

Great Britain's Great Game: An Introduction

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man. (George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, Act III)

A state, like a class, has its moment in history and must make the best use of it. Failure to do so means premature decline and, perhaps, unnecessary poverty. Great Britain's moment came in the 1830s when, as the first industrialized state, she tried to create the conditions necessary for her stability as the first world power. That the attempt was a failure was shown by her defeat in the First Afghan War. The attempt is now known as the Great Game in Asia and it began one hundred and fifty years ago, on 12 January 1830, when the President of the Board of Control for India, Lord Ellenborough, told the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, to open up a new trade route to Bokhara.¹

If the Great Game is treated as the struggle for control of Central Asia, Halford Mackinder's Heartland, whose possessor was to dominate the world, the game is going on today. That is not how the subject should be treated, nor how it is treated in these articles, which offer a prophesy of the Great Game in Asia and an explanation of its consequences. The Great Game was an aspect of British history rather than international relations: the phrase describes what the British were doing, not the actions of Russians and Chinese. This accounts for the choice of books and articles made by Philip Amos. Although, as Beryl Williams illustrates, the Russians sometimes made the same calculations as the British, the Great Game must not be reduced to the absurdities of game theory or systemic analysis. The Game was an attempt made by the British in the 1830s to

¹ Secret committee to governor-general in council, 12 Jan. 1830, India Office Records, L/PS/5/543.

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impose a view on the world and, afterwards, to escape the repercussions of their failure.

The Great Game in Asia was an attempt to prevent the swing to the East from leading to the end of the Columbian Era. By the middle of the eighteenth century, sea power had meant wealth for almost four hundred years. The connection between the two reached its apogee in 1763, in the Peace of Paris at the end of the Seven Years' War, and so did the power of Great Britain. The British had driven the French out of North America and India; they had pried their way into the carrying trade of Asia and had brought off the commercial revolution on which the success of their industrial revolution would depend. Henceforth, the British looked East. They were not encouraged to do this by the loss of their American colonies. Europe and North America would always be the most important British markets, for both investment and the sale of manufactured goods. But the present is not the future, certainly not for the British, who have always treated the present as less important than the future and the past. The future for Great Britain was to be found, at any given moment, in Asia, where Chinese and Indians might one day buy everything they showed no inclination to buy in the early nineteenth century.

The most solid manifestation of the swing to the East was the empire in India conquered by the British between 1757, the date of Robert Clive's victory at the battle of Plassey, and the destruction of the Maratha Confederacy in 1818. The conquest of India would transform Great Britain as great power from a peripheral state in Europe, where Great Britain's own security and increasingly large and profitable overseas trade could be protected by a powerful navy, into a continental state in Asia with geographically and strategically unsatisfactory frontiers and whose foreign élite became more and more worried about the difficulty of keeping control. Their quest of security would entangle them in relations between near-eastern states, in whose affairs they otherwise had no interest, and it is this problem of how to defend India, rather than the solution to the problem tried out between 1830 and 1842, that is often mistakenly called the Great Game in Asia.

