

COVERAGE OF THE RUSSIA–GREAT BRITAIN RIVALRY ON THE AFGHAN ISSUE IN THE PERIODICAL PRESS

Egamberdiyev Abduvakhob

Researcher, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (TSUOS)

Abstract. *In the second half of the 19th century, Afghanistan became the central stage of geopolitical rivalry between Great Britain and Russia. This article explores Afghanistan's role as a buffer zone within the framework of the strategic struggle between empires, known as "The Great Game," and highlights the events of the Gandamak Treaty (1879) and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880). The analysis is based on archives of Turkestanskije Vedomosti and examines the political-diplomatic strategies of Britain and Russia, local uprisings, discontent within Afghanistan, and their international consequences. Particular attention is given to the problems surrounding the Durand Line and border conflicts, which are assessed as threats to Afghanistan's sovereignty. The article reveals the instability of Afghanistan's foreign policy, the balancing policy pursued under the pressure of two empires, and the impact of this policy on internal stability.*

Keywords and phrases: *History of Afghanistan, Second Anglo-Afghan War, The Great Game, Russian Empire, British Empire, Geopolitical rivalry, Gandamak Treaty, Durand Line, Central Asia, Buffer state policy, 19th-century diplomacy, Turkestanskije Vedomosti, Colonial policy, Border conflicts, Imperialism and Afghanistan.*

In the second half of the 19th century, Afghanistan emerged as a central point of international political rivalry. The primary cause of this development was the geopolitical confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire, both of which sought to bring Afghanistan within their respective spheres of influence. While Britain viewed Afghanistan as a buffer zone to protect its colonial interests in India, Russia regarded it as a strategic means of consolidating its influence in Central Asia.

The British and Russian Empires regarded the territory of Afghanistan as a strategic point in their efforts to expand their spheres of influence in India and Central Asia, respectively. Afghanistan's crucial geographic position — bordering British-controlled India and lying in close proximity to Russia — rendered it a key buffer zone for both empires. The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) was a direct manifestation of this geopolitical rivalry. On the eve of the war, Russia attempted to strengthen its political presence in the region by dispatching envoys to

Afghanistan, thereby seeking to establish closer diplomatic ties¹. This development raised serious concerns in Britain, prompting the government to initiate military actions in order to safeguard its strategic interests. One of the key triggers of the conflict was the attack on the British diplomatic mission in Kabul in 1879². For Britain, stability in Afghanistan was directly linked to the security of its Indian frontier. As noted in a 1879 issue of *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*, “Instability in Afghanistan is generating security concerns along the Indian border. In response, Britain has sought to bring the Amirate under its control through political and military measures, culminating in the signing of the Treaty of Gandamak with Yaqub Khan in 1879.”³

Under the terms of the treaty, Britain acquired the right to control Afghanistan's foreign policy. This posed a serious threat to the country's sovereignty and provoked widespread public discontent. While Britain aimed to prevent Russian influence and maintain Afghanistan as a buffer zone, Russia continued to pursue its interests through various diplomatic channels. In response, Britain reinforced its military presence at key border points, including Quetta and Kalat⁴.

Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, Afghanistan became a major arena of geopolitical confrontation between Great Britain and Russia. This rivalry significantly affected the country's internal political stability, compelling the Amirate to balance its authority against increasing external pressures. Afghan rulers were forced to maneuver diplomatically between the two empires; however, such a strategy often failed to ensure national sovereignty or long-term stability.

The numerous uprisings that occurred in Afghanistan during this period posed serious challenges to internal governance and provided Britain with justification and opportunity for intervention. These revolts were frequently rooted in tribal resistance, distrust of centralized power, and collective opposition to foreign interference.

The 1879 uprising in Kabul marked a turning point, leading to Britain's direct involvement in Afghan affairs. It was triggered by the attack on the British mission in Kabul, during which Sir Louis Cavagnari and his entourage were killed. This incident prompted Britain to launch a military retaliation, resulting in a full-scale intervention⁵. As a consequence of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1879–1880), British forces established military control over key cities, including Kandahar and Kabul.

Despite the suppression of the uprisings, public dissatisfaction intensified. A large-scale rebellion near Kabul in 1880 reflected collective opposition to British political

¹ Afghanistan as a Buffer State between Regional Powers in https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/publications/no14/14-05_Toriya.pdf

² *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1879. – № 39.

