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Information and Empire in Central Asia: Anglo-Russian Rivalry and the Making of an Imperial Information Order, 1834–1908

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ABSTRACT

The Great Game is conventionally understood as a geopolitical rivalry between the Russian and British Empires over Central Asia. This article reinterprets it as an asymmetrical struggle over the production, circulation, and governance of information. It examines primary materials reproduced in fifteen volumes of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* (*Turkestan Collection*), a curated multivolume compilation of printed material, including newspapers, travel narratives, parliamentary debates, military journals, economic studies, maps, and diplomatic publications dating from the 1830s to 1908. Combining historical source analysis with comparative discourse analysis, the study distinguishes five overlapping phases: exploratory intelligence and geographical knowledge (1834–1864); territorial expansion and mediated rivalry (1865–1873); intensified newspaper and expert competition (1874–1885); commercial, cartographic, and infrastructural consolidation (1886–1906); and the post-Convention reorientation towards information governance (1907–1908). The comparison does not treat Britain and Russia as equivalent imperial formations. British practices were shaped principally by the defence of India, maritime reach, indirect frontier management, and liberal-commercial claims, whereas Russian practices accompanied contiguous conquest, administrative incorporation, state-sponsored commerce, and settler-colonial projects. The article develops the concept of an imperial information order to describe the contested relations among media, knowledge practices, infrastructures, and institutions through which Central Asia was rendered strategically knowable and politically governable. It thereby connects the history of the Great Game to comparative imperial history while demonstrating that common media forms could serve substantially different imperial projects.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-Russian rivalry; Central Asia; Great Game; imperial information order; imperial knowledge; *Turkestanskii sbornik*

Introduction

The nineteenth-century Great Game has usually been narrated as a geopolitical contest between the Russian and British Empires over Central Asia and the northern approaches to British India. Foundational narratives emphasise exploration, frontier diplomacy, military planning, and the balance of power, while more recent work has reconstructed the rivalry through multilingual state, military, diplomatic, and journalistic evidence.¹ Sergeev's account of 1856–1907 is especially important because it places Russo-British competition within changing Asian and European contexts, whereas Meyer and Brysac offer a broad narrative of the agents, routes, and encounters through which the contest was conducted.² Yet imperial rivalry also depended on a less visible struggle to make distant territories knowable. Travellers, diplomats, military officers, merchants, editors, translators, and geographical specialists collected and circulated accounts of routes, populations, markets, political loyalties, and strategic risks. These communicative practices did more than support imperial policy: they produced the categories and narratives through which Central Asia became intelligible as an object of geopolitical intervention.

Histories of communication and empire provide the conceptual basis for reconsidering this process. Imperial authority relied on systems for acquiring, classifying, transmitting, and authorising knowledge, while communications technologies and transport networks altered the spatial and temporal conditions under which such knowledge circulated.³ Colonial knowledge was not a neutral accumulation of facts. It was produced through institutional practices that classified populations, organised territory, established expert authority, and converted representation into a technique of rule.⁴ Newspapers, travel narratives, maps, parliamentary debates, military journals, and commercial reports should therefore be understood not merely as sources describing imperial rivalry but as media through which imperial space and political legitimacy were actively constructed.

Despite these advances, the historiography of the Great Game has rarely examined Anglo-Russian rivalry as a struggle over the authority to produce, circulate, and institutionalise knowledge about Central Asia. Existing studies have illuminated Russian conquest, British frontier policy, diplomacy, exploration, and military planning, but have devoted less attention to the processes through which observations, translations, maps, newspaper reports, commercial studies, and expert publications acquired political authority across imperial boundaries. The resulting gap is not an absence of information in Great Game historiography, but an insufficient explanation of how heterogeneous forms of knowledge helped constitute Central Asia as an object of imperial strategy and governance.

This article addresses that problem through the *Turkestanskii sbornik* (*Turkestan Collection*), a unique 594-volume curated compilation whose production

extended, discontinuously, from the late 1860s to 1939. The collection brought together books, newspaper articles, parliamentary reports, travel accounts, military studies, economic publications, maps, and diplomatic materials produced in different imperial and linguistic settings. Fifteen selected volumes – 31, 37, 38, 44, 47, 74, 75, 93, 381, 397, 401, 414, 416, 447, and 453 – provide a longitudinal corpus extending from nineteenth-century exploration to the public interpretation of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. The collection is analytically important not because it transparently preserves an entire imperial communication system, but because its acts of selection, reproduction, translation, and juxtaposition reveal how knowledge produced across rival information environments was reassembled within Russian Turkestan.

To make historical change explicit, the article first distinguishes five overlapping phases of rivalry: exploratory intelligence and geographical knowledge (1834–1864); territorial expansion and mediated rivalry (1865–1873); intensified newspaper and expert competition (1874–1885); commercial, cartographic, and infrastructural consolidation (1886–1906); and the post-Convention reorientation towards information governance (1907–1908). Within these phases, the analysis reconstructs seven analytically distinguishable configurations: information gathering and knowledge production; the emergence of media rivalry; newspaper-based information competition; expert communication and strategic narrative; economic and frontier journalism; cartographic, military, and infrastructural communication; and the post-1907 turn towards information governance. These configurations should not be understood as a rigid succession in which one medium displaced another. Travel, translation, intelligence gathering, journalism, cartography, and diplomatic communication overlapped throughout the period. The staged structure is instead used to identify changes in the dominant functions assigned to information – from reducing uncertainty and contesting interpretation to legitimising and administering an emerging imperial settlement.

The article asks two related questions. First, how did different media forms transform observations about Central Asia into strategically authoritative knowledge? Second, how did the circulation and reuse of that knowledge contribute to the formation of an imperial information order before and after the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907?

I use the term **imperial information order** to denote the historically situated relations among media forms, knowledge-producing practices, communication infrastructures, and institutions that enabled imperial actors to define strategic problems, authorise particular interpretations, and organise political space. An information order is therefore more than a collection of texts or a system for transmitting facts. It establishes who can produce credible knowledge, which representations become politically consequential, how information travels between institutions and publics, and how communication contributes to governance.

The article makes three contributions to the history of empire. Empirically, it introduces selected volumes of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* as an underused multilingual documentary corpus of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Conceptually, it develops the idea of an imperial information order to explain how knowledge production, translation, print circulation, infrastructure, and administrative authority operated together in Central Asia. Methodologically, it demonstrates how an imperial compilation can be studied not simply as a repository of evidence but as an instrument through which foreign and domestic knowledge was selected, reorganised, and incorporated into the political world of Russian Turkestan.

Historiography, Asymmetrical Empires, and the Great Game

The concept of the Great Game used here is neither a synonym for every British–Russian encounter in Asia nor a claim that two equivalent empires competed by identical means. Sergeev treats the rivalry between 1856 and 1907 as a changing field of diplomatic, military, economic, and intelligence interaction extending across Central and East Asia; Meyer and Brysac emphasise the longer history of exploration, covert agency, and the race for influence.⁵ These accounts clarify the geopolitical chronology, but the present study asks a different question: how did diverse observations acquire authority as public, expert, military, commercial, and administrative knowledge?

That question requires comparison without equivalence. Britain's position derived from a global maritime empire centred regionally on the defence of India. British information practices therefore privileged routes to India, buffer territories, frontier intelligence, diplomatic influence, and the language of commerce and open markets. Russia advanced through territorial contiguity. Its military conquest was followed by provincial administration, state-supported transport and trade, agricultural and settler projects, and the incorporation of Central Asian space into imperial institutions. The contrast can also be situated within different political economies, confessional traditions, and relationships between state and society: Anglican-Protestant, liberal-commercial claims had a different public vocabulary from Orthodox, autocratic, and state-patronage projects. These distinctions should not be converted into a civilisational binary. British rule also relied on coercion, monopoly, and racial hierarchy, while Russian policy combined market activity and local brokerage with military-administrative power. The historically useful point is that similar media forms – surveys, newspapers, maps, expert reports, and transport schemes – performed different functions within different imperial formations.⁶

Russian and Uzbek scholarship is indispensable to this comparison. Kasymova's monograph remains a central study of the composition, institutional history, and research value of the *Turkestanskii sbornik*.⁷ It shifts attention from the collection as a passive store of texts to the changing purposes and

labour of compilation. This perspective supports, but also disciplines, the argument advanced here: the collection may be analysed as an act of imperial mediation, yet it should not be misdescribed as a conventional state archive or treated as a transparent record of all contemporary communication.