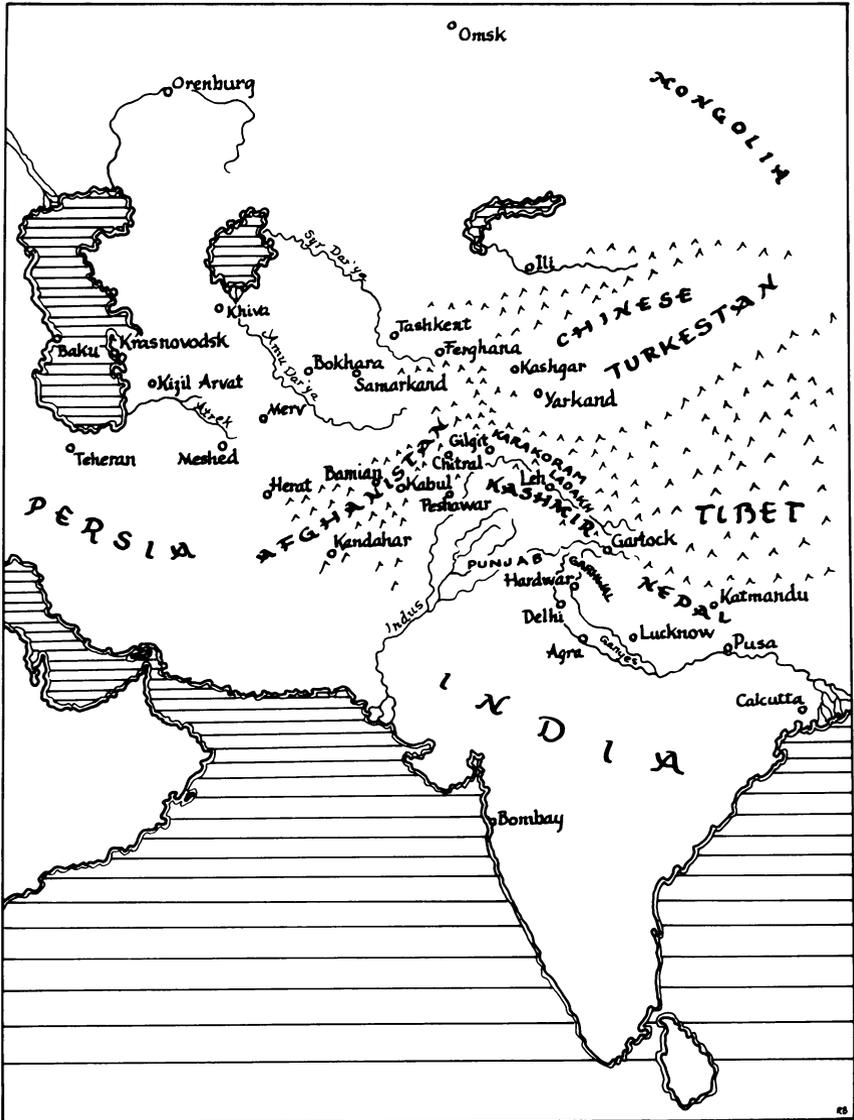
The alarm of the British about the security of their empire in India had its origin in an equivalent swing to the East on the continent of Europe. The pre-eminent power of France in the mid-eighteenth century, like the world power of Great Britain one hundred and fifty years later, depended on not having to choose between the defence of her overseas and her European interests. When the defeat of France in the Seven Years' War was followed by her loss of control over Poland, the fulcrum of the European balance of power began its gradual move eastwards from the Burgundian Circle to the Holy Alliance. Like all shifts in the European

balance of power, this was most clearly shown in the Near East. Despite, or perhaps because of, the aberration of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, whose significance historians of ideas tend to overestimate, the terms of the treaties of Münchengrätz in 1833 stand for recognition that the long-term future in early nineteenth-century Europe lay with Russia. Whereas the ideological imperialism of France would eventually destroy her, the partition of Turkey would make Russia invulnerable. This was one cause of the Crimean War.

As soon as Great Britain as great power was transformed by the conquest of India into a dual monarchy, her European enemies could give up the difficult task of invading the British Isles for the simpler task of creating a sphere of influence in the Near East. The danger feared by the British from European control over Turkey and Persia, for example, was not invasion but rebellion and bankruptcy. The British Government hated, and was not permitted, to spend money; the Government of India had no money to spend. To put down a rebellion while preparing to resist what might turn out to be only a feint at invasion, might use up its credit. Such fears depended upon a belief in the power of Islam, something people nowadays may not think far-fetched. If Turkey had been turned into a protectorate of France or, later on, Russia, an ideological lever could have been used against the British in India in the way the ideas of liberalism and nationalism were used to cause instability in the Austrian Empire. Or, if they were not, as Prince Metternich expected them to be.

