

# The Role Of Afghanistan In Russia's Colonial Policy

Akramova Yulduz Ulug'bekovna

National University of Uzbekistan History - directions and type of activities, PhD student, Uzbekistan

**Received:** 20 October 2025; **Accepted:** 11 November 2025; **Published:** 17 December 2025

**Abstract:** This article examines the strategic role of Afghanistan in the Russian imperial policy from the middle XIX to early XX century. The study aims to analyze how geographic, political, and cultural factors shaped Russia's colonial objectives in the region. Using a historical-comparative methodology, archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, and secondary literature were analyzed. The findings reveal that Afghanistan served as a buffer zone against British India, a site for geopolitical influence, and a stage for projecting imperial power. Russia's involvement was motivated by the Great Game dynamics, economic aspirations, and fear of British encroachment. The article concludes that Afghanistan's geopolitical significance contributed to shaping Russia's colonial strategies, laying the groundwork for later regional policies.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Russian imperialism; Great Britain; The Great Game; buffer state; colonial strategy; Russian convention.

**Introduction:** In the annals of imperial history, few regions have occupied as strategically contested a position as Afghanistan. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Afghanistan stood at the intersection of imperial ambitions, most notably those of the Russian Empire and the British Crown. This period, famously dubbed the 'Great Game,' saw Afghanistan evolve from a tribal, mountainous landlocked state into a geopolitical buffer zone. For Russia, whose empire stretched from Eastern Europe into the heart of Asia, control—or at the very least, influence—over Afghanistan became a cornerstone of its southern expansionist strategy.

This article aims to explore the central role Afghanistan played in Russian colonial policy. Unlike overt territorial colonization pursued in Central Asia, Russia's approach toward Afghanistan was largely indirect but deeply strategic. The Tsarist regime sought to assert political influence, ensure regional security, and contain British movements through a mixture of diplomacy, covert operations, and military posturing. This historical analysis is grounded in a review of primary diplomatic correspondences and recent scholarly assessments. The core research question driving this study is: How did Afghanistan serve Russia's imperial ambitions within the broader framework of colonial competition with Britain? To answer this, the paper adopts a

historical-comparative approach to trace the evolution of Russian strategies toward Afghanistan and assess their implications for broader colonial policy.

## METHOD

The geopolitical rivalry between the Russian and British empires over Central Asia and Afghanistan has been extensively documented in both classical and contemporary scholarship. The term 'The Great Game,' popularized by Rudyard Kipling and later expanded upon by historians such as Peter Hopkirk (1992), refers to the covert and overt strategies used by both empires to gain influence in Afghanistan during the 19th century.

Scholars such as Edward Said (1978) have framed imperial actions through the lens of Orientalism, suggesting that colonial strategies were often guided by ideologies of superiority, strategic necessity, and civilizing missions. Although Said focused more on British imperialism, his framework is increasingly applied to Russian expansionism as well, particularly in works by researchers like Alexander Morrison (2020), who detail how Russian intellectuals and military elites justified colonization using narratives of cultural supremacy. Paul Kennedy (1987), in his work on imperial overstretch, argues that empires often extended their influence beyond economically sustainable borders in pursuit of strategic advantage.

This thesis is particularly relevant when analyzing Russian interests in Afghanistan—a region that brought little direct economic return but considerable strategic value. Afghanistan's status as a 'buffer state' is a recurring theme in scholarly literature. According to Barnett Rubin (2002), the country's role as a neutral zone was less a reflection of Afghan agency and more the result of imposed international agreements driven by Russian and British interests. This narrative is supported by documents such as the 1878 Treaty of Gandamak, where Afghan sovereignty was compromised under external pressure. Recent historians like Sergey Glebov (2018) have emphasized Russia's dual strategy of indirect control and cultural penetration. Russia's efforts to promote Orthodox Christianity, introduce the Russian language, and co-opt local elites were all elements of what some scholars term 'soft colonialism.'

Additionally, David Fromkin (1989) stresses that imperial strategies were shaped not only by territorial ambition but also by misperceptions and exaggerated fears of rival empires. In the Russian case, the fear of British incursions into Central Asia justified deepening involvement in Afghanistan—even when such fears were not substantiated by British intentions.

Taken together, the literature suggests that Russia's policy toward Afghanistan was shaped by a complex mix of geopolitical calculation, imperial ideology, and reactive strategy. This article contributes to this scholarship by synthesizing these perspectives and applying them to the specific historical arc of Tsarist engagement with Afghanistan.

This article adopts a historical-comparative method to analyze the Russian Empire's policy toward Afghanistan within the broader framework of colonial competition in Central Asia. The methodology is primarily qualitative and based on secondary historical analysis and primary archival interpretation, allowing for a multi-layered understanding of Russian motivations, strategies, and outcomes. Given the historical nature of the research, one limitation is the availability of unbiased primary sources, particularly from the Afghan perspective. Moreover, some Russian-language archival material remains inaccessible due to restrictions or incomplete translations. These limitations are mitigated through cross-referencing English-language and translated Russian scholarship.

