

New Book – Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, Written by Matteo Miele

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MATTEO MIELE, AUG 9 2022

This is a preprint excerpt from *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911–1916*, by Matteo Miele. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The signing of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 is generally regarded as the end of the Great Game.^[1] In St. Petersburg, the British and the Russians defined the geopolitical role of Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet, the three main arenas in which the two empires had challenged each other for decades. Persia was divided into three areas. The Russian sphere of influence lay in the north, the British sphere was in the south-east, and the rest of the country remained open to the interests of both. Afghanistan remained a British protectorate. The suzerainty of the Ch'ing dynasty was recognized over Tibet. Both European powers would not interfere in internal administration, nor would they send their own representatives to Lhasa or request concessions in the country. Therefore, the Land of the Snows had to remain out of the appetites of London and St. Petersburg; it was the third geographical bastion of the Raj, but under the protection of a Manchu power in agony.

This is the geopolitical framework that was to resolve that confrontation that had begun in the first half of the nineteenth century and which had involved epic feats, military campaigns, massacres and fantasies, engulfing men and women in the dust and snow of Asia. The summer of 1907 was to put an end to the fears and obsessions that had swept through British India for almost a century. Geoffrey Wheeler in his *Epilogue* to Gerald Morgan's text, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia: 1810–1895*, writes that:

From the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 to the revolution of 1917 the Russian menace to India was virtually forgotten; but after the Conference of Eastern Peoples held in Baku in 1920, it reappeared in a new form – that of Communism.^[2]

This view^[3] remains a decidedly optimistic interpretation, when compared with other authors less inclined to move the resumption of confrontation so much later into the twentieth century.^[4] In particular, the work of Jennifer Siegel is based on a different interpretative line; analyzing the overall picture of Anglo-Russian relations in Asia after 1907, she comes to hypothesize that there was a risk of a military clash between the two empires, which was then averted only because of the First World War.^[5]

The work at hand essentially focuses on a part of the renewed confrontation between the two empires between the 1907 and the 1917 revolutions: that of the geopolitical consequences of 1911 Mongolian independence. The primary region on which the research focuses is High Asia. It is evident that the Chinese Revolution triggered again the complexities of the Anglo-Russian relationship in the region, at least on the diplomatic table. The breaking of the secular ties of the Manchu dynasty with Mongolia and Tibet moved the latter outside the framework in which it had been formally located four years earlier. On the throne of Urga sat a monk, Tibetan by birth. The close historical and cultural link between the two Buddhist countries became the key that could open the doors of Lhasa to the Russians. Russia was Mongolia's great ally, and on 3 November 3, 1912, the two countries signed an agreement of friendship

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and trade. The treaty between Tibet and Mongolia – with which the two countries recognized their full independence from China and guaranteed mutual aid from external and internal threats – was signed a few weeks later, in January 1913. In the same days a Mongol delegation went to the Russian capital. Mongolian monks and, perhaps, Russian weapons were moving towards Tibet. This work, therefore, aims to analyze the perspective of the British Empire with respect to the consequences of these profound political-international changes, thus following the traces of the birth of the modern independent Mongolian state. The institutional and geopolitical transformations initiated by the Hsin-hai Revolution in High Asia outlined the need and the opportunity for London to redefine its relationship with Lhasa as a barrier to the risks deriving from the Russo-Mongol alliance.

The first chapter, therefore, goes into the details of the – according to the traditional view – final phase of the Great Game. The role played by Tibet within the Anglo-Russian challenge is presented, as well as the British Expedition of 1903-1904 with the arrival of Younghusband in Lhasa and the flight of the Dalai Lama first to Mongolia and then to Peking. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 31 August 1907 is then presented in detail, as well as the difficulties and mistrust that had been a prelude to it, despite the downsizing of the Russian threat after the defeat in the recent war with Japan. Part of the chapter is dedicated to Bhutan, the Himalayan country, culturally linked to Tibet. In 1907 Bhutan became a hereditary monarchy under the Dbang-phyug dynasty. Sir O-rgyan-dbang-phyug – who in 1905 had been awarded the Order of the Indian Empire – ascended the throne. Three years later, in 1910, with the Treaty of Punakha, the Bhutanese accepted British guidance in their foreign policy. The last part of the chapter introduces readers to the historical relationship between the Manchu dynasty and Tibet.

The second chapter starts with the Hsin-hai Revolution of 1911 and the birth of the Republic of China on January 1, 1912, and the abdication of P'u-i, the child emperor. The second and last part of the chapter is dedicated to the Tibetan declaration of independence of 1913.