This meant that British India would have to be defended, not only cheaply but far away. According to G.J. Alder, the Great Game in Asia began in British plans to resist the Franco-Russian invasion of India expected to follow the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807. Even if Alder is permitted to equate the Great Game with the defence of India, 1798 would have to be chosen instead of 1807 as its beginning. The British had been expecting a French attempt to drive them out of India since 1784 and interpreted Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt as an attempt to set up a forward base in the Near East. Even the most parochial Englishman realized that, despite the collapse of the Second Coalition, peace could not be made with France until the French army of occupation in Egypt had been driven out. Although this would do little to help re-establish the European balance of power, it was necessary for the stability of British India. Except that the British were entangled by their Egyptian expedition in the local politics of the Near East, their attempts to defend India in the nineteenth century by connections with the near-eastern states are better separated from the Great Game in Asia. The Great Game was planned as an offensive by which the British might escape the consequences of their military weakness.

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Central Asia

The British were not well equipped in the early nineteenth century to repulse an invasion of India, brush off a feint at invasion, or put down a rebellion. Even in their heyday, the British were never as powerful as they were rich because, in order to keep down the power and pretensions of

the state, they refused to keep up a large army. The existence of the British army had to be disguised in the early nineteenth century by scattering it in garrisons overseas. The Indian Army, made up of Indian troops commanded mostly by Scots, was large and on view – being on view was its most important duty – but was meant to serve as a paramilitary police force. Its task resembled the task given in England to the militia, volunteers commanded by gentlemen who saw to it that equality was never allowed to challenge liberty by an attack on private property. The Indian Empire was the most valuable piece of property owned by the British; so valuable that, unlike Canada, they never thought of trying to slough it off. The Indian Army was meant to keep it in order but, as the effectiveness of the army depended upon the prestige of the British, it was a symbol rather than an instrument of power. Both the First Afghan War and the Crimean War proved that the British were incapable of defending their empire in India by military means.

This did not surprise the British, although they were disappointed by it and had played the Great Game in Asia in the hope of avoiding such a disagreeable experience. The British were more surprised by the limited use they had been able to make of their sea power. In an age of sail, the navy could contribute little to the defence of British India except to monitor the sea lane around the Cape of Good Hope. In the war of the Second Coalition, the monsoons had made a blockade of the Red Sea difficult to keep up; the strength of the current through the Straits had contributed to the failure of the Dardanelles Expedition in 1807; during the First Mahomet Ali Crisis in 1832, the fleet was needed in Portugal and Belgium. Despite these failures, one origin of the Great Game in Asia was a dream of extending the range of sea power far inland. As Alder explains, one of William Moorcroft's most significant prophecies of the Game was the future he predicted for steamers. The best known were sent up the Euphrates to stand between Mahomet Ali and Mahmud IV; the most important were the ones never put into service on the Indus.

If the British had no army capable of fighting another European state, because nobody will mistake Wellington's excursions into Spain or the battle of Waterloo for victories over Napoleonic France, and if the navy could not guarantee to keep the French out of Egypt and Syria and do nothing to hold back the expansion of Russia in the Caucasus, the British would have to rely for the defence of British India upon their effortless superiority. Here is the origin of the Great Game in Asia. The first industrialized state and the first free society, in its own eyes naturally, was to take advantage of its superior technology, its steam power, its iron and its cotton goods to take over and develop the economy of Central Asia. And after British goods would follow British values, in particular, respect

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for private property. Given security for the just rewards of labour, nomads would settle and oasis cities surrounded by tribes of herdsmen would be turned into territorial states with agreed frontiers on the European model. The Great Game in Asia was partly, therefore, an attempt to draw lines on a map.

The Great Game was begun by Lord Ellenborough and the Duke of Wellington, but the goals to be reached and the methods of reaching them were then revised by Sir Henry Ellis, a member of the Board of Control for India in Earl Grey's administration from 1830 to 1834, who explained to the Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston, how to play. The Game was Great Britain's response to the Treaties of Turkmanchay in 1828 and Adrianople in 1829, which were seen by the British as steps towards the transformation of Persia and Turkey into protectorates of Russia. This interpretation of the treaties would change the British perception of their world. Although the British had fought hard against the French Revolution, they had never been particularly frightened of it: they were far more frightened by the Napoleonic Empire momentarily legitimized by the Treaty of Tilsit. Their need of Russian help in replacing empire by balance of power in the international system prevented their noticing until too late that the Russians, unlike the British, had stopped choosing in the Near East between the security of their empire and the maintenance of the European balance of power.

