# Timofei Bordachev: A New Great Game for Central Asia?

Timofei Bordachev argues that thinking about the Great Game of the 19th Century still dominates thinking about Central Asia, yet the geopolitical realities of this region are undergoing great changes. Bordachev is the Programme Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, and an Academic Supervisor of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. Eurasia's Ghosts of the Great Game: https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eurasia-s-ghosts-of-the-great-game/ Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL

## #Glenn

Welcome back to the program. We're joined today by Timofey Bordachev, program director of the Valdai Discussion Club, to talk about his recent article—well, one of his most recent ones—*Eurasia's Ghost of the Great Game*. I'll leave a link to the article in the description, and I really recommend everyone read it. Thank you for coming on.

## #Timofei Bordachev

Thank you, Glenn. Very glad to talk with you.

## #Glenn

So, the Great Game of the 19th century has a very special place in geopolitical thought. It also fits within the wider context of, I guess, Halford Mackinder's ideas about the Eurasian Heartland, which greatly influenced both British and American politics in terms of how to contain Russia and the wider Eurasian game. But there's also much discussion at the moment about a return to this Great Game. However, you've taken the opposite position. I was wondering if you could give some context about, I guess, what the Great Game was, its relevance, and also why the geopolitical environment now is fundamentally different.

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, first of all, a small correction. I don't think the geopolitical environment is completely different. And this is actually one of the reasons behind my conclusions and my general hypothesis. The situation in Central Asia, first of all, because of the geographic location of this region, cannot challenge the survival of Russia. It cannot challenge the survival of China. It cannot challenge the survival of Europe, or even more so, the United States. So, the Great Game, which appeared as a very visible part of intellectual discussion in the 19th century, should be considered one of the first elements of a narrative that doesn't have a particularly strong connection to the reality of power politics. In the 19th century, especially after the Crimean War and after the Berlin Congress of 1878, the survival and security of Russia and the European empires depended on the situation in Europe and on their relationships on the European continent.

Not in Central Asia, not in Afghanistan, not in India. And in my view, the idea—the concept of the Great Game—had us become welcoming of the narrative, exactly because it doesn't have a relation to hard reality. Britain and the Russian Empire at that time were, objectively, allies trying to suppress their autonomy and to limit the role of continental Western Europe. And for both the British Empire and the Russian Empire, it was very useful to find an area where they could compete without challenging the most important part of their relationship in Europe—against Germany. The notion of the Great Game, as we know, was introduced by a young British aristocrat traveling to the Emirate of Bukhara around 1837–1840, in one of his letters.

## #Timofei Bordachev

In 1841, he was executed in the central square of the great, beautiful city of Bukhara by order of the Emir of Bukhara. And this notion soon appeared in Western European, British, and later Russian narratives, even though both empires never significantly confronted each other directly, never faced each other with anything close to the full extent of their power capabilities. So, it was not great—but it was a game.

## #Glenn

One of the things that seems to have changed, though, is that when we had the Russian Empire versus the British Empire, by definition, empires would diminish the autonomy of other peoples. But now we have countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan doing very well. You can see them having much more, I guess, agency and autonomy, even compared to the end of the Cold War. How do you see them acting, though? Because they have their own priorities as opposed to—well, we didn't see this kind of autonomy in the 19th century.

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, I think there's a certain duality in the attitude of our friends and allies in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. On one hand, they're definitely not welcoming any possible confrontation or

competition between Russia and the West on their own territory. And, of course, they quite reasonably consider themselves independent actors in international politics, wanting to build multi-vector, cooperative relationships with different powers—not only with Russia, but also with China and, of course, with the West. But on the other hand, they're desperately looking for international attention.

Because objectively, this region doesn't have the resources to be important in international politics or the world economy. The population is small. The entire population of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, is smaller than that of Vietnam—about three times smaller than countries like Pakistan or Indonesia. The territory available for economic activity and social and cultural life in all of Central Asia isn't larger than the territory of, say, Poland. The amount of natural resources is smaller than in many other countries around the world. And the logistics are terrible—logistics are terrible.