The third chapter enters more carefully into the discourse at the center of this book. If the first two chapters served in part to introduce the historical context preceding and contemporary to the events studied, this chapter is in fact dedicated to the Mongolian independence declared in December 1911. The geopolitical consequences of this event for British interests in Asia – only apparently marginal in the context of the history of the British Empire – are the reference point on which the work orbits. A rapid historical reconstruction of relations between Russians and Mongols in modern and contemporary times up to the months following independence is presented. The Russo-Mongol Agreement of November 3, 1912 is therefore analyzed in detail. A few weeks later, in January 1913, a Mongolian delegation arrived in St. Petersburg, on the same days in which, as explained, the Tibetan-Mongol treaty was signed. Furthermore, in February, a Tibetan delegation also arrived in the Russian capital.

The fourth chapter continues with the political and geopolitical consequences of Mongolian independence, starting with the Russo-Chinese Agreement of November 5, 1913 by which Peking recognized the internal autonomy, including in commercial and industrial matters, of Outer Mongolia. For the British, the events described in the previous chapters became evident signs of the need to redefine what was established in 1907.

The fifth chapter is therefore dedicated to the long negotiation undertaken, on behalf of Sir Edward Grey, by the British ambassador in St. Petersburg, George Buchanan with the Foreign Minister of the Russian Empire Sergey Sazonov. The negotiation moved almost parallel to the discussions undertaken in Simla by the British, Tibetans and Chinese and which would later lead to the Simla Convention of July 3, 1914, signed by the Tibetans and the British, but repudiated by the Chinese. Buchanan's work in the Russian capital was long and complex. As I will explain, it unfolded on several levels, overlapping the secret negotiations – which had to remain as such in order to avoid wider crises with the other countries involved – on the internal and public political needs. The negotiations in St. Petersburg had to be reconciled in time and content with the negotiations in Simla and could not compromise the other results obtained with the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, in particular with respect to Afghanistan which remained at the center of the Tsar's geopolitical attentions. The discussions fluctuated in the political and commercial spheres; the economic damage suffered by the British in the new Mongolian state – due to the support that Urga enjoyed from St. Petersburg – were underlined to ease Russian claims. A few weeks after the signing of the Simla Convention, however, the First World War broke out, thus putting Central Asian differences in the background, while not completely extinguishing them.

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The sixth chapter analyzes the British perspective with respect to the Russo-Mongol Agreement of 30 September 1914 in Kyakhta and the agreement signed in the same town on June 7, 1915, between the Russians, Mongols and Chinese. The chapter ends with 1916, the year before the February and October Revolutions and the fall of the Russian Empire. In January 1916, the Chinese had signed another agreement with the Mongols and Russians in Urga that transferred the Haalgan-Urga-Kyakhta telegraph line to the Mongolian government. In the same year, the Tibetans had expressed their willingness to purchase machine guns from Japan through the Japanese consul in Calcutta. The question could have been the opportunity to send an agent to Lhasa to discuss the issue. This possibility was contemplated by the Simla Convention and had been discussed in the negotiations between Buchanan and Sazanov, when the British agreed to have to request and obtain Russian consent on the matter. As will be seen, Grey preferred to avoid opening new issues with the Russians and Japanese in the midst of the world conflict.

The conclusions are a quick attempt to read the events described in a broader framework, within the history of East and Central Asia in the twentieth century in order to define more clearly the geopolitical – and not only political – dimension of Tibet and Mongolia.

Almost all the primary sources used in this work are British archival documents kept at The National Archives (London, Kew) and to a lesser extent at the British Library (London). The British perspective is at the heart of this work. In this way I want to present the point of view of a government that was certainly directly involved in the events relating to the independence of Tibet and Mongolia, but more distant on an ideological and cultural level than the current debate on the Tibetan question. Although a certain attention has been given by historiography to the relationship between Tibetans and the British in the years described, using the perspective of Mongolian independence within the framework of the interests of the British Empire in Asia can provide further elements for academic discussion. With this work I have no pretensions to cross over into other subjects such as political science. This is a history book. There are no theoretical claims and the same conclusions as mentioned are only a way to propose a more extensive historical and geopolitical location of the events described and at the same time an invitation to further reflection and research on the matter.

[1] See S. C. BAILEY, 'Great Game', in: *Encyclopedia of the Age of Imperialism, 1800-1914*, edited by C. C. Hodge, Westport, Connecticut – London 2008.

[2] G. WHEELER, *Epilogue*, in: G. MORGAN, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia: 1810-1895*, London 1981, p. 220.

[3] On this interpretation see also R. JOHNSON, *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South Asia, 1757-1947*, London 2006.

[4] See for example I. KLEIN, *The Anglo-Russian Convention and the Problem of Central Asia, 1907-1914*, in: *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Nov., 1971), pp. 126-147.

[5] J. SIEGEL, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, New York 2002.

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