As soon as change in the Near East was perceived as threatening, as leading to contagious unrest, stability became the primary British goal in the area. The British did not plan to take control of the area themselves, but to prevent anybody else from taking control of it. This would require the creation of a zone of buffer states behind which would be created a second zone of protectorates. The buffer states were to be Turkey, Persia, and the territorial states based on Khiva and Bokhara that the British hoped would grow out of the expansion of their trade. The protected zone to be set up behind the buffer zone would stretch in a horseshoe from the Persian Gulf, up the Indus by way of Sind and the Punjab into Afghanistan. From Bir on the Euphrates opposite Aleppo round to Attock on the Indus opposite Peshawar, British sea power would provide security for the traders who were to push forward British goods and values and stamp the area with the Union Jack before the Russian Empire could get into it.

This vision determined the degree and type of interest taken by the British in the various parts of the Near East. Turkey was to be preserved as drawn on a map in 1829. What happened inside it was to be ignored, although the British hoped that the Sultan would build up an army large enough to keep his vassals in order and to police his frontier with Russia.

Although the British would not have wanted Russia to become a naval power in the Mediterranean and, therefore, preferred the Sultan to keep control of the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, they did not much care what happened to the Turkish Empire in the Balkans. Batum, Erzerum, Baghdad, Syria, Egypt: these were the areas needed to help separate Great Britain's Asiatic empire from the European balance of power. Adrian Preston explains how the determination of the British not to give up this policy during the Great Eastern Crisis led them to search for a site in the Near East which might indicate their ability, as well as their willingness, to defend Asiatic Turkey against Russia.

Persia, too, was to be drawn on a map. In the north-west she was to keep the frontier laid down by the Treaty of Turkmanchay. This should satisfy the Russians: they, after all, had laid it down. The danger zones in Persia were her northern and eastern frontiers. Either the northern frontier of Persia had to be drawn along the River Atrek, or be left undelineated until the transformation of Khiva and Bokhara should permit the partition of Transcaspia. In the east, Persia must be made to give up her claims to Herat. This decaying fortress in a once fertile valley at the western end of the Paropmisus Mountains had been selected with the islands of Kishim in the Persian Gulf and Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea to be the most western outposts of the British Empire in Asia.

Unlike Aden and Kishim, Herat cannot be reached from the sea. Its use would depend upon the transformation of Afghanistan from a group of trivial and warring principalities into one state ruled by a dependant of the Government of India, an ally whose foreign relations would be conducted on his behalf by the Governor-General and the Foreign Office. In the 1830s, the British thought they had found such a ruler in Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, a former Amir of Afghanistan who had been living as a pensioner of the British at Ludhiana since his overthrow in 1809. The First Afghan War began in a plan for providing the limited military support – and little was thought to be needed – necessary to put Shah Shuja back on the throne at Kabul and to help him take over Herat. In return for this help, Afghanistan would be thrown open to British trade and to the beneficial and stabilizing influence built into British goods.

Access to Afghanistan would be provided by the development of the Indus and Sutlej rivers as trade routes. Without unhindered access to Sind and the Punjab, nothing could be done. The Great Game in Asia therefore depended upon a closer connection between the British and the states along their North-West Frontier. Although the British did not want, and did not mean, to take over these states, they could no longer be permitted to change their relationships with one another. The rulers of Sind, the Punjab, and Afghanistan must live in harmony while encourag-

ing the British trade which was meant to destroy them by transforming their subjects into Asiatic copies of the new-model, self-reliant Englishman whom evangelicals and utilitarians admired. The Great Game in Asia began in the British attempt between 1832 and 1834 to negotiate commercial treaties with Ranjit Singh and the Amirs of Sind, and the first interruption of this magnificent British daydream was caused by the determination of the Amirs of Sind to be left alone.