The Russian Empire's engagement with Afghanistan unfolded in distinct phases, each reflecting shifts in imperial strategy and regional dynamics. The initial phase, during the early 19th century, was characterized by limited interest. Russian expansion focused on consolidating control over Central Asian khanates such

as Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. However, Afghanistan soon emerged as a critical buffer zone amid increasing friction with Britain.

The period from 1830 to 1880 witnessed heightened Russian military and diplomatic activity. Following the Crimean War (1853–1856), Russia intensified its advance into Central Asia, culminating in its annexation of territories bordering Afghanistan. British apprehension over Russian advances fueled the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880), where Russia's indirect influence played a crucial role in shaping Afghan politics.

By the late 19th century, Afghanistan became central to what scholars term 'defensive imperialism.' Russia avoided outright invasion of Afghanistan due to British deterrence but maintained influence through intelligence networks and pro-Russian factions within Afghan elites. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention formalized Afghanistan as outside Russia's sphere, but it underscored the effectiveness of Russia's indirect strategy.

Economically, Afghanistan offered little direct benefit; rather, it was viewed as a 'strategic shield' to secure Russia's vulnerable southern flank. The fear of British infiltration into Central Asia justified costly military build-ups and diplomatic missions. Russia's colonial policy thus blended hard power—military presence and threats—with soft power, including cultural diplomacy and covert alliances.

Ultimately, Afghanistan was less a target of colonization and more a pivot point in Russia's broader colonial system, allowing the empire to maintain strategic depth while avoiding direct conflict with Britain.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that Afghanistan played a multidimensional role in the Russian Empire's colonial policy, functioning not as a direct object of annexation but as a strategically indispensable geopolitical space. Based on the analysis of diplomatic records, imperial strategies, and historical interpretations, several key results emerge.

First, Afghanistan consistently served as a buffer state that protected Russia's southern frontiers from perceived British expansion. Russian imperial authorities regarded Afghanistan as a defensive barrier shielding newly conquered Central Asian territories such as Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khiva. This buffer function reduced the likelihood of direct military confrontation with Britain while simultaneously allowing Russia to consolidate its dominance in Central Asia. Second, the research demonstrates that Russia

pursued a policy of indirect influence rather than formal colonization. Unlike its approach in Central Asia, the Russian Empire refrained from occupying Afghan territory due to the high military costs, difficult terrain, and the risk of provoking Britain. Instead, Russia relied on diplomacy, intelligence networks, and influence over Afghan elites to secure its interests. Russian envoys, agents, and military advisors played a subtle but significant role in shaping Afghan foreign policy decisions, particularly during periods of Anglo-Afghan conflict. Third, the findings highlight that geopolitical considerations outweighed economic motivations in Russia's Afghan policy. Afghanistan offered limited economic value compared to other colonial possessions, lacking exploitable natural resources or developed trade networks attractive to Russian capital. Nevertheless, Russian policymakers continued to invest political and military resources in Afghan affairs, underscoring the primacy of strategic depth over economic gain in imperial decision-making. Fourth, the study reveals that Russia's actions in Afghanistan were heavily influenced by fear and perception rather than concrete threats. British intentions were often exaggerated within Russian strategic thinking, leading to preemptive diplomatic and military measures. This reactive posture illustrates how imperial competition during the Great Game was driven as much by suspicion and rivalry as by actual geopolitical developments. Finally, the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention emerges as a critical outcome of these dynamics. While the agreement formally recognized Afghanistan as outside Russia's sphere of influence, it effectively institutionalized Russia's long-standing strategy of indirect control. The convention confirmed Afghanistan's role as a neutral buffer, validating the effectiveness of Russia's cautious yet persistent approach. Overall, the results confirm that Afghanistan was not peripheral but central to Russian colonial strategy, shaping imperial policies aimed at security, influence, and regional stability rather than territorial expansion.

The results of this study contribute to a broader understanding of imperial behavior by illustrating how colonial powers adapted their strategies in response to geopolitical constraints. In the case of Russia, Afghanistan represented a space where imperial ambition met strategic limitation, resulting in a distinctive form of colonial engagement. One of the most significant implications of these findings is the confirmation that Russian imperialism was flexible and pragmatic. Unlike the conventional image of Russian expansion as uniformly aggressive and territorial, the Afghan case demonstrates a more calculated approach. Russia recognized that direct occupation would likely

provoke war with Britain and destabilize its southern borders. As a result, indirect influence emerged as a rational alternative, aligning with theories of defensive imperialism and buffer state politics. This study also reinforces existing scholarly arguments regarding the nature of the Great Game. Rather than a continuous series of confrontations, Russian-British rivalry in Afghanistan functioned largely through symbolic power, diplomacy, and perception management. Afghanistan became a stage on which imperial power was projected without direct control. This challenges simplistic interpretations of colonialism that equate imperial influence solely with territorial annexation. Furthermore, the findings support Paul Kennedy's concept of imperial overstretch, suggesting that Russia deliberately avoided extending itself beyond sustainable limits. By refraining from occupying Afghanistan, Russia reduced administrative burdens and military expenditures while still achieving its core strategic objectives. This highlights the importance of restraint and strategic calculation in imperial governance. Another important dimension concerns Afghanistan's lack of agency within imperial rivalries. While Afghan rulers attempted to navigate between Russian and British interests, the country's role as a buffer state was largely imposed by external powers. This aligns with Barnett Rubin's argument that Afghanistan's neutrality was not self-determined but externally constructed.