Information, Knowledge, and Imperial Rule

The concept of an imperial information order developed in this article draws together four bodies of scholarship that are usually discussed separately. The first concerns the relationship between empire and information. Bayly⁸ demonstrates that imperial expansion depended on the appropriation and restructuring of existing information networks, while Headrick⁹ shows how transport and communication technologies expanded the administrative and military reach of European empires. Information did not simply flow from metropolitan institutions towards passive peripheries. It was gathered through encounters with merchants, interpreters, guides, local elites, political intermediaries, and previously established regional networks.

The second body of scholarship concerns colonial knowledge. Cohn¹⁰ explains how investigative practices such as surveys, classifications, historiography, and enumeration transformed knowledge into an instrument of colonial authority. Foucault's¹¹ account of power/knowledge similarly emphasises that systems of representation do not merely describe their objects but help constitute them as fields of intervention. Stoler¹² extends this insight to colonial archives, treating them as active epistemic technologies rather than neutral repositories. From this perspective, the *Turkestanskii sbornik* is significant not only for the information it preserves but also for the practices of selection, translation, and arrangement through which heterogeneous publications were incorporated into an imperial archive.

Third, media circulation gave imperial knowledge public and transnational mobility. Newspapers and periodicals selected events, connected geographically dispersed developments, and organised them within recognisable narratives of danger, civilisation, commerce, and legitimacy. Strategic narratives make political environments intelligible by configuring actors, conflicts, and anticipated outcomes within coherent accounts.¹³ In the context of the Great Game, narrative authority therefore depended not only on access to information but also on the capacity to translate geographical observation, diplomatic uncertainty, and local political developments into persuasive accounts of imperial security.

Finally, information governance directs attention to the institutional consequences of communication. Braman¹⁴ defines information policy broadly as the practices through which states shape the production, circulation, and use of information. Applied historically, governance does not imply a centralised or technologically unified system. It refers here to the gradual coordination of knowledge, infrastructure, expert authority, and public explanation through

which imperial relationships became more predictable and administratively manageable. The ‘order’ reconstructed in this article was consequently uneven, contested, and dependent on older communication practices. Its historical importance lies precisely in the coexistence of travel writing, newspapers, maps, military expertise, commercial reporting, railways, and diplomatic discourse within a shared struggle to define and govern Central Asian space.

The *Turkesterskii Sbornik* as a Curated Documentary Compilation

The history of the *Turkesterskii sbornik* was discontinuous and its institutional purpose changed over time. Initiated under the first governor-general of Russian Turkestan, K. P. von Kaufman, and compiled in its first major phase by the bibliographer V. I. Mezhev, it was conceived as a practical compendium of knowledge about Central Asia for the new colonial administration. Volumes 1–416 were assembled during the initial phase ending in 1887. Compilation then ceased for approximately twenty years and resumed in Tashkent in 1907 under new institutional conditions and with altered criteria of selection. Work continued through the late imperial period; the final three volumes, 592–594, were added in 1939 under E. K. Betger’s editorial supervision.¹⁵ The resulting 594 volumes are therefore not the product of a single, unchanged editorial programme.

This layered history matters methodologically. The fifteen volumes analysed below belong to different moments in the collection’s development and preserve publications originally produced in different countries, languages, and institutional environments. Selection, clipping, translation, binding, and later continuation made the compilation itself a historically situated form of mediation. Accordingly, this article refers to the *Turkesterskii sbornik* as a curated documentary compilation or corpus, not as a historical archive in the strict institutional sense.

The date 1908 used in the title and corpus description denotes the terminal date of the primary publications analysed in this article; it was never intended to date the completion of the entire 594-volume compilation. The collection’s institutional history continued beyond the empirical horizon of this study and culminated in the addition of its final volumes in 1939. The revised manuscript makes this distinction explicit in order to separate the chronology of the selected evidence from the chronology of the collection itself.

The source criticism underlying this study is also informed by sustained first-hand engagement with the collection. The author first encountered and began studying the *Turkesterskii sbornik* in 1982, while entering university, and has since worked with the copy preserved in the rare manuscripts and books holdings of the National Library of Uzbekistan in Tashkent. This long engagement supports familiarity with the collection’s physical organisation, composite

character, and research conditions. It does not substitute for historiographical documentation; rather, the revised account brings that practical knowledge into explicit dialogue with Russian and Uzbek scholarship, especially Kasymova's dedicated study of the collection.

Sources and Method

The study examines primary publications reproduced in fifteen volumes of the *Turkestanskii sbornik*: Volumes 31, 37, 38, 44, 47, 74, 75, 93, 381, 397, 401, 414, 416, 447, and 453. The corpus includes travel books, Russian, British, French, German, and Anglo-Indian newspaper materials, parliamentary debates, military journals, economic studies, diplomatic commentary, maps, and discussions of railways and communication routes. The original publications represented in these volumes date from the 1830s to 1908.

The unit of analysis was the individual reproduced publication or, where several newspaper texts were presented as a connected exchange, the documented cluster of articles. Each item was examined in relation to its date, place and language of publication, genre, institutional or professional source, principal geopolitical actors, dominant problem definition, evidentiary form, intended or implied audience, and communicative function. The analysis distinguished among observation, translation, intelligence gathering, news reporting, commentary, rebuttal, expert interpretation, commercial representation, spatial visualisation, diplomatic legitimation, and administrative coordination.

The volumes were selected purposively rather than statistically. Inclusion required that a volume contain material directly addressing Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Persia, Eastern Turkestan, or British India and that the material provide evidence of how information was produced, circulated, interpreted, translated, contested, or institutionally used. The corpus is therefore not presented as a representative sample of all 594 volumes or of the entire nineteenth-century press. It is a theoretically selected longitudinal corpus designed to identify changing relations among media form, strategic knowledge, and imperial authority.

The chronological composition of the corpus further reflects the gradual transformation of imperial communication. Materials reproduced in Volumes 31, 37, and 38 primarily emphasise exploration, intelligence gathering, and geographical observation. Volumes 44, 47, 74, 75, and 93 document the emergence of newspaper controversy, expert debate, and strategic narratives. The later volumes (381, 397, 401, 414, 416, 447, and 453) illustrate the expansion of economic communication, frontier journalism, cartographic representation, military media discourse, communication infrastructure, diplomatic legitimation, and post-conflict information governance. This chronological range makes it possible to compare changes in the dominant uses of

information while recognising that older media practices continued alongside newer ones.

Bibliographic descriptions follow the information preserved in the corresponding volumes of the *Turkestarskii sbornik*. This creates an important limitation: some reproduced newspaper items lack complete authorship, pagination, issue, or original publication details. Rather than silently reconstructing missing metadata, the study identifies such items at the level permitted by the collection. The analysis consequently concerns both the historical publications and the form in which those publications were preserved and made available within this particular imperial compilation.

The study employs qualitative historical source analysis and comparative discourse analysis to examine how different imperial actors produced, circulated, and authorised knowledge about Central Asia. Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each item was read for its construction of geopolitical actors, territories, threats, interests, and legitimate courses of action. Particular attention was given to recurring narratives of security, expansion, civilisation, modernisation, commerce, frontier stability, and historical necessity. Second, items were compared across media forms and imperial contexts to determine how similar developments were reframed through travel writing, journalism, parliamentary speech, military expertise, commercial reporting, cartography, and diplomatic commentary. Third, the identified patterns were grouped according to the dominant communicative function performed by the material.

This procedure produced seven analytical configurations: information gathering and knowledge production; media rivalry; newspaper-based information competition; expert communication and strategic narrative; economic communication and frontier journalism; cartographic, military, and infrastructural communication; and information governance. These categories were generated through iterative comparison between the primary materials and the theoretical literature. They are interpretive categories rather than claims that every communicative form appeared for the first time in a particular period or that all sources developed in an identical linear sequence.

Historical Periodisation of Anglo-Russian Information Rivalry

The corpus supports a five-phase periodisation. Phase I (1834–1864) centres on travel, exploratory intelligence, geographical description, and the translation of knowledge across imperial boundaries. Phase II (1865–1873) follows Russian territorial expansion and the internationalisation of debate in Russian, British, French, and Anglo-Indian publications. Phase III (1874–1885) is marked by sustained newspaper controversy, expert intervention, frontier crisis, cartographic argument, and competing threat narratives. Phase IV (1886–1906) consolidates military, commercial, transport, and administrative knowledge; the corpus is thinner for these years, and the phase is interpreted

as continuity and institutionalisation rather than as the disappearance of rivalry. Phase V (1907–1908) follows the Anglo-Russian Convention and shows the partial reorientation of existing communicative resources towards explaining accommodation, commerce, connectivity, and regulated coexistence. The phases identify changes in dominant function, not sealed chronological compartments: exploration, journalism, intelligence, and expert communication persisted across them.¹⁶

This periodisation distinguishes the chronology of rivalry from the seven analytical configurations used below. The phases answer when the relations among media and imperial strategy changed; the configurations explain how information was gathered, circulated, contested, materialised, and redirected towards governance.

