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THE RUSSO-CHINESE AGREEMENT ON THE ILI (GHULJA) QUESTION

Sobirov Sardorbek Abdusattor ugli

Senior Lecturer of the Department of World History

Andijan State University

E-mail: sobirov88@adu.uz

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7437-1529>

Abstract

This article analyzes the diplomatic negotiations conducted between the Russian Empire and the Qing Empire over the Ili (Ghulja) Question during the 1870s and 1880s. The study examines the factors behind the emergence of the Ili Question, the political situation in Eastern Turkestan, the occupation of Ili by the Russian Empire in 1871, and the stages in the development of diplomatic relations between the two states. In addition, the content and significance of the Treaty of Livadia and the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, as well as their role in resolving the Ili Question, are analyzed. The research demonstrates that the Ili Question was not merely a territorial dispute, but an important component of the clash of international relations and geopolitical interests in the late nineteenth century. The study employed the methods of historicism, objectivity, comparative analysis, and a systematic approach.

Keywords: Ili Question, Russian Empire, Qing Empire, Russo–Chinese negotiations, Eastern Turkestan, Ili Valley, Ghulja, Yettishar State, Yakub Bek, Zuo Zongtang, Treaty of Livadia, Treaty of Saint Petersburg, “Great Game”.

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INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan became an important geopolitical region where the interests of major empires clashed. In particular, the expansion of the Russian Empire into Turkestan and the Qing Empire's attempts to preserve its dominance in Eastern Turkestan led to the intensification of political and diplomatic relations between the two states. Within this context, the Ili (Ghulja) Question occupied a special place.

During the 1860s, the Dungan and Uyghur uprisings in Eastern Turkestan significantly weakened the authority of the Qing Empire in the region. Under conditions of political instability, the Yettishar State led by Yakub Bek was established. The situation in the region also affected the interests of the Russian Empire. In particular, issues related to border security and control over trade routes encouraged Russia to pursue an active policy in the area. As a result, Russian troops occupied the Ili region in 1871.

The Russian government justified the occupation of Ghulja as a temporary military measure. However, after the Qing Empire restored its authority in Eastern Turkestan, it firmly raised the issue of returning Ghulja. Consequently, prolonged diplomatic negotiations began between the two states. The Treaty of Livadia of 1879 and the Treaty of Saint Petersburg of 1881 became important diplomatic agreements aimed at resolving the Ili Question.

The Ili Question was one of the most significant political issues in Russo–Chinese relations in the late nineteenth century. It was not merely a territorial dispute, but was closely connected with the Russian Empire's interests in Central Asia and the Qing Empire's policy of preserving its territorial integrity. Therefore, this issue occupies an important place both in the history of Eastern Turkestan and in the history of international relations.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

The problem addressed in this article was studied on the basis of official documents, historical sources, and scholarly literature related to the diplomatic relations between the Russian Empire and the Qing Empire. The source base of the research consists of international treaties, diplomatic correspondence, military reports, and historical memoirs dating to the second half of the nineteenth century. The article also extensively utilizes modern historiographical studies. In particular, the works of Hodong Kim, Musa Sayrami, and the studies of Peter Hopkirk are of significant scholarly importance for the analysis of the topic. These sources made it possible to examine the political processes in Eastern Turkestan, the interests of the Russian and Qing Empires, and the broader international situation.

The research methodology primarily relied on the principles of historicism and objectivity. In addition, the methods of comparative historical analysis, systematic approach, and problem-chronological analysis were employed throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Eastern Turkestan became one of the most important geopolitical regions in Asia where the interests of major empires collided. In particular, the internal political crisis of the Qing Empire and the intensification of local uprisings in the region significantly aggravated the situation in Eastern Turkestan. These developments later became one of the main factors contributing to the emergence of the Ili Question.

By the 1850s and 1860s, the Qing Empire was experiencing a profound internal political and economic crisis. The Taiping Rebellion, financial instability, and the weakening of central authority reduced the empire's control over its peripheral territories. In particular, dissatisfaction with the Qing administration among the

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local Muslim population in Eastern Turkestan steadily increased [Kim H. Holy War in China. Stanford, 2004. P. 37].