There's a well-known fact that there's no direct connection to ocean sea routes. Our friends and allies—the countries of Central Asia—are looking for narratives that can make them more recognizable in international intellectual debate and help them promote themselves as an object of competition between the great powers. So, this duality is a strategically not very comfortable position. But tactically, for now, we can give credit to our friends in Central Asia for being able to explore the different opportunities related to the existence of this "great game" narrative.

## #Glenn

Well, this multi-vector foreign policy you refer to—you know, you hear this from many countries now—that this is the opportunity in a multipolar world: to get along with all the major powers, even play them a bit against each other to extract benefits. And you can say that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan—they all have an interest in this. But it does beg the question of to what extent it's possible, because this was, to some extent, what Yanukovych was doing in Ukraine: playing the Europeans and the Russians a bit against each other to get the best possible deal for himself. But they ended up with a coup and being essentially converted into a frontline state. And you can also see—well, at least Armenia has changed fundamentally over the past two years now, and Azerbaijan is also taking a very different tone. Do you see the possibility, though, of having this ideal balancing between the major powers, or will they be forced into, I guess, a frontline position?

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, I don't think the states of Central Asia can be forced into one of the opposing geopolitical camps. And I don't think we can or should compare them with our brothers in Ukraine—first of all, because they're in a completely different geopolitical position. Ukraine has a direct border with NATO, with the West. It would take a tremendous effort to bring any serious weapons into Central Asia, unlike in Ukraine. So, in terms of trying to build some kind of military campaign structure, Central Asia is not the best place—it's actually one of the worst places on the perimeter of the Russian Federation for any adversary of Russia who might even think about exploring that

opportunity. And second, maybe even more importantly, the culture. The great Russian orientalist Vasily Bartold wrote in his book *Cultural History of Turkestan*...

It's right at the very beginning of his book. He writes, speaking about Turkestan, that we should never forget the history of cultural life there is at least four times longer than in Russia. So, Glenn, at the time when my and your ancestors were collecting food in the deep forests of Northern Europe, people in Central Asia were already living very civilized, very cultured lives within the ancient civilizations and cultural centers of the great cities. So we should not underestimate the political and historical wisdom of the people of Central Asia. They have a much longer history of statehood, a much longer history of cultural life. They are much wiser than any of the Europeans, including Russians. This is another reason why I believe Central Asia can never be just an object of manipulation by any of the great powers.

## #Glenn

Well, I think what's interesting about the difference now, compared to the 19th and 20th centuries, is that in the 19th century you had Britain as a maritime power confronting the Russian Empire as a land power. Then, to some extent, this was replayed in the 20th century between the Soviet Union and the United States. But it was very much defined by a zero-sum rivalry, where you could see both sides trying to achieve primacy. It's somewhat different today, though, given that you have all these other regional actors. It's hard not just to see the autonomy of these states themselves, but also several other great powers. And while I would argue that after the post–Cold War era we still see some of the same zero-sum thinking coming out of the West—that is, from the US and the Europeans.

They tend to, whenever they engage with Central Asian countries, always include in their statements that, you know, we have to liberate them from Russia, or somehow decouple Russia's neighbors from Russia. But that fits within that same zero-sum thinking. When you look at the emergence of China, for example, it doesn't seem that the Chinese or the Indians have played the zero-sum game to the same extent. In other words, they've tried to harmonize their interests with Russia's, or at least manage the competition where it arises. Do you think that's correct—or even sustainable—in the long term?

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, I think it's quite sustainable.

## #Glenn

And I think your evaluation is correct.

## #Timofei Bordachev

China's engagement in Central Asia is very limited. I'm a frequent traveler to this region, and I can say for sure that China is present there. China is a good partner for the Central Asian economies in terms of trade, and somewhat smaller in terms of investment—mostly focused on exploiting various natural resources. But its actual engagement isn't very big. Russia's engagement is much stronger, and the West's engagement is growing, but it faces, like any other external actor, fundamental internal obstacles and limitations. These are connected to the strong desire and ability of our neighbors in Central Asia to maintain the independence of their statehood from external manipulation—a desire, as I said, that's based on a very strong cultural tradition.