Analysis: The Making of an Imperial Information Order

The analysis is organised around seven configurations that identify shifts in the dominant functions of imperial communication. The sequence moves from the acquisition of geographical and political knowledge to its public contestation, infrastructural embedding, and eventual use in legitimising a negotiated imperial settlement. These configurations overlap: translation, travel, journalism, expert commentary, and strategic representation remained mutually dependent throughout the period.

Information Gathering and Imperial Knowledge Production

The earliest materials reproduced in Volumes 31, 37, and 38 of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* demonstrate that the initial stage of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia was characterised not by direct military confrontation but by systematic information gathering and the production of strategic knowledge. Long before newspapers became the principal arena of geopolitical controversy, both empires invested considerable effort in collecting geographical, political, economic, commercial, and ethnographic information concerning the territories situated between the Russian Empire and British India. Information thus emerged as a strategic resource through which uncertainty surrounding frontier regions could be reduced and future political decision-making supported.¹⁷

The publications reproduced in Volume 31 demonstrate that the Great Game had already become an international communicative phenomenon by the late 1860s. French, British, and Russian publications presented Central Asia not merely as a geographical region but as a contested political space whose significance was constructed through competing imperial interpretations. Charles Lullier's *Les Anglais et les Russes dans la Haute-Asie* portrayed Anglo-Russian rivalry as a struggle extending beyond bilateral diplomacy to

encompass the future political order of Asia. Rather than merely describing military campaigns, the publication sought to shape European public opinion by portraying Britain and Russia as competing civilisational powers advancing towards the same strategic space. From a communication perspective, the text transformed geopolitical rivalry into a coherent strategic narrative that circulated across national boundaries.¹⁸

A similar communicative function can be observed in *La Russie et l'Angleterre dans l'Asie Centrale*, which consistently represented Central Asia as an object of strategic observation rather than as an autonomous political actor. Geography, diplomacy, and political reporting became interconnected mechanisms for producing knowledge about territories increasingly interpreted through imperial interests. The publication demonstrates that geographical description simultaneously functioned as political communication, enabling distant regions to become intelligible within European geopolitical discourse.¹⁹

The third major publication reproduced in Volume 31, O. Sachot's *Les annexions russes en Asie*, illustrates another important dimension of early information competition. Russian territorial expansion was interpreted not simply as a sequence of military events but as a communicative phenomenon requiring explanation, evaluation, and political judgement. Through journalistic interpretation, territorial change acquired symbolic meanings associated with legitimacy, security, and imperial ambition. Military expansion and information production therefore developed simultaneously, each reinforcing the significance of the other.²⁰

Volumes 37 and 38 shift attention from public geopolitical interpretation to the mechanisms through which strategic knowledge itself was produced. Alexander Burnes's *Travels into Bokhara* represents one of the most comprehensive examples of nineteenth-century imperial information gathering. Although presented as a travel narrative, the work systematically documents political authorities, trade routes, ethnic communities, caravan networks, economic conditions, military capabilities, administrative practices, and diplomatic contacts throughout Afghanistan, Bukhara, Persia, and neighbouring regions. Observation, travel, and diplomacy were therefore integrated into a single communicative process whose ultimate objective was the production of knowledge capable of informing imperial decision-making.²¹

Burnes repeatedly emphasises routes, distances, commercial exchanges, frontier settlements, and local political relationships. These descriptions demonstrate that geographical exploration simultaneously functioned as intelligence gathering. Information concerning rivers, mountain passes, caravan routes, urban centres, and frontier populations was transformed into strategic knowledge capable of supporting diplomatic and political planning. In this respect, mobility itself became an instrument of communication through which imperial authorities expanded their understanding of Central Asia.²²

The editorial introduction prepared by Platon Golubkov for the Russian edition of Burnes's work adds another important dimension to the production of imperial knowledge. Rather than treating British travel literature as the intellectual property of a rival empire, the Russian editor translated, republished, and interpreted it for Russian audiences. British observations consequently became components of Russian strategic learning. Information competition therefore involved not only confrontation but also the selective appropriation of an opponent's knowledge. Translation itself emerged as a communicative mechanism through which strategic information crossed imperial boundaries while simultaneously acquiring new political meanings.²³

Volume 38 further demonstrates that information gathering depended upon extensive communication networks rather than isolated individual observations. Burnes describes continuous interactions among political agents, interpreters, merchants, military officers, caravan leaders, and local elites. Collectively, these actors formed an information infrastructure connecting British India with Afghanistan, Bukhara, Persia, and Central Asia. Communication flowed through diplomatic encounters, commercial exchanges, personal relationships, and travel routes, creating interconnected channels through which knowledge circulated across vast frontier regions.²⁴

Particularly significant is Burnes's portrayal of Bukhara. The city appears not merely as a commercial centre but as an information hub linking multiple regional networks. Merchants, diplomats, religious figures, and travellers continuously exchanged political intelligence alongside commercial information. Markets therefore functioned simultaneously as economic institutions and communication nodes. Volumes 31, 37, and 38 thus reveal an early configuration in which travel, translation, diplomacy, commerce, and local mediation converted mobility into strategic knowledge. The significance of these materials lies not only in the information they contain but also in the chain of communicative transformations they disclose: observation became written description; description became transferable knowledge; and translated or republished knowledge became available for appropriation by a rival imperial audience. This configuration provided an epistemic foundation for the more explicitly public media competition examined in the following sections.

The Emergence of Media Rivalry

The materials reproduced in Volumes 44 and 47 of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* demonstrate a significant transformation in the evolution of Anglo-Russian communication. Whereas the earlier volumes primarily document the production of strategic knowledge through exploration, travel, and observation, these later publications reveal the emergence of an explicit media rivalry in which newspapers, political commentary, public correspondence, and geopolitical essays became active participants in imperial competition. Information

was no longer gathered solely for governmental decision-making; increasingly, it entered the public sphere, where competing interpretations sought to influence political opinion and redefine the legitimacy of imperial action.

Volume 44 represents a turning point in this development. Unlike the travel narratives reproduced in the preceding volumes, the publications contained in this volume openly discuss Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia through political journalism and newspaper commentary. The extensive work *Ob otnosheniakh Rossii i Anglii po sredneaziatskim delam* presents Anglo-Russian rivalry as an ongoing public debate rather than as a series of isolated diplomatic events. Parliamentary discussions, frontier developments, Persian affairs, Afghanistan, and the concept of buffer states are interpreted through competing political arguments designed both to legitimise one imperial position and to challenge the other.²⁵

One of the most distinctive features of these publications is their increasing reliance on strategic interpretation. British proposals concerning neutral territories between Russia and Afghanistan are presented not as impartial diplomatic initiatives but as instruments intended to expand British influence under the language of regional stability. Russian commentators therefore contest not the existence of diplomatic negotiations but the meanings attached to them. Competing actors increasingly struggled over interpretation rather than information itself, demonstrating that media rivalry had become an essential dimension of imperial communication.²⁶

A similar pattern appears in discussions concerning Persia. Parliamentary speeches reproduced and interpreted within Russian publications consistently portrayed Russian influence in Persia as a future threat to British India. These texts employed anticipatory communication by presenting contemporary political developments as evidence of future geopolitical risks. Rather than describing immediate military realities, they sought to shape expectations regarding possible future conflicts. Russian responses, in turn, attempted to undermine these interpretations by portraying British concerns as politically motivated exaggerations. Consequently, the debate evolved into a contest between competing threat narratives rather than competing factual accounts.²⁷

Another important contribution of Volume 44 concerns the historical legitimisation of imperial expansion. The article *Istoricheskoe dvizhenie Rossii v Aziuu* frames Russian expansion into Central Asia as a natural continuation of historical development. Expansion is represented not as a deliberate colonial project but as an inevitable historical process. Such historical framing transformed political decisions into expressions of historical necessity, thereby reducing perceptions of aggression while strengthening the legitimacy of imperial policy. Historical interpretation thus became an important communicative resource through which newspapers contributed to the construction of political legitimacy.²⁸