In 1864, Dungan and Uyghur uprisings broke out in Eastern Turkestan and rapidly spread across much of the region. As a result of the uprisings, many Qing military garrisons were destroyed, and the local administrative system collapsed. The authority of the Qing administration weakened especially in Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, and the Ili region [Musa Sayrami. Tarikh-i Hamidi. Translated by E. Schluessel. New York, 2023. P. 214].

Under conditions of political instability in Eastern Turkestan, the struggle for local power intensified. In this situation, Yakub Beg, who was connected with military circles of the Kokand Khanate, emerged on the political stage. Within a short period, he succeeded in establishing his authority in Kashgar, Yarkand, Aksu, and other cities. As a result, the Yettishar State was established. Yakub Beg sought to centralize the state, create a regular army, and develop diplomatic relations with foreign powers [Kim H. Holy War in China. Stanford, 2004. P. 112].

Yakub Beg's political activities were closely monitored by the Russian Empire and Great Britain. Eastern Turkestan held considerable importance in terms of controlling international trade routes and strategic territories in Central Asia. In particular, the Ili Valley and the city of Ghulja possessed special economic and military significance. This region bordered the Semirechye Province of the Russian Empire and represented one of the key junctions of regional trade routes [Hopkirk P. The Great Game. New York, 1990. P. 165]. The political crisis in Eastern Turkestan caused serious concern within the Russian Empire. The administration of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship emphasized that instability in the region could pose a threat to Russian border security. Moreover, the Russian government was also worried about the growing influence of Great Britain in Eastern Turkestan, since British diplomats and trade representatives

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sought to establish contacts with Yakub Beg [Khalfin N. A. *Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii*. Moscow, 1960. P. 198].

The political situation in the Ili region played a particularly important role in the formation of the Ili Question. The Ili Valley was one of the economically developed regions of Eastern Turkestan, where trade, agriculture, and handicrafts were highly developed. At the same time, the region's proximity to Russian borders further increased its strategic significance [Kuropatkin A. N. *Kashgariya*. Saint Petersburg, 1879. P. 96]. By the late 1860s and early 1870s, the political situation in the Ili region had also deteriorated. As a result of local uprisings and internal struggles for power, the Qing administration lost effective control over the territory. The Russian Empire assessed this situation from the perspective of its own interests and began to see an opportunity for military intervention in Ghulja. Consequently, the Ili Question became one of the most important diplomatic issues between the Russian and Qing Empires.

By the 1870s, the political situation in Eastern Turkestan had become even more complicated. The authority of the Qing Empire in the region weakened significantly, while central administration in the Ili Valley and Ghulja virtually collapsed. Local uprisings, internal power struggles, and economic decline intensified political instability in the region. This situation increased the political activity of the Russian Empire in Eastern Turkestan and brought the issue of occupying Ghulja onto the political agenda [Kim H. *Holy War in China*. Stanford, 2004. P. 156].

For the Russian Empire, the Ili region possessed considerable strategic importance. The Ili Valley bordered the Semirechye Province of the Russian Empire and represented one of the principal trade routes connecting Eastern Turkestan and Central Asia. Furthermore, the Russian government emphasized that political instability in the region could threaten the security of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship [Kuropatkin A. N. *Kashgariya*. Saint Petersburg, 1879. P. 104].

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One of the leading figures pursuing an active policy regarding the Ili Question was the Governor-General of Turkestan, Konstantin Petrovich Kaufman. In his reports to the Russian government, he provided a detailed analysis of the situation in the Ili region and attempted to justify the necessity of Russian military intervention. Kaufman stressed that the unrest in the region endangered Russian borders and that it was necessary to protect Russian citizens and commercial interests [Khalfin N. A. *Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii*. Moscow, 1960. P. 205].