If the failure of the British to win the Great Game in Asia was implicit in their disappointment with the Amirs of Sind, their actual failure resulted from their much more bitter disappointment with the Afghans. The British succeeded in 1839 in putting Shah Shuja back on the throne at Kabul. They could not keep him there. Probably, they could have done so; they had not expected to have to. He, as the agent of the higher things they represented, should have been welcomed. The rebellions in Afghanistan, the disastrous retreat from Kabul, and the punitive expedition sent in 1842 to avenge the national honour, were a prophesy of the dilemma in which the British would find themselves in Egypt after 1882. They did not want to be in Egypt; they wanted to find some Egyptians to whom to hand it over; but the Egyptians must be reasonable: they must realize that progress and the common interest meant paying one's debts. The British stayed put in Egypt. They pulled out of Afghanistan. By 1882, they had realized that Utopian visions may have to be imposed by force; or that one must hang on to what one needs, even if self-esteem compels one to pretend it is also for the good of others. And one should not underestimate the British Empire. It was good for others. Mahatma Gandhi said so.

The failure of the British in the First Afghan War to turn Afghanistan into a client state which could be developed along British lines meant that the Great Game in Asia could not be won. The British could not impose their own order on the Near East and would spend the rest of the century trying to prevent the Russians from doing in Turkestan what Great Britain had been unable to do and, when that proved impossible, trying to limit the consequences. This attempt to make sure that a Game which could not be won should not be lost, led the British in dizzying circles as they debated without resolution two propositions of which illustrations are given here by Beryl Williams, Adrian Preston, and Gordon Martel. If the British could not prevent the expansion of the Russian Empire into Turkestan, should they try to limit the effects of this by means of a connection with Persia, by a second attempt to turn Afghanistan into a protectorate, or by demonstrating Great Britain's ability to attack Russia all over the world? The last meant, in practice, in the Black Sea or hiding behind a continental ally.

The effects of Great Britain's failure to win the Great Game in Asia were

delayed for thirty years by the development of steam power in warships. This gave the British navy its last moment of strategic importance. Failure in Afghanistan had been accompanied by success in Turkey: the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi had been replaced by the Straits Settlement, Great Britain's interest in the preservation of Turkey had been shown to be a European interest, and when Russia seemed, in the conduct of her dispute with France over access to the Holy Places, to be trying to treat Turkey as a protectorate rather than a buffer state, her pretensions were resisted by force. They were not, however, resisted by Great Britain, who had ridden to the Crimea on the coat-tails of Austria and France. Despite this, the neutralization of the Black Sea gave the British the opportunity to return there whenever necessary. Until the Russians began to rebuild their Black Sea fleet in the years following the revocation of the Black Sea Clauses in 1870, the defence of India against Russia was left to the nationalist uprising in the Caucasus predicted to follow the landing of a few British troops. This was a copy of the uprisings on the continent on which the British had counted so often in the Napoleonic Wars and which had taken place nowhere except Spain.

The Crimean War must not be treated as a farce, nor as a war with no causes and no results. It was the only successful invasion of Russia in modern times and a whole theory of Indian defence, the Punjab School founded by Lord Lawrence on the principle of masterly inactivity, rested upon the assumption that limited military movements would have dramatic political consequences. Why else were the British so worried about the stability of India? The legacy of the Crimean War was the reason why the British were so unperturbed about the expansion of Russia in Turkestan, until the Russians moved into Transcaspia and the area inhabited by the Tekke-Turkomans along the northern frontier of Persia. Williams explains that one Russian interest in Central Asia was in a lever equivalent to the lever the British had formerly possessed in the Black Sea; and Preston adds that the British search for a base in the eastern Mediterranean during the Great Eastern Crisis was an attempt to continue an old and similar policy despite new circumstances.