Media rivalry also extended beyond governmental commentary into regular news reporting. Publications such as *Izvestiia iz Azii* demonstrate that information concerning Central Asia increasingly circulated through transregional news networks connecting St. Petersburg, London, Tehran, Kabul, and Tashkent. Geographically distant events became shared objects of public discussion, allowing frontier developments to acquire significance far beyond the regions in which they occurred. The circulation of news therefore contributed to the emergence of a common geopolitical consciousness concerning Central Asia among educated imperial audiences.²⁹

Commercial reporting likewise became incorporated into media rivalry. Discussions of articles published in the *Manchester Guardian* illustrate how trade agreements between Russia and Yakub Beg were interpreted as indicators of geopolitical success or failure. Commercial developments ceased to be regarded as purely economic phenomena; instead, they became symbolic measures of imperial influence. Newspapers translated commercial statistics, market access, and diplomatic agreements into narratives of imperial competition, demonstrating that economic communication had become inseparable from geopolitical discourse.³⁰

The serial publication *Letopis' po sredneaziatskomu voprosu* further illustrates the institutionalisation of media rivalry. By presenting successive developments within a continuous chronological narrative, the publication transformed separate political events into a coherent geopolitical storyline. Serial reporting sustained public attention, linked individual episodes into a broader framework of imperial competition, and gradually normalised the perception of Anglo-Russian rivalry as a permanent feature of international politics.³¹

Volume 47 complements these developments from a different perspective. Robert Barkley Shaw's *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashgar* continues the tradition of travel writing while simultaneously illustrating how geographical exploration increasingly served public geopolitical communication. Eastern Turkestan is represented not simply as an unknown frontier but as a strategically significant region whose political future depended upon the balance of Russian and British influence. Observation was therefore directed towards questions of diplomacy, legitimacy, communication, and imperial reputation rather than geography alone.³²

Shaw repeatedly discusses Russian expansion, the position of Yakub Beg, the circulation of information among local elites, and indigenous perceptions of both empires. Particularly significant are the chapters describing how the inhabitants of Kashgar perceived Britain, Russia, and the authority of the Tsar. These passages demonstrate that media rivalry extended beyond metropolitan newspapers into local political imagination. Imperial authority depended not only upon diplomatic recognition but also upon the circulation

of narratives concerning power, prestige, and legitimacy among frontier societies.

The narrative further demonstrates that communication networks relied upon numerous informal intermediaries, including merchants, interpreters, guides, confidential agents, and local officials. These actors transmitted information across political boundaries and enabled competing empires to monitor developments beyond their formal administrative control. Information consequently circulated through hybrid communication networks linking official institutions with local knowledge brokers.

The asymmetry of the two imperial positions becomes especially visible in this phase. British arguments typically projected outward from the security of India and interpreted Russian movement through possible future effects on an overseas imperial centre. Russian commentary answered from the position of a contiguous expanding state, recoding conquest and frontier administration as historical movement, order, and legitimate regional presence. The disagreement concerned not only facts but the spatial standpoint from which danger and legitimacy were defined.

Volumes 44 and 47 mark a change in the dominant use of strategic knowledge. Information previously associated mainly with exploration and diplomatic observation entered wider circuits of political commentary, serial news, commercial reporting, and publicly available travel literature. Media rivalry therefore involved more than the transmission of competing facts: it established newspapers and other publications as arenas in which the legitimacy, historical meaning, and anticipated consequences of imperial action were contested.

Newspaper-Based Information Competition

The materials reproduced in Volumes 74 and 75 of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* reveal the most explicit manifestation of Anglo-Russian media rivalry during the Great Game. Unlike the publications discussed in the preceding section, in which newspapers primarily interpreted geopolitical developments, the sources reproduced in these two volumes demonstrate direct interaction between competing information spheres. Russian and British newspapers no longer communicated independently; instead, they responded to one another, challenged competing interpretations, and constructed alternative narratives concerning the same political developments. Consequently, newspapers became active strategic participants in imperial competition rather than passive transmitters of information.

One of the clearest examples of this process appears in the exchanges between the *Journal de St.-Petersbourg* and the *London Morning Post*. Russian commentators systematically reproduced British arguments before offering detailed rebuttals. This dialogic structure demonstrates that information competition depended upon continuous engagement with the

opponent's discourse. Rather than ignoring British publications, Russian newspapers monitored them closely, selected politically significant arguments, and sought to redefine their meaning for European audiences. Media rivalry therefore operated through interpretation and counter-interpretation rather than through isolated national reporting.³³

The *Morning Post* consistently portrayed Russian expansion towards the Atrek Valley, Khorasan, and Herat as evidence of a long-term strategy directed against British India. The newspaper interpreted individual frontier developments within a broader anticipatory framework in which present territorial changes signified future geopolitical danger. Such reporting illustrates a communication strategy based on forward-looking threat construction. Rather than emphasising immediate military conflict, the newspaper encouraged readers to perceive Russian activities as successive stages of an unfolding strategic design.³⁴

Herat occupied a particularly significant place within these narratives. British newspapers repeatedly described the city as the 'key to India', transforming a specific geographical location into a symbolic representation of imperial security. This process reduced a complex regional political environment to an accessible strategic narrative centred on a single frontier city. The communicative significance of Herat therefore derived less from its immediate political status than from its symbolic role within the British geopolitical imagination.

The Afghan succession crisis provides another illustration of newspaper-based information competition. Reports published in the *Indian Public Opinion* interpreted the rivalry between Yakub Khan and Abdullah Khan almost exclusively through the framework of Anglo-Russian competition. Internal Afghan political developments acquired international significance because newspapers associated each claimant with broader imperial interests. Local political events were thus incorporated into imperial communication systems, enabling metropolitan audiences to interpret frontier politics as components of a wider geopolitical contest.³⁵

A similar communicative logic appears in the *Times of India*. Editorials concerning Yakub Khan consistently emphasised the possibility that unsuccessful British diplomacy might encourage Afghan leaders to seek Russian support. Rather than presenting Russia as an immediate military adversary, the newspaper portrayed imperial competition as a struggle for political influence and diplomatic allegiance. Communication therefore became closely associated with persuasion, reputation, and symbolic authority rather than with territorial occupation alone.³⁶

At the same time, the British information sphere was far from homogeneous. Articles reproduced from the *Bombay Gazette* offered a noticeably different interpretation of Anglo-Russian relations. Rather than advocating confrontation, the newspaper argued that both empires shared common interests in maintaining regional stability and suggested that cooperation could prove

more advantageous than continued rivalry. These publications demonstrate that competing narratives existed not only between Russian and British newspapers but also within the British press itself. Newspaper-based information competition therefore encompassed both external confrontation and internal debate concerning imperial policy.³⁷

Volume 75 demonstrates an even more sophisticated stage of media rivalry. Articles reproduced from the *Calcutta Gazette* no longer focused solely on contemporary geopolitical developments but increasingly relied upon long-term strategic projections. Russian expansion towards Central Asia and China was interpreted as a gradual transformation of the Asian balance of power that might eventually threaten British India. Such reporting illustrates temporal framing as a communication strategy through which newspapers sustained public attention by projecting future scenarios rather than merely describing current events.

The *Calcutta Gazette* also employed extensive statistical comparisons of military forces, financial resources, population, and administrative capacity. Quantitative information functioned not merely as descriptive evidence but as persuasive communication intended to shape public perceptions of relative imperial strength. Numerical data therefore became rhetorical instruments reinforcing broader geopolitical arguments. This reliance upon statistical comparison indicates that nineteenth-century newspapers increasingly integrated empirical evidence into strategic communication.³⁸

Russian newspapers responded systematically to these British interpretations. Articles published in *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* challenged British claims concerning Beluchistan, Quetta, and Russian expansion by reversing the dominant narrative. Rather than portraying Russia as the principal expansionist power, Russian commentators argued that Britain itself continuously extended its influence under the rhetoric of defence and regional stability. This reversal illustrates the development of counter-narrative strategies through which newspapers sought to undermine the credibility of competing geopolitical interpretations without necessarily disputing the factual occurrence of frontier events.

Particularly important in this context were discussions of Henry Rawlinson's lectures before the Royal Geographical Society. British geographical expertise was presented as authoritative evidence supporting concerns about Russian expansion. Russian newspapers responded by questioning both the factual basis and the interpretative conclusions of Rawlinson's arguments. Expert authority thus became another arena of newspaper competition, demonstrating that information rivalry extended beyond political reporting into scientific and geographical discourse.³⁹

The cumulative evidence contained in Volumes 74 and 75 demonstrates that newspapers had become highly organised instruments of strategic communication by the mid-1870s. British and Russian publications continuously

monitored one another, reproduced opposing arguments, challenged competing interpretations, and offered alternative explanations of identical geopolitical developments. The circulation of information increasingly depended upon interaction between competing media systems rather than isolated national reporting.