Well, in this sense, as I said, I'm very optimistic. Second, I don't believe that the West, when objectively evaluating the geopolitical location of Central Asia, will invest significant resources. First of all, I don't think the West has those resources. Secondly, I don't think the West will invest serious resources in a region like Central Asia. It's not good for them. It's not an asset. It's something different.

## #Glenn

Yeah, when everyone asks how many powers will engage there, you always look at the intentions and the capabilities. And I think that's probably correct. The political West is fragmenting as well. It doesn't have the capabilities to invest there, and in terms of intentions, it doesn't seem to be a high priority. One could also argue that what's different with Russia today, as opposed to the 19th and 20th centuries, is that there's not much need, if you will, to balance Russia there, because Russia doesn't have the intention of pursuing hegemony in Central Asia.

Also not the capability anymore either. Indeed, the whole challenge now seems to be managing this great-power cooperation and competition with the other Eurasian states. Do you see the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization being up to the task of managing not just the great-power competition or cooperation between the Russians, Chinese, Indians, and others, but also accommodating the autonomy of the Central Asians themselves, who, as you say, have a very strong cultural distinctiveness?

## #Timofei Bordachev

I understand. Well, I think not only for them, but also for us—for Russia as well. Both international organizations you mentioned, BRICS and the SCO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are very different from the kinds of international organizations we used to see in the West, like NATO or the European Union. They don't have a single leadership. They don't have a single hegemon inside that can structure the cooperation. So, cooperation within these institutions is very flexible, and there's no ordering power structuring it from above. I think that's exactly what we Russians like in the SCO, for example, or in BRICS, and what our friends in Central Asia like too—the flexibility and the absence of totalitarian control over their foreign policies.

So that is, in my view, quite an erratic way of doing things. You know, I was giving an interview a couple of months ago, and I got a relatively similar question from a French journalist. She asked me, what is the main advantage of the SCO? And I said, the advantage of the SCO is that it doesn't have a leader. She was surprised. She told me, how can you have an organization without a leader? For her, for the French journalist, it was something absolutely unthinkable, because she grew up in this NATO, American-centric narrative that any institution, in order to function, should have a leader—otherwise it doesn't function. Well, of course, it is more difficult to live in a free society than to live in military barracks.

We do understand that. And we understand that since the SCO or BRICS are societies, not military barracks, it's difficult to do many, many things that could have been done otherwise. But the absence of sovereignty and freedom in Eurasia, in my view, is not only unnecessary—it's impossible. So we should take the absence of any opportunity to have a single centralizing leadership in Eurasia as a given, as something that is the ultimate condition of our interstate relationships. And that suits everyone. But coming back for a second to your previous question—I apologize, I forgot to mention one thing about the zero-sum narrative. Well, the zero-sum narrative, I see it in a slightly wider context, as part of European political philosophy.

You know, when I'm teaching students—when I go to my students—they're Russians, they're Chinese, Central Asians, from many other countries. I tell them during the first seminar that, in order to approach a certain question, we need to find a conflict, because without conflict there is no study. People from China don't understand that. People from Asia don't understand that. Because my thinking and theory of international relations, as you know, is around zero-sum—it's around conflict. So I don't blame the West for zero-sum thinking, just as I don't blame a predator for eating meat or a vegetarian for eating grass. This is part of Western political philosophy. There's nothing to blame them for.

## #Glenn

Well, it's interesting. The focus on centralizing power in these international institutions—you could argue that this becomes more necessary when there's an external adversary to confront. I mean, if you look at ancient Greece, what made them centralize power was the Persians. In the United States, they also centralized power when they began to engage more with other great powers. And you can say the same with the European Community, which became the European Union. Once they were focused on improving relations and security with each other, instead of seeking security against non-members, they didn't need the same level of centralization.

It's only now that they're building this geopolitical EU that they have to centralize all this power. And, you know, you could argue that within BRICS and the SCO, the fact that there's no centralization of power should be reassuring to other states because—well, there's no way the Indians and the Chinese are going to ally against the Americans, I guess. But within your predictions or model for Central Asia, how do you see the war in Iran fitting in? Because it seems to have a very

disruptive impact with unforeseen consequences. Do you see this affecting Eurasia in any significant way?