³ *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1875. – № 17.

⁴ *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1879. – № 41.

⁵ *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1879. – № 39.

and military policies⁶. The Treaty of Gandamak (1879), which granted Britain control over Afghanistan's foreign affairs, was met with strong resistance⁷. The Afghan population perceived the treaty as a direct threat to national independence, fueling further uprisings against British influence⁸.

The uprisings were not confined to the center but also intensified in various provinces. In particular, regions around Ghazni, Logar, and Herat witnessed active resistance by insurgents against both the authority of the Amirate and the British military forces. In response, Great Britain launched several military campaigns and, in some instances, was compelled to sign separate agreements with local tribal groups. Thus, the rebellions in Afghanistan, coupled with British intervention, posed a serious threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While these uprisings reflected the growing political awareness and aspiration for independence among the Afghan people, British military and political measures aimed to suppress and contain these national movements.

The internal political instability, widespread uprisings, and British military interventions contributed to a large-scale refugee crisis and humanitarian disaster. As a result of military operations across various regions in the second half of the 19th century, thousands of people were forced to flee their homes. According to several reports in the Turkestan press, many residents of Kabul, Kandahar, and Ghazni fled en masse to Turkestan, India, and Iran. One 1879 article noted: "Following the disturbances in and around Kabul, numerous women and children are heading toward Peshawar in a dire state. Due to shortages of food and shelter, many are perishing along the way."⁹

After the Treaty of Gandamak, Great Britain formally obtained control over Afghanistan's foreign policy. As a result, the Amirate lost its ability to conduct independent diplomacy in international affairs. This situation also forced the Amirate to limit its official relations with Russia. In turn, Russia sought to maintain its influence by establishing covert connections with various local political forces through diplomatic channels.

One of the fundamental issues in Afghanistan's foreign policy during this period was its volatile and inconsistent nature. Frequent changes in leadership, tribal pressures, and foreign interventions rendered the pursuit of a long-term diplomatic strategy nearly impossible. Especially after the Battle of Kandahar in 1880, Afghanistan's role in Britain's Indian security policy diminished significantly, initiating a process of diplomatic isolation for the Amirate.

⁶ Turkestanskije Vedomosti. – 1880. – № 6.

⁷ Treaty of Gandamak [1879] <https://www.britannica.com/place/Khyber-Pass#ref251210>

⁸ Turkestanskije Vedomosti. – 1880. – № 6.

⁹ Turkestanskije Vedomosti. – 1879. – № 40.

Moreover, the Turkestan press provides various accounts of diplomatic missions and activities in Afghanistan. For instance, reports from 1880 noted that the reestablished British mission in Kabul generated considerable public dissatisfaction and resistance.

Thus, in the latter half of the 19th century, Afghanistan adopted an uncertain, contradictory, and short-term approach in foreign policy. This made the country a victim of great power rivalry and severely limited its capacity to define and maintain an independent foreign policy course.

During this period, Russia preferred to preserve its influence through diplomatic means. Efforts such as sending trade delegations to Afghanistan, reopening trade routes, and conducting dialogue through political envoys were aimed at maintaining its position in the region, as reflected in *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* and other official publications.

Furthermore, Afghanistan's attempt to balance its relations between Great Britain and Russia often resulted in mutual distrust. As *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* reported, Amir Sher Ali Khan's policy of navigating between the two powers led both sides to view him as an untrustworthy figure, thereby weakening his political legitimacy and undermining Afghanistan's independent standing in international affairs¹⁰.

In summary, the rivalry between Russia and Great Britain rendered it virtually impossible for Afghanistan to pursue an independent foreign policy. On one hand, British political and military pressure, and on the other, Russia's efforts to maintain its influence, turned Afghanistan into a victim of geopolitical confrontation rather than an active participant in international relations.

Furthermore, *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* published reports on the strengthening of trade relations with Russia, the movement of Russian merchants through Herat and Balkh, and the dispatch of diplomatic delegations. These accounts offer insights into how Russia sought to maintain its influence in the region through economic and diplomatic channels.