Newspaper interaction did not erase institutional difference. Anglo-Indian papers addressed audiences for whom Herat, Afghanistan, and Persia were protective approaches to India; Russian papers republished and rebutted those claims for audiences asked to understand Central Asia as an adjacent zone of security and expansion. The same cycle of quotation and counter-quotation therefore connected unequal imperial geographies and translated them into a shared, but contested, media arena.

This configuration demonstrates that newspapers ceased to function merely as channels for transmitting geopolitical information and became strategic actors in their own right. By selecting foreign reports, reproducing rival arguments, constructing threat narratives, and publishing counter-interpretations, the press shaped how imperial policies and international developments were publicly understood. Newspaper-based information competition therefore operated through continuous cycles of monitoring, appropriation, reframing, and rebuttal, making the press a central arena of Anglo-Russian rivalry.

Expert Knowledge and Strategic Narratives

Volume 93 of the *Turkestarskii sbornik* represents a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of Anglo-Russian communication during the Great Game. Unlike the newspaper debates examined in the previous section, the materials reproduced in this volume demonstrate how strategic communication increasingly relied upon expert authority and systematic geopolitical interpretation. The central publication, Mikhail A. Terent'ev's *Rossiiia i Angliia v Srednei Azii* (*Russia and England in Central Asia*), was far more than a political commentary on contemporary events. It constituted a comprehensive intellectual response to British geopolitical literature and sought to construct an alternative interpretation of imperial rivalry grounded in historical argumentation, military analysis, and strategic expertise.⁴⁰

Terent'ev explicitly states that his study was written in response to British publications portraying Russian expansion as a growing threat to British India. Among the principal works discussed are James Hutton's *Central Asia: From the Aryan to the Cossack* and Henry Rawlinson's *England and Russia in the East*.⁴¹ Rather than responding to isolated newspaper articles, Terent'ev engages directly with influential geopolitical monographs that shaped British elite opinion. This shift demonstrates that information competition had expanded beyond journalism into the production of expert knowledge

intended to influence governments, military institutions, and educated audiences.

The structure of Terent'ev's work illustrates a systematic strategy of counter-interpretation. British arguments are first presented in detail before being challenged through historical evidence, geographical analysis, military reasoning, and political comparison. This approach differs fundamentally from newspaper polemics. Instead of responding to individual reports or editorials, the author seeks to reconstruct the broader interpretative framework within which British strategic thought understood Central Asia. Communication therefore operates at the level of conceptual systems rather than isolated political claims.⁴²

Historical interpretation occupies a central place within this strategy. British writings are presented as products of selective historical reasoning that exaggerate Russian ambitions while minimising Britain's own imperial expansion. Terent'ev responds by situating Russian activities within a broader historical process emphasising regional stability, commercial development, and administrative integration. Historical knowledge thus becomes an instrument through which competing political realities are constructed and legitimised. The debate therefore concerns not simply what occurred in Central Asia but how its historical significance should be interpreted.⁴³

Equally important is the role of expert authority. Throughout the volume, British strategic arguments derive considerable legitimacy from the reputations of recognised specialists such as Henry Rawlinson.⁴⁴ Geographical expertise, military experience, and diplomatic knowledge are repeatedly invoked to reinforce interpretations of Russian policy. Terent'ev does not reject the authority of expertise itself; rather, he challenges the conclusions drawn by British experts and presents alternative analyses grounded in Russian military and administrative experience. Expert knowledge consequently becomes an arena of communication in which competing professional communities struggle to establish interpretative authority.⁴⁵

The discussion of the British press further illustrates this transformation. Terent'ev argues that British newspapers and journals consistently amplified fears concerning Russian expansion by interpreting each political or military development as evidence of a future threat to India. According to the author, the repeated circulation of similar narratives contributed to the formation of a persistent atmosphere of geopolitical anxiety. Media influence was therefore understood not merely as the dissemination of information but as the continuous reproduction of strategic expectations capable of shaping political decision-making.⁴⁶

Particularly revealing are the chapters devoted to Kashgar. Terent'ev presents the region as a frontier where diplomacy, commerce, intelligence, and political influence intersect. British diplomatic initiatives, commercial activities, and scientific expeditions are interpreted collectively as components of a

broader communication strategy intended to expand British influence beyond India. Russian responses are similarly described not only in military or diplomatic terms but also through their capacity to establish informational presence, political legitimacy, and regional authority. Kashgar thus emerges as a communication frontier in which competing empires sought simultaneously to influence local elites and international observers.⁴⁷

Another significant strategic narrative concerns the perceived possibility of a broader Muslim coalition directed against Russia. Whether historically realistic or not, this narrative functioned as a powerful interpretative framework through which British diplomacy, frontier politics, and regional instability became interconnected. It transformed diverse political developments into elements of a single strategic threat, demonstrating that geopolitical communication frequently depended as much upon imagined futures and hypothetical scenarios as upon observable political realities.

The treatment of Afghanistan and Beluchistan further illustrates how expert discourse reorganised spatial perception. British strategic literature consistently represented these territories as indispensable defensive zones protecting India, whereas Terent'ev reframed them as areas increasingly incorporated into British expansionist policy. Identical geographical spaces therefore acquired different political meanings depending upon the interpretative framework employed. Communication rivalry consequently extended to the symbolic construction of geopolitical space itself.⁴⁸

Unlike newspaper debates characterised by rapid exchanges of competing opinions, the publications reproduced in Volume 93 reveal a more institutionalised form of strategic communication. Books, military studies, geographical analyses, and expert publications provided comprehensive explanatory models capable of influencing political elites over extended periods. These texts possessed greater analytical depth than newspaper editorials while simultaneously enjoying greater authority within governmental and military circles. Expert publications therefore became strategic communication platforms through which imperial actors sought to shape long-term geopolitical understanding.

The evidence presented in Volume 93 demonstrates that expert knowledge functioned as a decisive resource in the evolution of the imperial information order. Newspapers continued to influence public opinion, but were increasingly reinforced by authoritative books, geographical scholarship, military analysis, and professional expertise. Information competition consequently evolved beyond journalistic controversy into a systematic struggle over the production of legitimate knowledge.

Terent'ev's counter-history also exposes the limits of a symmetrical model. His defence of Russian expansion relied on contiguity, administrative integration, and a claim to regional order, while the British works he opposed treated distance from India, buffer space, and anticipatory defence as

organising principles. Expert authority did not simply add more reliable information to the debate; it converted different imperial structures into rival standards of prudence and legitimacy.

The evidence therefore identifies expert authority as a crucial mechanism through which geopolitical interpretation acquired institutional legitimacy. Military officers, geographers, political commentators, and regional specialists did not merely report events; they organised historical, geographical, and political information into authoritative explanations of imperial rivalry. Expert publications connected factual claims to broader strategic narratives, thereby influencing which interpretations of Central Asia appeared credible, coherent, and relevant to imperial policy.

Economic Communication and Frontier Journalism

The materials reproduced in Volumes 381 and 397 of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* demonstrate another important transformation in the evolution of the imperial information order. By the mid-1880s, Anglo-Russian rivalry was communicated no longer primarily through military reports, diplomatic debates, or expert publications, but increasingly through economic arguments, frontier journalism, commercial reporting, and international correspondence. Communication thus expanded beyond political discourse to encompass trade, markets, transport, and frontier observation as interconnected dimensions of imperial influence.