## #Timofei Bordachev

Of course, people in Central Asia and in Central Eurasia generally do not want Iran to collapse. For them, it's going to be a challenge, because if Iran collapses, its territory could become a base for different terrorist and extremist groups. And knowing the habits of our counterparts in the West, we're absolutely sure that the Americans or the Europeans would exploit this opportunity and take advantage of it. So the collapse of Iran could bring a serious change for Central Asia—especially now, when the situation in Afghanistan has been relatively stabilized and the government in Kabul is able to control most of the territory or settle conflicts with neighboring states caused by problems along the border, like with Pakistan or Tajikistan. So they can generally manage, even though they don't control everything.

So in this sense, the situation around Iran is seen with a sense of danger. But on the other hand, it also gives them some opportunities, because they can gain something from the collapse of the Persian Gulf economic miracle. They can get some money back, attract new investment that might otherwise have gone to the Gulf countries. And there's also a new opportunity—a new chance—for the Trans-Afghanistan Logistics and Transportation Corridor to be built, since the north–south trade routes still need to be established and developed. Now, the Western flank—I mean, the situation between Iran and Israel—seems likely to remain unstable for a long time, and that opens new opportunities for countries like Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states as well. So these events are viewed with very mixed feelings.

## #Glenn

I'm glad you brought up Afghanistan because, you know, once NATO pulled out, Afghanistan disappeared from the headlines across the West. But, as we learned from Russian media—and also Chinese, for that matter—both the Russians and the Chinese had their own careful approaches to engaging the new authorities in Afghanistan, essentially to stabilize a region that had been out of control. For those of us who haven't followed closely since the NATO occupation ended, how are the Chinese and Russians now managing this situation? It almost strips them of autonomy, but how do they handle their relations with Afghanistan?

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, as you probably know, at the beginning of July last year, Russia officially recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a state, and the Taliban government as part of that government. The flag was raised on the building of the Afghan embassy in Moscow. The Chinese haven't followed us yet, even though they've developed relations with the Taliban government and are already making some investments there. Second, the current authorities in Afghanistan can be considered

anything but puppets. They can continue to explore and establish relations with Russia, with China, and with the United States as well—why not?

But they've managed not to be under the dictate of any of the great powers. In that sense, Afghanistan is moving closer to Central Asia in terms of its behavior and its position in international politics. And that's a very important change. I saw the people of Afghanistan just four days ago. They look much better now than they did five years ago, when I was there observing the retreat of American forces. How the Afghan people looked five years ago and how they look now are two very different things.

They are more psychologically strong—stable, calm. And of course, we can understand them, because for 20 years they lived in a situation where sudden fire from an American helicopter, or anything else, could hit their houses in Kabul, destroying the big walls around them. This is the most important indicator. For many decades of civil war and international occupation—Soviet and American—people in Kabul and other major cities built huge walls around their houses. Now they are tearing them down. And this is one of the most important indicators of how people feel about their stability, the current situation in the country, and their future.

I consider this destruction of the walls within the cities a very important indicator. Even though, of course, we know that Afghanistan is still very vulnerable to different sorts of terrorist activities and border misunderstandings with Pakistan—which recently caused relatively big clashes—they have now entered negotiations. So the situation in Afghanistan is under the control of the government, and it allows both China and Russia to contact them, to work with them, and to understand that this government has its own full sovereign right to engage and cooperate with any external power.

## #Glenn

Yeah, I've made the point that I think it's probably in Russia's interest not to be all-powerful or a prospective hegemon of Eurasia, because that just incentivizes a lot of balancing. I've noticed that when Russia's in the east—for example, in the Central Asian states—you see that the rise of economic connectivity with China creates a lot of Chinese influence. So there's often an interest among these states to get closer to Russia, simply to have some balance of power or balance of dependence in the region. I don't know, it seems like the equilibrium is working more in Russia's favor by not necessarily being the biggest one on the block. But you mentioned something about the transportation corridors that should be built—transportation, you know, both resource and corridor—in Afghanistan.