By the 1870s, the British were on the defensive in Central Asia, reacting rather than taking initiatives, unable any longer to make local circumstances dovetail imperial needs. Even the Second Afghan War was a response, an attempt to prepare for, if not to forestall, the Russian annexation of Merv. Given the difficulty of forcing the Straits against Russian opposition and, after 1882, against opposition from the Sultan and the Three Emperors' League, the British debated for fifteen years, from the late 1870s until the early 1890s, whether they should instead defend India by an offensive in Central Asia. This would mean a choice between

Afghanistan and Persia. Sir Garnet Wolseley, according to Preston, chose Persia: his great rival, Sir Frederick Roberts, chose Afghanistan. Nothing new was said in the debate between them. Everything had already been said between 1798 and 1828, when the Persian Connection had been the orthodox strategy for the defence of British India. The Great Game in Asia was partly a response to the destruction of the Persian Connection by the Treaty of Turkmanchay.

Gordon Martel would have one believe that the debate between the theorists of the defence of India was irrelevant, because by the 1890s the Great Game in Asia had been relegated to a lower place in the scale of Great Britain's most vital interests. Frontier quarrels with Russia in Central Asia were to be patched up in order to demonstrate to Germany that the Franco-Russian Alliance was not directed against Great Britain. If it were not, the future was not as bleak for Great Britain as the Germans were trying to prove and Great Britain need not respond to pressure from Germany to join the Triple Alliance. One can sympathize with the Germans about this. They were telling the truth, except that, in the short run, the danger to Great Britain would come from them not from Russia and, by their own actions in the Moroccan Crisis, they proved it. This would drag the British into the First World War. As soon as the states with access to the Near East were revisionist not legitimist, the British were bound to take part in a European war. They fought the First World War for the reason they had fought the Crimean War, because they had failed to win the Great Game in Asia.

The First World War seemed to be a great victory for Great Britain. If one looked at the pink blotches on the world map in 1919, never had the British Empire been larger and seemed more secure. The states threatening the European balance of power and the stability of British India had both been destroyed. So, unfortunately, had Great Britain. The state that came out of the First World War was not the state that went into it. The introduction of conscription was the surrender of liberty to equality, against which Great Britain had struggled one hundred and fifty years earlier for almost twenty-five years. Nor was the British Empire that came out the one that went in. Owing to the price of the victory and the principles by which the terms of peace were to be justified, there was unrest everywhere in the Empire. The British had neither the strength nor the will to continue to play the part of the leading world power while, and perhaps by, repressing demands for self-rule.

In his account of the British in Transcaucasia, John D. Rose exposes most cruelly this difference between appearance and reality. The Foreign Office, headed by two former Viceroys of India, saw that the Great Game in Asia seemed to have been won after all. British troops were at Constan-

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tinople, at Batum, at Baku: Russia was in turmoil. Surely it should be possible to draw new lines around new buffer states to stand between Russia and the recreated British protectorate in Persia? The partition of Germany and the recreation of Poland seemed to be taking Europe back to the mid-eighteenth century and the pre-eminence on the continent of France. The partition of Turkey and the Russian Empire in the Near East ought to do the same for Great Britain. Lord Curzon and Lord Hardinge had found in Batum the forward base from which the British might manage, by the use of sea power and without a continental commitment, to maintain the stability of the new buffer states they hoped to create. If the opportunity were not taken, the British Empire would collapse.

Curzon and Hardinge were right. The British Empire did collapse: it turned into *H.M.S. Hood* and the Prince of Wales. This gap between appearance and reality was not all British self-deception. The adjustment of the British to decline was so uncomfortable partly because it was so long delayed by others. In the twentieth century, the international system made too heavy demands on the British. They had tried for the last time in 1915 to defend their empire and help maintain the European balance of power without having to choose between them. The failure of the Dardanelles Expedition led to the horrors and exhaustion of the Western Front. By 1919, the British were too tired and too poor to risk war with Turkey and Russia in an attempt to reverse their failure to stabilize the British Empire in 1842. To protect it from the effects of fluctuation in the European balance of power had been the purpose of playing the Great Game in Asia. And the British had lost.

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