A central position within this stage is occupied by A. P. Subbotin's *Rossiia i Angliia na sredneaziatskikh rynkakh* (*Russia and England in the Central Asian Markets*), reproduced in Volume 381. Unlike earlier publications that emphasised diplomatic confrontation or military rivalry, Subbotin places commercial competition at the centre of Anglo-Russian relations. The work consistently argues that British concerns regarding Russian expansion cannot be understood solely through military considerations but must also be interpreted in relation to trade, markets, and commercial communication linking Central Asia with British India.⁴⁹

Throughout the study, India is presented as the principal economic foundation of British imperial power. Commercial access to Central Asian markets is repeatedly associated with broader questions of imperial stability, international prestige, and political influence. Consequently, economic discourse functions simultaneously as geopolitical discourse. Commercial competition is transformed into a language of strategic security in which market access, trade routes, and commercial networks acquire political significance extending well beyond economic exchange itself.⁵⁰

Subbotin further employs historical reconstruction as a mechanism of economic legitimisation. By tracing commercial connections linking Rome, Byzantium, Central Asia, India, and China, he presents Russian expansion as the

continuation of long-standing Eurasian trade relations rather than as colonial conquest. Historical memory therefore performs an important communicative function by naturalising contemporary commercial ambitions within an apparently continuous historical tradition. Economic narratives thus contribute directly to the legitimisation of imperial expansion.⁵¹

Another recurring feature of the work is the representation of Afghanistan as a communication frontier rather than merely a buffer state. Trade routes, caravan networks, and frontier connections linking Central Asia with British India are described as strategic channels through which commercial influence, political information, and diplomatic interaction simultaneously circulated. The significance of frontier regions is therefore increasingly defined by their communicative connectivity rather than solely by their military defensibility.⁵²

Volume 397 shifts attention from systematic economic analysis to frontier journalism and international political correspondence. Articles published in *Novoe Vremia* illustrate how newspaper correspondents became increasingly influential actors in the communication of imperial rivalry. Rather than merely reporting frontier developments, correspondents interpreted political events for metropolitan audiences and actively contributed to the construction of geopolitical meaning.

Alexander Molchanov's correspondence concerning Badakhshan provides one of the clearest examples of this transformation. Reports from London describe British governmental discussions, diplomatic uncertainty, and growing concern regarding Russian activities in Central Asia. Particularly significant is the prominence given to rumours, unofficial reports, and incomplete political information. The scarcity of confirmed governmental statements encouraged speculative journalism, allowing uncertainty itself to become an important communicative resource. Frontier reporting therefore operated within an information environment in which political expectations were often shaped as much by speculation as by verified information.⁵³

These reports further demonstrate the symbolic construction of frontier territories. Badakhshan appears less as a remote mountainous region than as a strategic frontier whose political meaning depends upon competing imperial interpretations. Before becoming objects of military confrontation, frontier regions first became objects of communicative contestation. Newspaper discourse transformed geographical uncertainty into geopolitical significance, illustrating journalism's capacity to redefine peripheral territories as symbols of international rivalry.⁵⁴

Another important contribution of Volume 397 concerns Russian observations of British India. Articles describing the impressions of Russian military delegates reverse the traditional colonial perspective. Instead of British observers describing Central Asia, Russian correspondents evaluate British colonial administration, military organisation, and social conditions in India.

Observation itself thus becomes reciprocal. Competing empires increasingly construct one another as objects of strategic interpretation, demonstrating that communication rivalry depended upon mutual processes of representation rather than unilateral observation.

Religious narratives also assume greater prominence within frontier journalism. Several reports suggest that Muslim populations in British India might perceive Russia sympathetically, portraying the Russian Emperor as a potential protector of Muslim interests. Whether politically realistic or not, such representations functioned as symbolic communication intended to extend Russian influence beyond territorial boundaries through shared religious imagination. Imperial authority was therefore communicated not exclusively through military power but also through narratives of cultural and political affinity.

Economic reporting further reinforced this communicative transformation. Publications concerning Russian commercial interests in Asia consistently framed trade as an element of national security rather than merely an economic activity. Commercial expansion was interpreted as evidence of geopolitical strength, while transport routes connecting Central Asia with neighbouring regions were presented as strategic infrastructures supporting both economic development and imperial influence. Economic communication thus became inseparable from political communication.

Travel correspondence reproduced in Volume 397 illustrates a similar tendency. Descriptions of routes extending from Krasnovodsk towards the Afghan frontier emphasise roads, settlements, caravan movements, administrative organisation, and regional accessibility. Such narratives perform functions extending beyond simple description. By systematically documenting frontier space, they contributed to the symbolic incorporation of distant territories into the imperial political imagination. Narrative mapping therefore complemented geographical mapping as a communicative instrument of territorial governance.

Commercial language likewise concealed different relationships between market and state. British commercial claims were tied to Indian production, long-distance exchange, and access beyond a maritime imperial base. Russian commercial writing connected markets to territorial administration, rail construction, settlement, and state-supported integration. Both invoked commerce, but commerce operated as a different instrument within each imperial formation.

Taken together, Volumes 381 and 397 demonstrate that Anglo-Russian rivalry entered a new communicative phase during the mid-1880s. Commercial discourse, frontier journalism, political correspondence, and international reporting collectively expanded the scope of imperial communication beyond diplomacy and military affairs. Markets, trade routes, frontier towns, transport corridors, and commercial statistics became integral components of

geopolitical narratives through which imperial legitimacy and influence were increasingly articulated.

These materials reveal that commercial analysis and frontier journalism expanded the communicative vocabulary of imperial rivalry beyond diplomacy and military security. Newspapers, economic studies, travel correspondence, and reports from contested regions connected markets, trade routes, local observations, and political influence within shared narratives of imperial advantage. The frontier consequently appeared not merely as a territorial boundary but as a communicative space in which commerce, information, diplomacy, mobility, and political authority continuously intersected.

Cartographic Communication, Military Media, and Information Infrastructure

The materials reproduced in Volumes 401, 414, and 416 of the *Turkestanskii sbornik* demonstrate the most advanced stage of imperial communication prior to the political settlement of Anglo-Russian rivalry. By the mid-1880s, communication no longer depended exclusively on newspapers, travel narratives, or expert publications. Instead, military journals, geopolitical monographs, maps, transport infrastructure, and communication networks had become integrated components of a broader imperial information system. These materials demonstrate that strategic influence increasingly depended upon the ability to organise, visualise, and circulate information through interconnected communication infrastructures.

Volume 401 illustrates the internationalisation of Great Game communication. Fernand Hue's *Les Russes et les Anglais dans l'Afghanistan* presents Afghanistan not merely as a frontier territory but as the central arena of an international geopolitical crisis linking Central Asia, India, the Eastern Question, and European diplomacy. The publication demonstrates that geographically distant events were increasingly interpreted within a unified communicative framework extending across multiple political regions. Local frontier disputes acquired international significance because communication networks connected separate geopolitical developments into coherent strategic narratives.⁵⁵

An equally important feature of Hue's work is its treatment of communication routes. Commercial roads, caravan corridors, and traditional trading networks are progressively reinterpreted as strategic military corridors. Infrastructure undergoes a communicative transformation: routes previously associated with trade become symbols of potential military expansion, while commercial mobility itself acquires geopolitical significance. Public perceptions of infrastructure therefore depended less upon its physical characteristics than upon the strategic narratives through which it was interpreted.⁵⁶

The maps accompanying Hue's publication further illustrate the communicative role of cartography. Rather than serving merely as geographical illustrations, they visually constructed contested territories and simplified complex frontier disputes into accessible representations of proximity, vulnerability, and strategic importance. Through visual communication, abstract geopolitical relationships became concrete images capable of shaping political imagination. Cartography therefore functioned as an important medium through which imperial knowledge was organised and communicated.⁵⁷

Volume 414 marks another significant development by demonstrating the growing importance of military journalism. Publications such as *La Situation Militaire dans l'Asie Centrale* no longer concentrated exclusively on describing current military conditions. Instead, they systematically evaluated future scenarios, estimated possible outcomes of conflict, and compared alternative strategic options. Military journals thus performed anticipatory communication by preparing readers to interpret uncertainty through structured expectations concerning future geopolitical developments.⁵⁸

This anticipatory character is particularly evident in discussions of the Panjdeh crisis. Military commentators examined hypothetical military operations, diplomatic alternatives, logistical capacities, and possible political consequences before actual conflict occurred. Communication therefore became increasingly future-oriented. Strategic knowledge was produced not merely to explain present circumstances but also to organise expectations concerning possible developments. Such publications demonstrate that military journalism increasingly participated in shaping political imagination rather than merely recording historical events.

Another characteristic feature of Volume 414 is the growing authority of expert communities. Military writers repeatedly referred to the analyses of Henry Rawlinson, Charles Marvin, Burnaby, Baker, and other specialists whose publications had become influential throughout Europe. Expertise itself became an institutional communication resource. Political interpretation increasingly depended upon recognised specialists whose authority derived from geographical, military, and colonial experience. Consequently, communication acquired greater institutional legitimacy through professional expertise.⁵⁹

Infrastructure emerged as another major theme throughout these publications. Articles devoted to communication routes between Europe and Asia emphasised railways, caravan roads, maritime connections, and telegraph networks as essential instruments of imperial influence. Such infrastructure was presented not simply as technical facilities but as communication systems enabling the rapid movement of information, personnel, military forces, commercial goods, and administrative authority. Control over infrastructure therefore became inseparable from control over communication itself.⁶⁰

The symbolic representation of Herat provides another illustration of communicative transformation. Military publications consistently portrayed the city as the ‘key to India’, thereby elevating a specific frontier settlement into a strategic geopolitical symbol. Through repeated media representation, Herat acquired meanings extending far beyond its local political reality. The city became an icon of imperial security, illustrating how strategic communication transformed geographical locations into symbolic centres of political imagination.

