

The Great Game



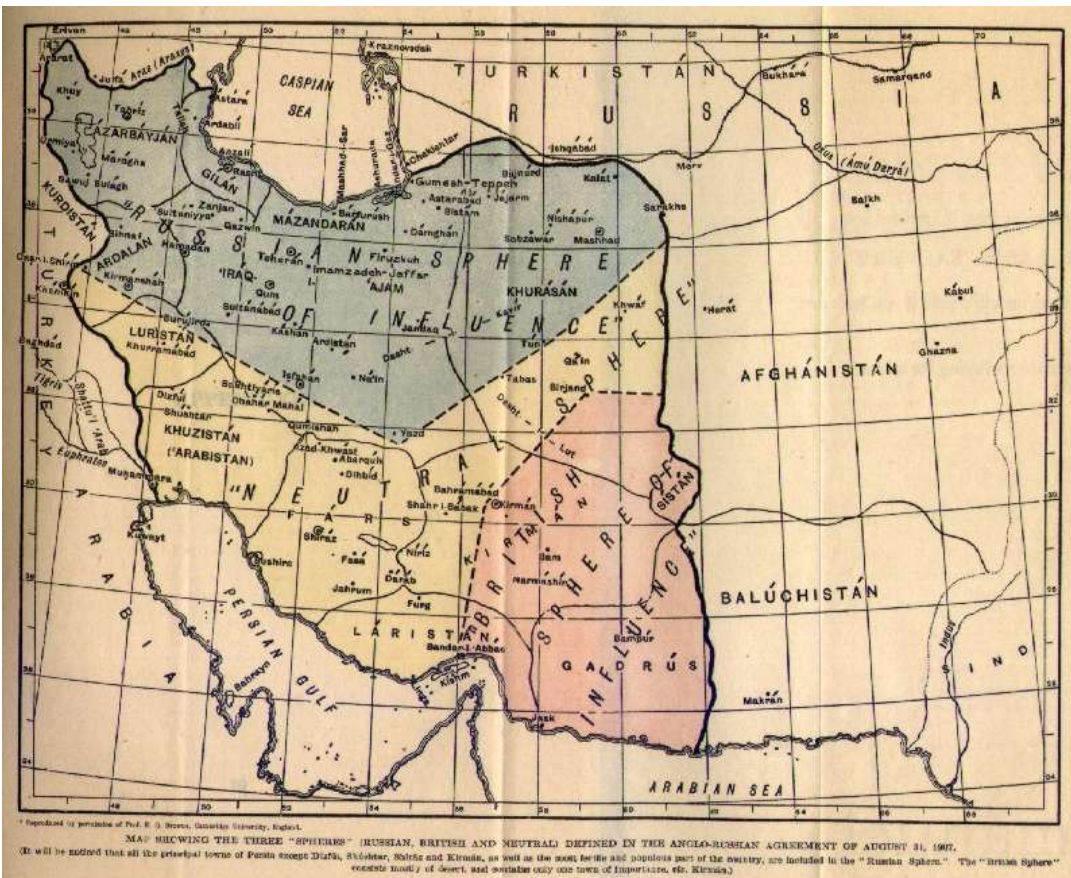
This map, published in 1885, shows Afghanistan's relation to British and Russian territories.

The Great Game was a 19th-century geopolitical and diplomatic confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia.

- **The “Crown Jewel” of the British Empire during the 17th-20th centuries was India.** As Russia expanded and consolidated its rule over much of the Asian continent, especially as they began to build a railway linking its vast landmass (1891-1916), the British feared that Russian expansion south through Central Asia would eventually lead to an invasion of the Indian subcontinent.
- **Afghanistan and Persia became strategic buffer states,** used by Britain to protect British India from potential Russian invasion.
 - Afghanistan has long been a crossroads of empires, ruled at different times by the Persians (under Darius), Alexander the Great, and later regional powers.



- A modern Afghan state began forming in the 18th century under Ahmad Shah Durrani, who expanded Afghan territory into India.
- First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–1842): Britain invaded Afghanistan fearing Russian influence. The British suffered defeat, and Afghan ruler Dost Mohammad Khan eventually returned to power.
- Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880): Triggered by Afghan acceptance of a Russian diplomatic mission and rejection of a British one. Ended with the Treaty of Gandamak, giving Britain influence over Afghan foreign policy.
- Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919): Initiated by Amanullah Khan after the assassination of his father. Resulted in full Afghan control over its foreign affairs after August 8, 1919.
- Russia continued advancing southward, heightening British anxiety. **Anglo-Russian agreements** attempted to stabilize the region including the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) dividing spheres of influence.



Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) designated North Persia (including Tehran) as a Russian sphere of influence and South Persia as a British sphere, creating a neutral buffer zone.



The Durand Line

- In 1893, Afghan leader Abdur Rahman Khan and British official Sir Mortimer Durand established the Durand Line – the border between Afghanistan and British India (today, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan).
 - This border split Pashtun communities and remains a source of tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

Russian Influence in Persia

- Throughout the 19th century Russia gained dominant influence over Iran and, through a policy of “informal support” for the weakened Persian Qajar dynasty, maintained this dominance for nearly a century.
 - The Persian monarchy became largely symbolic and financially dependent on British and Russian loans. Russian diplomats emerged as major powerbrokers, and Russian officers shaped Iran’s military modernization—most notably through the Russian-led Cossack Brigade formed in 1879, which reinforced the monarchy’s claims to legitimacy through military strength.
 - By the late 19th century, Russian personnel held significant sway at the Shah’s court. Although both Russia and Britain invested in Iran’s infrastructure to expand their influence, intense Great Game rivalry prior to 1907 led each to block the other’s initiatives, ultimately preventing railroad construction in Persia.



Persian Cossacks, some time after 1876



- Russia's Tsar Nicholas II was a staunch supporter of the Persian Shah against revolutionaries who were demanding constitutional reforms – the Tsar sent both regular Russian troops and the Persian Cossacks.
- Failing to fully suppress the Persian Constitutional Revolution or keep Muhammad Ali Shah in power, the constitutional reforms were put in place against Russia's wishes, though the Cossack Brigade remained a major factor.
 - An Iranian former Cossack, Reza Shah, overthrew the Qajar dynasty and established the **Pahlavi dynasty**.