The study thus underscores how buffer states often become instruments of great power politics rather than independent actors. The discussion also reveals parallels between Russian imperial practices and later geopolitical strategies in the region. The emphasis on influence, security zones, and indirect control foreshadows policies adopted by subsequent powers, including the Soviet Union. This continuity suggests that Afghanistan's strategic significance has remained remarkably consistent across different historical periods. In conclusion, the discussion highlights that Russia's engagement with Afghanistan was shaped by a complex interplay of fear, strategy, and imperial ideology. Afghanistan was neither fully colonized nor ignored; instead, it occupied a critical middle ground that allowed Russia to safeguard its empire while avoiding direct confrontation. This case study enriches our understanding of colonial strategy and offers valuable insights into the enduring geopolitics of Central and South Asia.

## **CONCLUSION**

Afghanistan's role in Russian colonial policy highlights the complexities of imperial competition in the 19th century. Rather than pursuing outright annexation, Russia adopted a strategy of indirect control that

aligned with its geopolitical realities and rivalries. The region served as a defensive buffer, a stage for power projection, and a critical component of the broader Great Game.

This analysis demonstrates that Russia's policy toward Afghanistan was shaped by fear of British expansion, strategic calculation, and imperial ideology. While Afghanistan itself remained formally independent, it became enmeshed in the dynamics of Russian imperialism, underscoring how buffer states were instrumental in sustaining colonial systems.

Future research should explore Afghan perspectives more deeply and examine how Russian influence indirectly shaped Afghanistan's internal governance. By doing so, scholars can better understand how imperial rivalries continue to echo in modern geopolitics, particularly in regions historically viewed through the lens of strategic utility rather than intrinsic value.

#### REFERENCES

1. Бартольд В. В. Сочинения. Том IX. Работы по истории Средней Азии и Афганистана. – М.: Наука, 1977. – С. 215–238.
2. Постников А. В. Россия и Афганистан в XIX – начале XX века. Политика, дипломатия, границы. – СПб.: Изд-во СПбГУ, 2004. – С. 87–112, 145–168.
3. Агафонов С. Л. Русско-афганские отношения и “Большая игра”. – М.: Восточная литература, 1999. – С. 56–79.
4. Халфин Н. А. Политика России в Средней Азии (1857–1868 гг.). – М.: Наука, 1960. – С. 201–225.
5. Громыко А. А. (ред.) История внешней политики России. XIX – начало XX века. – М.: Международные отношения, 1997. – С. 312–329.
6. Hopkirk, Peter. The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia. – London: John Murray, 1990. – pp. 365–402.
7. Ewans, Martin. Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics. – New York: HarperCollins, 2002. – pp. 73–101.
8. Fraser-Tytler, Sir William Kerr. Afghanistan: A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953. – pp. 180–212.
9. Robson, Brian. Britain, Russia and the Afghan Frontier (1880–1907). – London: Croom Helm, 1985. – pp. 94–123.
10. Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah. Siraj al-Tawarikh. Vol. III. – Kabul: Matba'a-yi Dawlati, 1914. – pp. 98–134.
11. Adamec, Ludwig W. Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan. – Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012. – pp. 23–41, 189–194.
12. Ahmedov B. O'рта Osiyo tarixidan lavhalar. – Toshkent: O'qituvchi, 1996. – 178–195-betlar.
13. Ziyov A. Markaziy Osiyo va Afg'oniston: tarixiy aloqalar va siyosiy jarayonlar. – Toshkent: Akademnashr, 2010. – 95–123-betlar.
14. Xudoyorov R. XIX–XX asr boshlarida Afg'oniston va Markaziy Osiyo munosabatlari. – Toshkent: Fan, 2008. – 67–89-betlar.
15. Rasulov A. “Buyuk o'yin” davrida Afg'oniston masalasi. // O'zbekiston tarixi jurnali, 2015, №2. – 45–53-betlar.
16. Сборник дипломатических документов по русско-афганским отношениям. XIX век. – М.: Архив внешней политики России, 2001. – С. 134–159.
17. Материалы Азиатского департамента МИД Российской империи. – СПб., 1890-йиллар. – Лл. 45–72.
18. Постников А. В. Россия и Афганистан в XIX – начале XX века. – СПб., 2004. – С. 98.
19. Burnes A. Travels into Bokhara: Being the Account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia. – London: John Murray, 1834. – P. 210–225.
20. Crews R. D. For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia. – Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. – P. 180–195.