Volume 416 further expanded these developments by demonstrating the increasing integration of military expertise, transport systems, and international communication. Publications concerning the Panjdeh crisis describe how a local frontier incident rapidly evolved into a European political issue through newspapers, military journals, diplomatic correspondence, and international public debate. Frontier conflicts therefore became transnational media events whose political significance depended upon extensive communication networks rather than geographical proximity.

Military journals reproduced in Volume 416 also reveal an important mechanism of media amplification. During periods of uncertainty, the repeated publication of military analyses, strategic speculation, and expert commentary gradually transformed limited political information into widespread geopolitical anxiety. Communication did not merely transmit concern; it actively intensified perceptions of danger through continual repetition, comparison, and interpretation. Media amplification consequently became a significant component of imperial strategic communication.

The role of transport infrastructure receives particular emphasis in discussions of Russian railway construction across Central Asia. Railways were consistently interpreted as communication infrastructures supporting administrative integration, commercial expansion, military mobilisation, and political authority simultaneously. Their significance therefore extended well beyond logistics. Railway systems symbolised the capacity of empires to organise space through the accelerated circulation of information and institutional control.⁶¹

A similar communicative function is attributed to Merv. Originally a regional oasis, it gradually became a symbolic frontier within European geopolitical discourse. Newspapers, military journals, and strategic publications repeatedly portrayed Merv as evidence of Russian proximity to British India. Through sustained media attention, the oasis was transformed into a geopolitical symbol whose importance derived primarily from communication rather than geography itself.

The concept of ‘Central Asia’ likewise underwent an important transformation throughout Volume 416. Rather than appearing as a fixed geographical entity, the region was progressively constructed through repeated military, journalistic, diplomatic, and cartographic representations. Communication

therefore contributed directly to the construction of geopolitical regions by producing shared spatial understandings among international audiences.

Taken together, Volumes 401, 414, and 416 demonstrate that imperial communication during the mid-1880s increasingly depended upon interconnected information infrastructures. Books, military journals, maps, railways, transport corridors, expert publications, and visual representations collectively produced a communication environment in which political authority relied as much upon the organisation of information as upon military or diplomatic capabilities.

Material infrastructures sharpened rather than dissolved the asymmetry. For Britain, routes and maps were evaluated principally as lines of approach to India and as means of influencing buffer territories without direct annexation. For Russia, railways, telegraphs, maps, and military surveys increasingly joined conquered territory to administrative centres and made continental rule operational. Cartographic and infrastructural communication thus created a common strategic vocabulary while supporting different modes of imperial power.

Taken together, these sources show that imperial communication operated through material and visual forms as well as through written narratives. Maps rendered contested territories strategically legible; military journals authorised specialised interpretations; and railways, telegraphs, and transport routes accelerated the circulation of information, personnel, and administrative decisions. Communication was thus embedded within infrastructures and institutions that enabled imperial actors not only to represent Central Asian space but also to organise, connect, and govern it.

From Information Competition to Information Governance

The materials reproduced in Volumes 447 and 453 of the *Turkestaniskii sbornik* document the final stage in the evolution of Anglo-Russian communication during the Great Game. Unlike the publications examined in the preceding sections, these sources no longer focus primarily on constructing threats, contesting rival interpretations, or anticipating military confrontation. Instead, they demonstrate how communication gradually shifted towards legitimising political settlement, stabilising public expectations, and explaining the emerging geopolitical order established after the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. Information thus acquired an increasingly administrative function, serving governance rather than confrontation.

The discussions surrounding the Anglo-Russian Agreement occupy a central place within this transformation. Prince G. Trubetskoi's *Anglo-russkoe soglasenie* presents the Convention not merely as a diplomatic compromise but as the culmination of a long historical process of imperial adjustment. Earlier decades of rivalry are interpreted retrospectively as successive stages leading

towards political accommodation. Rather than emphasising continued antagonism, the publication consistently frames cooperation as a rational response to changing international circumstances. Diplomatic communication thus became an instrument through which a new political order was publicly explained and legitimised.⁶²

An important characteristic of these publications is the transformation of media framing. Throughout the earlier stages of the Great Game, newspapers consistently organised political developments through narratives of danger, competition, and strategic uncertainty. Following the Convention, however, the dominant communicative framework changed considerably. Articles increasingly employed the language of stability, cooperation, and mutual recognition. Rivalry did not disappear entirely, but it was reinterpreted within a broader discourse emphasising regulated coexistence. This transition demonstrates that media communication adapted not only to political change but also actively contributed to the normalisation of new interstate relations.

Despite this transformation, India remained the symbolic centre of imperial communication. Numerous publications continued to identify the security and stability of British India as one of the principal motivations underlying Anglo-Russian cooperation. Yet the communicative significance of India changed substantially. Earlier publications consistently portrayed India as an object threatened by Russian expansion. In the post-Convention discourse, India increasingly appeared as a region whose long-term political stability depended upon successful diplomatic management rather than military preparedness alone. The symbolic importance of India therefore persisted even as its narrative function evolved.

Infrastructure occupied a similarly transformed position. Articles concerning railway projects linking Turkestan with India through Afghanistan no longer described transport primarily as an instrument of military mobility. Instead, railway development was increasingly interpreted as a mechanism facilitating commercial exchange, administrative coordination, and regional integration. Infrastructure consequently acquired a governance function. Communication routes continued to possess strategic significance, but they became increasingly associated with regulated interaction rather than impending confrontation.⁶³

Trade publications further reinforced this transition. Discussions concerning Russian commercial routes in Persia emphasised transport systems, commercial exchanges, telegraph connections, and economic cooperation. Commercial communication increasingly replaced military communication as the principal language through which regional influence was described. Markets, transport corridors, and commercial institutions became mechanisms for organising stable relationships among neighbouring political actors. Economic communication therefore assumed many of the coordinating functions previously associated with strategic rivalry.⁶⁴

Volume 453 further illustrates how communication adapted to the political realities established after 1907. Publications devoted to Afghanistan demonstrate a notable shift in emphasis. Earlier materials consistently portrayed the country as a military buffer situated between rival empires. In contrast, post-Convention discourse increasingly represented Afghanistan as a developing economic partner, a communication corridor, and an emerging regional market. Frontier space was consequently redefined through narratives of connectivity, modernisation, and commercial opportunity.⁶⁵

Modernisation itself became an important communication theme. Articles describing industrial projects, administrative reforms, infrastructure construction, and economic development portrayed modernisation as evidence of political legitimacy and effective governance. Communication thus served not merely to report institutional change but also to construct narratives demonstrating governmental competence and regional stability. The legitimacy of political authority increasingly derived from administrative performance rather than exclusively from military capability.

The symbolic representation of Herat likewise underwent significant transformation. During the Panjdeh crisis, the city functioned primarily as a strategic military symbol associated with the defence of India and the danger of Russian expansion. In post-Convention publications, Herat was increasingly discussed within the context of commerce, transportation, and regional exchange. Although its strategic importance remained acknowledged, its communicative role expanded to encompass economic integration and transregional connectivity. The changing representation of Herat illustrates how geopolitical symbols acquire new meanings as broader political circumstances evolve.

Political institutions in Persia received similar treatment. Discussions concerning the *Majlis* no longer portrayed regional politics exclusively through military competition between Britain and Russia. Instead, representative institutions became arenas within which influence was exercised through diplomacy, political negotiation, and administrative engagement. Communication therefore shifted from confrontation towards management, emphasising coordination, political mediation, and institutional governance rather than strategic conflict.

The speeches of leading political figures further illustrate this communicative transition. Lord Curzon's statements concerning the Anglo-Russian Agreement are presented not merely as expressions of political opinion but as public acts explaining, legitimising, and interpreting diplomatic change for broader audiences. Elite political communication increasingly functioned to stabilise expectations, reduce uncertainty, and establish shared understandings of the emerging international order. Diplomatic discourse thereby became an essential component of governance communication.⁶⁶

The Convention did not make the two empires institutionally alike. It coordinated different security projects: British protection of India and Russian consolidation of a continental sphere. Post-1907 communication normalised this asymmetrical accommodation by translating strategic restraint into narratives of stability, commerce, and mutual recognition.