The newspaper also paid particular attention to tensions along the Afghanistan–India border, especially concerning the Durand Line, the closure of trade routes through the Khyber Pass, and the disruption of commercial activities. In the 19th century, the border between Afghanistan and British-controlled India evolved into a significant issue in international politics. The boundaries of Afghanistan had not been clearly delineated and were historically governed by tribal structures. Britain aimed to bring these areas under its own sphere of control, which led to numerous military clashes and political disputes.

¹⁰ *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1874. – № 43.

Although the 1893 Durand Line agreement was intended to formally define the border between Afghanistan and British India, its implementation generated considerable controversy and resistance. Afghan officials regarded the treaty as a document signed under unilateral pressure and refused to recognize some of its provisions. This sentiment was also reflected in articles published in *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. Despite its official status, the Durand Line failed to resolve earlier disputes, and Afghan rulers continued to reject the border as detrimental to the country's sovereignty and the well-being of its people. As a result, violent clashes, raids, and attacks were frequently reported among border villages and tribal groups.

Overall, *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* did not merely report on Afghanistan's foreign policy developments but analyzed and often criticized them. This analytical stance supported the consolidation of Russia's political position in the region while exposing the weaknesses within Afghanistan's governing structures.

Although most attention in the border dispute centered on the Afghanistan–British India frontier, the boundary with Iran also became a subject of political contention. Several issues of *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* from 1879 reported on the construction of British military forts near Quetta and Koshmoron, which the Afghan Amirate perceived as direct threats to its sovereignty. These actions were condemned in the press, reflecting growing Afghan distrust toward British expansionism¹¹.

In particular, the closure of trade routes along the Khyber Pass and the restrictions placed on the movement of regional tribes had a detrimental effect on the region's economic balance. As reported in the press, the closure of these trade routes was closely tied to Britain's strategic objectives, primarily its efforts to establish complete control over Afghanistan. These policies disrupted regional trade interests and heightened public dissatisfaction.

Additionally, border disputes with Iran emerged in areas such as Herat, Sistan, and other adjoining regions. Afghanistan's attempts to retain its influence in these territories led to heightened diplomatic tensions with the Iranian government. These issues were extensively covered in the *Turkestan* press, which highlighted the prolonged nature of diplomatic negotiations, the activities of boundary commissions, and the trade-related implications of these disputes. Overall, border issues were evaluated as one of the key factors undermining Afghanistan's capacity to maintain an independent foreign policy.

The Durand Line between Afghanistan and British India, the construction of British forts near Quetta and Koshmoron, and the closure of trade routes along the Khyber Pass further exacerbated the complexity of border-related challenges. According to sources from *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* in 1880, these conflicts were widely analyzed, with one article stating: "Tensions are escalating around the Khyber mountain route,

¹¹ *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1879. – № 6, 8, 9, 11.

and trade routes are being shut down, negatively impacting commercial relations with India.”¹².

In conclusion, during the second half of the 19th century, Afghanistan became the focal point of geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian Empires. Both powers sought to control Afghanistan as a strategic buffer zone: Britain aimed to ensure the security of India, while Russia sought to expand and consolidate its influence in Central Asia. This rivalry culminated in the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880), after which Britain, through the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879, gained control over Afghanistan’s foreign policy.

However, the treaty sparked widespread discontent among the Afghan population, leading to a series of uprisings. Although Afghan rulers attempted to maintain a political balance between the two imperial powers, the country’s internal instability, tribal rivalries, and foreign interference prevented the establishment of an independent political course. The resulting humanitarian crisis, mass displacement of refugees, and economic isolation contributed significantly to the weakening of the Afghan state.

Russia, for its part, continued to pursue its influence through diplomatic and commercial channels. Russian perspectives were actively promoted through the *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*, which highlighted the political fragility of the Afghan leadership and often criticized their policy decisions. Border issues — particularly the Durand Line, the closure of trade routes along the Khyber Pass, and disputes around British forts in Quetta and Koshmoran — further complicated Afghanistan’s foreign relations and undermined its sovereignty.

By the end of the 19th century, Afghanistan had not only become a victim of imperial rivalry but also faced significant challenges in preserving its independence. The country’s complex geopolitical position subjected it to external pressure and internal fragmentation, forcing it to navigate a treacherous path between great power interests and its own national survival.

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¹² *Turkestanskije Vedomosti*. – 1880. – № 9

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