

The Forward Policy and Central Asia

① Mark Twain once quipped, “History does not repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.” The history of Central Asia is a perfect case in point. From the 3rd century B.C. to the present day, nations have vied for power and influence in a region that spans the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, the mountains of western Pakistan, the Russian steppes to the north, and the Arabian Sea to the south. In this vast and strategically vital region, the world's greatest conquerors have strutted across the pages of history, filling their coffers with the spoils of war.

② In ancient times, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and the Turkish leader Timur made Central Asia their imperial domain. In the 19th century, the land was coveted by Napoleon, and then became a “playing field” for the so-called Great Game between Britain and Russia that lasted a hundred years. In

the mid-20th century, Soviet and American cold warriors jockeyed for power and influence in Central Asia until the fall of the USSR in 1991 gave hope that great-power rivalries were a thing of the past. Barely a decade later, however, Russia, America, China, and the EU were once again vying for privileged access to the area's rich oil and natural gas deposits. Today, as in centuries past, the politics of the region are a “bloody muddle,” according to journalist and historian Karl Meyer. In his book *Tournament of Shadows*, Meyer argues that the misguided meddling of outsiders exacerbates the complicated and violent rivalries in the region.

③ Interventions in Central Asia by the world's major powers have often been justified as necessary preemptive reactions to perceived security risks. As part of the Great Game, British leaders adopted a “forward policy,”

fearing that their imperial hold on India was threatened by the possibility of a Russian invasion from the north. To prevent such an attack, officials in London and New Delhi became determined to control the northern approaches to the subcontinent. These areas beyond the frontier were broad, blank spaces on 19th-century maps—a vast uncharted area of 1.5 million square miles. Convinced that it was imperative to know what lay just beyond the empire's border, the British viceroy of India sanctioned exploratory missions by pundits (native Indian explorers), who could blend in with the local populations and escape detection. The pundits' mission was to map Central Asian terrain clandestinely and gather intelligence data for Britain. While their accomplishments were remarkable, providing a wealth of information about the climate, topography,

and cultures of Central Asia, many pundits paid a high price, dying of exposure, being killed as spies, or being enslaved by hostile tribesmen. Few of them were ever publicly recognized or honored for their sacrifices on behalf of the British Empire.

④ Recent literature on the Great Game reveals differing views regarding the motivation behind Britain's forward policy, as well as how justified it appears in retrospect. British writer Peter Hopkirk, author of *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, has written sympathetically about Britain's forward policy in the century leading up to World War I, arguing that “the Russian threat to India seemed real enough at the time. The evidence was there for anyone who chose to look at the map.” For this reason, nearly every British leader of the age accepted the policy as conventional wisdom.

⑤ In *Tournament of Shadows*, Meyer also acknowledges that Britain's forward policy was popular, albeit not unanimously so. However, in contrast to Hopkirk's view that the policy was a matter of survival for the British Empire in India, Meyer contends that it was based on the hubris of the British government and reflected an unfounded optimism about the West's ability to reshape Muslim societies in Central Asia. While Hopkirk's focus on affairs of state elicits the difficulties of policymakers when dealing with the complexities of foreign cultures and their intricate politics, Meyer emphasizes the problems associated with the excessive pride and enthusiasm of the pundits who worked in the service of the British Empire: “The young were driven by both ambition and belief in the righteousness of their cause; their elders were often possessed by half-examined ideas and a determina-

tion not to appear weak.” The cumulative effect of what Meyer sees as the arrogance of British leaders and the misjudgment of the pundits was more often than not disastrous, leading to two ill-conceived British invasions of Afghanistan within a 35-year period, both of which ended in ignominious defeat.

⑥ Toward the end of the 19th century, Russian leaders grew preoccupied with internal revolts and imperialist threats from both the east and west, while Britain became involved in an intensive arms race with Germany. With the attention of policymakers in London and St. Petersburg diverted, the Great Game between Britain and Russia drew to an end. Afghanistan and the areas beyond the northern frontier remained ungovernable, and by 1900 most British imperialists had conceded that the forward policy in Central Asia had been a failure.

(38) According to the author of the passage, why does Central Asia provide a good example of the way history “rhymes”?

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- 1 From ancient times, all of the great leaders who have invaded the region ended up making the same mistakes as their predecessors.
- ② Over a large part of its history, there has been a similar pattern of outsiders attempting to exert their control over and profit from the region.
- 3 Throughout history, the numerous attempts by invaders to conquer the region have all failed due to the hostile and inaccessible nature of the landscape.
- 4 The complexity of the current political situation in the region stems from a historical rivalry between two major ruling powers that resurfaced in modern times.

(39) Why did 19th-century British officials become anxious to learn more about Central Asia?

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- 1 They felt that it was necessary to gather as much intelligence as possible in order for the planned attack on Russia to have the greatest chance of success.
- 2 They were in desperate need of accurate maps that would allow native explorers to be sent into the region without fear of them entering tribally controlled areas illegally.
- 3 They hoped the area to the north could provide the valuable natural resources that were necessary to allow British rule in India to be sustained.
- ④ They believed that without extensive knowledge of the region it would be impossible to defend the British Empire successfully.

(40) What is one way in which Peter Hopkirk and Karl Meyer interpret Britain's “forward policy” differently?

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- 1 Hopkirk stresses that there was a need to reform Muslim countries, while Meyer emphasizes the desire British leaders had to maintain peace in the region.
- ② Hopkirk argues that the British really believed Russia posed a risk to security, while Meyer sees the policy as merely a demonstration of the overconfidence of British imperial leaders.
- 3 Hopkirk regards the policy as an unfair one that failed to treat Central Asian societies with respect, while Meyer believes Britain was right to ignore local customs for the sake of the British Empire.
- 4 Hopkirk believes the policy was destined to fail due to poor decision making, while Meyer believes British leaders should have had more faith in the information they received from the pundits.

(41) What was the main reason the Great Game came to an end?

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- ① Both Britain and Russia had no choice but to focus their time and resources on more pressing security issues that were occurring closer to home.
- 2 Joint attempts to stabilize the region failed and fierce resistance from local people led Britain and Russia to reassess the benefits of continuing their campaigns.
- 3 Policymakers in London concluded that the only way to deal with Russia and take control of Central Asia was by direct military engagement.
- 4 Britain and Russia finally tired of competing in an arms race with Germany that was proving both futile and expensive for all involved.