The cumulative evidence contained in Volumes 447 and 453 demonstrates that the communicative logic of the Great Game changed fundamentally after the Anglo-Russian Convention. Newspapers, political journals, commercial publications, diplomatic commentaries, and transport narratives continued to shape public understandings of Central Asia; however, their primary objective gradually shifted from mobilising audiences for geopolitical rivalry towards explaining, organising, and legitimising an emerging framework of regulated interstate relations. Communication consequently assumed a governance function extending well beyond the earlier production of strategic narratives.

The transition from information competition to information governance represents the final configuration reconstructed in this study. The archival materials demonstrate that Anglo-Russian rivalry did not simply conclude with a diplomatic agreement. Rather, its communicative structures were reoriented towards the management of political stability, regional cooperation, and imperial coexistence. Information remained a strategic resource, but its principal function shifted from contesting rival legitimacy to sustaining an increasingly institutionalised system of imperial governance across Central Asia.

Discussion

The analysis supports a reinterpretation of the Great Game as both a geopolitical rivalry and a struggle over the authority to produce, circulate, and institutionalise knowledge. The concept of an imperial information order captures the relations among otherwise heterogeneous practices: exploration, translation, newspaper exchange, parliamentary debate, expert publication, commercial reporting, cartography, transport infrastructure, and diplomatic explanation. These practices did not constitute a centralised system. Their coherence emerged from their recurrent orientation towards making Central Asia strategically knowable, narratively intelligible, and politically manageable. This approach recasts the Great Game as a historically changing imperial knowledge regime rather than a sequence of diplomatic crises or an uninterrupted movement towards military confrontation. It also shows that British and Russian expansion cannot be understood separately from the transimperial circulation and appropriation of knowledge.

The findings also clarify why resemblance at the level of media form must not be confused with identity of imperial purpose. British surveys, newspapers, and expert arguments were organised primarily around the security of India, indirect frontier influence, and access to trade. Russian publications

increasingly accompanied contiguous conquest, administrative incorporation, commercial penetration, transport building, and projects of settlement. Each empire appropriated the other's information, but did so within a different institutional geography. The imperial information order was therefore relational and asymmetrical rather than a single system shared on equal terms.

This interpretation extends histories of imperial information in two ways. First, the evidence supports Bayly's⁶⁷ argument that empires depended on the appropriation and restructuring of pre-existing information networks. Burnes's reliance on merchants, interpreters, guides, and local elites demonstrates that imperial knowledge was produced through cross-cultural encounters rather than generated exclusively within metropolitan institutions. The Russian translation and republication of British travel accounts further show that information did not remain the stable property of the empire that first produced it. Translation enabled strategic knowledge to cross political boundaries and acquire new meanings within a competing imperial environment.

Second, the study broadens the category of media beyond newspapers and individual communication technologies. Following Innis,⁶⁸ Headrick,⁶⁹ and Winseck and Pike,⁷⁰ communication infrastructure should be understood as part of the organisation of imperial power. Maps, railways, telegraphs, caravan routes, and frontier settlements shaped not only movement but also the speed, direction, visibility, and administrative usefulness of information. Textual representation and material infrastructure were therefore mutually reinforcing: publications assigned strategic meanings to routes and territories, while infrastructures helped make those representations actionable.

Strategic narrative analysis further clarifies why the possession of information alone was insufficient. British and Russian publications frequently addressed the same territories and events but organised them through competing plots of security, civilisation, commercial progress, historical necessity, and imperial legitimacy. Their political force derived from connecting dispersed developments to anticipated futures – for example, by transforming Herat into the 'key to India', Merv into a symbol of Russian advance, or commercial agreements into measures of imperial influence. Strategic narratives converted geographical and political uncertainty into intelligible accounts of threat and appropriate action.⁷¹

The post-1907 material qualifies any simple equation between imperial communication and permanent confrontation. After the Anglo-Russian Convention, many of the same media and infrastructural forms were used to explain accommodation, normalise regulated coexistence, and redirect attention towards trade, administrative coordination, and regional connectivity. Information governance did not replace information competition completely. Rather, the function of communication changed as previously antagonistic actors attempted to stabilise expectations and publicly authorise a negotiated geopolitical order. This finding extends Braman's⁷² concept of information

governance into a historical imperial context while showing that governance can emerge through the reorientation of competitive communication structures.

The *Turkestarskii sbornik* also requires critical interpretation as a curated documentary compilation. Following Stoler,⁷³ the collection cannot be treated as a transparent container preserving a complete nineteenth-century information environment. Its compilers selected, translated, excerpted, grouped, and preserved some publications while excluding others. The collection therefore documents two interconnected processes: the original circulation of imperial representations and their subsequent reassembly within Russian Turkestan. This double mediation is analytically valuable because it reveals which foreign and domestic texts were considered worth preserving as politically relevant knowledge.

Several limitations follow from this approach. The fifteen volumes constitute a purposive corpus rather than a representative sample of all 594 volumes, and incomplete bibliographic metadata sometimes restricts reconstruction of original publication contexts. The study also analyses reproduced texts rather than independently comparing every item with its original edition. Finally, the concept of an imperial information order is developed from a corpus structured largely by Russian selection practices. Comparative research using British, Ottoman, Persian, and Qing archives is needed to test whether the same relations among media, knowledge, infrastructure, and governance appear from other institutional perspectives.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the corpus, but they define the level at which the article's claims should be understood. The study does not claim that communication alone caused Anglo-Russian policy or that the Great Game constituted a fully integrated information system. It demonstrates instead that imperial rivalry was mediated through recurrent relations among knowledge production, public interpretation, infrastructure, and institutional authority. The concept of an imperial information order makes those relations visible and provides a framework for comparing historical forms of geopolitical communication beyond Central Asia.

Conclusion

This article has reinterpreted the Great Game as a struggle conducted not only through diplomacy, territorial expansion, and military planning but also through the production and organisation of information. The materials reproduced in fifteen volumes of the *Turkestarskii sbornik* reveal changing relations among travel, translation, newspapers, expert publications, commercial reporting, maps, infrastructure, and diplomatic discourse. Together, these forms enabled imperial actors to reduce uncertainty, claim interpretive authority, construct geopolitical threats, and legitimise political arrangements.

The concept of an imperial information order describes these relations without assuming the existence of a centralised or technologically unified system. The order was heterogeneous, contested, and historically layered. Practices of exploration and intelligence gathering persisted as journalism, strategic narrative, cartography, transport, and governance communication acquired greater prominence. The shift identified after the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 was therefore not a simple end to information competition but a reorientation of communicative resources towards stabilising and administering a negotiated imperial relationship.

Treating the *Turkestanskii sbornik* as both a curated documentary corpus and an act of imperial mediation demonstrates the value of such compilations for the study of empire. The collection preserves not only accounts of Anglo-Russian rivalry but also traces of how publications were selected, translated, classified, and repurposed within Russian Turkestan. These practices formed part of the process through which Central Asia was rendered strategically knowable and politically governable. Comparative research in British, Ottoman, Persian, and Qing archives may reveal whether similar information orders developed across other imperial frontiers and how knowledge circulated between competing imperial institutions.

Notes

1. Hopkirk, *The Great Game*; Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia*; Yapp, *Strategies of British India*.
2. Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907*; Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*.
3. Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*; Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*; Innis, *The Bias of Communication*; Winseck and Pike, *Communication and Empire*.
4. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
5. Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907*; Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*.
6. Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907*; Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia*; Bayly, *Empire and Information*.
7. Kasymova, *Turkestanskii sbornik*.
8. Bayly, *Empire and Information*.
9. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*; Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*.
10. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.
11. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.
12. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
13. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
14. Braman, *Change of State*.
15. Kasymova, *Turkestanskii sbornik*.
16. Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907*.
17. *Turkestanskii sbornik*, vols. 31, 37, and 38.
18. Lullier, *Les Anglais et les Russes dans la Haute-Asie*.
19. “La Russie et l’Angleterre dans l’Asie Centrale.”

20. Sachot, "Les annexions russes en Asie."
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Data Availability Statement

The materials used in this study are derived from historical Russian-language texts reproduced in the *Turkestanskii sbornik* and related archival compilations. The analytical corpus consists of publicly available historical Russian-language periodicals and archival compilations. The compiled dataset and coding framework are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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