But this also applies to the rest of Eurasia. And indeed, if you look back at the Great Game, it was, to a large extent, about the expansion of railroads as well. Later on, under Alfred Mackinder, the concern was these big transcontinental railroads. Do you see more investments in this coming up in the years ahead? I mean, yes, the Chinese have their Belt and Road Initiative, and the Russians, Iranians, and Indians have their International North-South Transportation Corridor. But now that we

see maritime corridors being disrupted by the relative decline of the U.S.—with Venezuela, Cuba, the efforts to hijack Russian ships, and what we're seeing in the Strait of Hormuz—do you see land corridors becoming more important? Because that would, I guess, elevate the relevance of Central Asia.

## #Timofei Bordachev

Yes, I absolutely agree. Speaking again about the relationships with neighboring powers or any other powers, what we see now is that China is a big contributor, but China doesn't create jobs. Actually, it's only Russia that provides jobs for Central Asians in the Russian market. We create jobs. About seven to ten million people from Central Asia are employed within the Russian Federation, and this is a very significant contribution to their economic stability. By doing this, Russia is far ahead of any other international player as a contributor—first of all, to economic stability, and only secondarily in security affairs. Because, believe me, our Central Asian friends have their own armies and security forces.

They can handle those problems that may arise today with their own national, sovereign security forces. They don't actually need Russian protection—they need jobs. And we help them create jobs for the people in Central Asia. Regarding transportation and logistics, listen, the biggest challenge to developing these sectors in Central Asia is that everyone believes once the conflict between Russia and the West is resolved or ends, everything will again move quickly through Russia, bypassing Central Asia. Because we have the wonderful Trans-Siberian Railway, wonderful airports, wonderful infrastructure, and great expertise. So, the day after we have peace in Ukraine...

Everyone will look to invest in and develop east–west transportation corridors running through Russia, or through Kazakhstan and Russia, from China to Europe. And this is the biggest challenge. People are reluctant to invest because they anticipate peace in Europe, and that's a problem. For Russia, of course, it's important not only to create jobs on our own territory but also to help our friends and allies in Central Asia strengthen their economic stability and mutual social cohesion, and to help Afghanistan as well. Because, as you correctly said, we are not going to occupy these territories. We're going to do what we did 150 years ago—we're not going to repeat it. It doesn't make any sense from the perspective of today's Russian strategic thinking.

## #Glenn

Just one last question. If the Great Game is not a good analytical model for understanding what's happening in Central Asia—and I guess in many ways it's a bit outdated—what do you think is the right framework then? What would be a good way to assess what's happening there?

## #Timofei Bordachev

Well, for a couple of years now, we've been promoting the notion of the "world majority"—the large number of countries whose ultimate goal in strategic thinking is to make their own decisions: to decide for themselves with whom to trade, negotiate, and strengthen political relationships. In this sense, I think the states of Central Asia are very similar to those in the Middle East, Southeast Asia—really, to every state that's part of the world majority. This is a good analytical framework. They're looking for freedom of choice. And we should recognize this—in Russia, in China, and in the West—that for them, the ultimate purpose of strategy is freedom of choice. We should shape our politics based on that clear understanding.

## #Glenn

Sorry, I'll add one last question here. A key problem with freedom of choice is when exclusive security arrangements start being pushed, which undermines the security of others. You can apply this to Central America or even to Ukraine. For example, countries like Mexico should have the freedom to do what they want, but they don't have the freedom to host a Chinese or Russian military base—just as Ukraine should have freedom to make its own choices, but not to place American missiles on the Russian border. Is that the main or possible future challenge in Central Asia—if exclusive blocs start to emerge, or if the Central Asian states are used essentially against other great powers? Or is that not something you see on the horizon? I don't think Russia needs to put our rockets in Central Asia. Against whom?

## #Timofei Bordachev

We have good relations with China. We have good relations with India. Our relations with Iran are also very good. So there's no neighbor against whom Russia would want to place rockets in Central Asia. The same goes for China—China doesn't need to put its rockets there. And the West can't, physically, because of Central Asia's geography, place its rockets there either—unlike in Ukraine. So, in this sense, I think the geopolitics of Central Asia are not favorable in terms of international rivalry, but very, very favorable in terms of their own...

## #Glenn

Good response. Well, thank you very much for taking the time. Again, I'll leave the article in the description for those who'd like to read it.