

The 19th century marked Russia's southward expansion across the Eurasian steppe into Central Asia. This expansion, characterized by the annexation of khanates such as Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand, placed Russia in close proximity to Afghanistan. For Russian policymakers, Afghanistan was strategically vital: its mountainous terrain and location positioned it as a natural barrier between Russian territories and British India. The Russian Empire viewed Afghanistan not only as a military frontier but also as a point of leverage in its diplomatic negotiations with Britain

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Russian military expeditions and infrastructure projects in Central Asia reflected this strategic priority. Railways were constructed to facilitate troop movements toward the Afghan frontier. Intelligence networks monitored developments in Kabul and among tribal leaders. These measures underscored the centrality of Afghanistan in Russia's broader imperial ambitions [1].

For Russia, Afghanistan's strategic value was immense. As the empire expanded southward, it sought not only economic and territorial gains but also the ability to counterbalance British power in Asia. Russian policymakers viewed Afghanistan as both an obstacle and an opportunity: a buffer against British encroachment, yet a potential corridor toward the Indian Ocean if secured diplomatically or militarily. These dual perceptions defined Russia's Afghan strategy for nearly a century.

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of Afghanistan's role in Russian foreign policy during this period, contextualizing its importance within broader imperial strategies. By exploring Russian military expansion, examining key episodes of the Great Game, and assessing the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, the paper offers both a historical and analytical

perspective on how buffer states function within power politics. Moreover, it draws connections between these historical dynamics and Afghanistan's enduring significance in modern geopolitics.

Russian expansion into Central Asia was a gradual but determined process, rooted in both security concerns and imperial ambition. Beginning in the 18th century with the annexation of Orenburg and the establishment of frontier fortresses, Russia pushed steadily southward. By the mid-19th century, military campaigns resulted in the subjugation of the Khanates of Khiva (1873), Bukhara (1868), and Kokand (1876), consolidating Russian control over much of Central Asia. These campaigns were accompanied by extensive mapping expeditions, diplomatic overtures, and trade agreements designed to integrate these territories into the Russian imperial system[2].

The construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway in the 1880s facilitated troop movements and trade across the region, bringing Russian forces to Afghanistan's doorstep. For the British, these developments signaled an existential threat to India, their 'crown jewel.' Russian diplomats argued that their southward push was defensive, designed to secure borders against nomadic incursions and rival powers. However, British strategists saw it as evidence of Russia's intention to ultimately challenge British supremacy in Asia, particularly through Afghanistan[3].

The capture of Panjdeh in 1885, during the so-called Panjdeh Incident, brought Russia and Britain to the brink of war. Although direct conflict was avoided, this episode illustrated how closely Afghanistan's fate was tied to imperial rivalries. The settlement of the boundary between Russian-held Turkestan and Afghanistan marked a turning point, solidifying Afghanistan's northern border while reinforcing its buffer role.

The term 'Great Game,' popularized by British officer Arthur Conolly, encapsulates the high-stakes contest for influence across Asia. Russian and British agents engaged in clandestine missions, mapping uncharted regions and attempting to sway Afghan rulers. Figures such as Russian envoy Ivan Vitkevich and British political agent Alexander Burnes exemplified this shadow war of intelligence and persuasion[4].

Afghanistan's rulers, notably Dost Mohammad Khan and later Abdur Rahman Khan, skillfully exploited this rivalry. They accepted arms, subsidies, and diplomatic recognition from both sides while jealously guarding Afghanistan's sovereignty. Abdur Rahman Khan, in particular, emerged as the quintessential buffer-state monarch, accepting British control over Afghan foreign policy in exchange for internal autonomy, thus ensuring Afghanistan's survival amid great power competition.

British military interventions during the First (1839–1842) and Second Anglo-Afghan Wars (1878–1880) further underscored Afghanistan's significance. While both wars ended disastrously for Britain in military terms, they reinforced British determination to prevent Russian encroachment. Russian strategists, meanwhile, continued to regard Afghanistan as a strategic glacis—a forward zone shielding their Central Asian conquests from British attack[5].

By the early 20th century, the intensifying rivalry forced both powers to seek accommodation. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 represented a watershed moment, dividing Persia into Russian and British spheres of influence, affirming Afghanistan's

exclusion from Russian influence, and recognizing Tibet's neutrality. For Russia, this agreement allowed a temporary respite to focus on its Far Eastern and European challenges following the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Revolution.

While the convention ostensibly removed Afghanistan from direct Russian reach, it did not eliminate Russian strategic interest. Military planners continued to consider Afghanistan's terrain, logistical routes, and political landscape in the event of renewed conflict. Thus, the convention institutionalized Afghanistan's buffer status while freezing the Great Game into a tense equilibrium.

Afghanistan's experience during the Great Game exemplifies classical geopolitical theories. Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory posited that control over the Eurasian Heartland—including Central Asia—was the key to global dominance. Afghanistan, situated at the fringes of this Heartland, became the chessboard where such theories were tested. As Nicholas Spykman later argued, buffer states often serve as 'pressure points,' absorbing tensions between rival powers while suffering from chronic instability[6].

The historical dynamics examined here continue to resonate today. Modern Russia's cautious engagement with Afghanistan, particularly following NATO's withdrawal, echoes 19th-century concerns about southern borders and influence in Central Asia. Similarly, Afghanistan's ongoing strategic relevance to regional powers such as China, Pakistan, and India reflects the persistence of its buffer-state legacy.

Afghanistan's role as a strategic buffer in Russian foreign policy during the 19th and early 20th centuries illustrates the enduring interplay between geography and power politics. The Great Game embedded Afghanistan within the diplomatic and military calculus of two empires, transforming it into a keystone of Eurasian strategy. Although the Anglo-Russian Convention formalized its buffer status, Afghanistan's geopolitical salience has persisted well beyond this era.

Understanding this historical trajectory is crucial not only for historians but also for policymakers navigating contemporary Eurasian geopolitics. Afghanistan's experience offers enduring lessons on the vulnerabilities and strategic value of buffer states caught between rival powers.

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