The Russian Empire did not assess the events in Eastern Turkestan solely from the perspective of security. Research demonstrates that Russia also sought to expand its political influence in the region and limit British activity in Eastern Turkestan. British diplomats and commercial representatives were actively attempting to establish relations with the state of Yakub Beg [Hopkirk P. *The Great Game*. New York, 1990. P. 173].

In June 1871, Russian troops under the command of General G. A. Kolpakovsky entered the Ghulja region. Within a short period, Russian forces took control of the main territories of the Ili Valley. Ghulja was occupied with almost no serious resistance. The Russian government described this action as a temporary military measure and declared that its primary objective was to restore order in the region. The occupation of Ghulja by Russia was met with strong protest from the Qing Empire. However, due to internal political difficulties and ongoing military operations in Eastern Turkestan, the Qing government was unable to take active measures against Russia at that time. As a result, Russia introduced its own administrative system in Ghulja. A temporary Russian administration was established in the Ili region, and military garrisons were deployed there [Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitaem. Saint Petersburg, 1889. P. 198]. The Russian administration also began to control economic and commercial activities in Ghulja. Favorable conditions were created for Russian merchants, the security of trade routes was ensured, and the economic resources of the region were studied.

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This further strengthened Russia's political and economic influence in the Ili Valley [Kuropatkin A. N. Kashgariya. Saint Petersburg, 1879. P. 118].

The occupation of Ghulja by the Russian Empire in 1871 became one of the most significant political issues in Russo–Chinese relations. Initially, due to internal political problems and ongoing military operations in Eastern Turkestan, the Qing Empire was unable to pursue an active policy against Russia. However, by the second half of the 1870s, the Qing Empire succeeded in restoring its authority in Eastern Turkestan [Kim H. Holy War in China. Stanford, 2004. P. 243].

Under the leadership of Zuo Zongtang, Qing forces carried out a successful military campaign against the state of Yakub Beg. As a result, Kashgar and other territories returned to Qing control. The death of Yakub Beg in 1877 further weakened the Yettishar State [Musa Sayrami. Tarikh-i Hamidi. New York, 2023. P. 301]. Having restored its position in Eastern Turkestan, the Qing government began demanding the return of Ghulja from Russia. The government in Beijing regarded the Russian occupation of Ghulja as a threat to the territorial integrity of the Qing Empire [Khalfin N. A. Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii. Moscow, 1960. P. 223].

The Russian Empire, however, pursued a cautious diplomatic policy regarding the Ili Question. On the one hand, Russia sought to avoid an open military confrontation with the Qing Empire; on the other hand, it attempted to preserve its political and economic interests in the Ili Valley. In particular, Russia paid considerable attention to obtaining commercial privileges in Eastern Turkestan [Petrovsky N. F. "O Kul'dzhinskoy voprose." Turkestanskaya vedomosti. 1880. No. 16. P. 3]. During the negotiations, serious disagreements emerged between the two sides. While the Qing Empire demanded the complete return of Ghulja, Russia attempted to retain certain strategic territories under its control. At the same time, Russia continued to describe the occupation of Ghulja as a temporary measure [Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitayem. Saint Petersburg, 1889. P. 207]. The first major result of the prolonged diplomatic negotiations between the

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Russian and Qing Empires over the Ili Question was the Treaty of Livadia, signed in 1879. After restoring its military position in Eastern Turkestan, the Qing government firmly placed the return of Ghulja on the diplomatic agenda. Russia, meanwhile, attempted to avoid worsening relations with the Qing Empire while simultaneously preserving its political and economic interests in the Ili Valley [Khalfin N. A. *Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii*. Moscow, 1960. P. 236].

The negotiations were conducted at the Livadia residence in Crimea. The Qing Empire was represented by the envoy Chun Hou, while the Russian side sought to resolve the Ili Question in accordance with its own interests. During the negotiations, Russia approached the issue of returning Ghulja with caution and aimed to retain control over certain strategic territories [Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitaem. Saint Petersburg, 1889. P. 215]. According to the Treaty of Livadia signed on October 2, 1879, Russia agreed to return most of the Ghulja territory to the Qing Empire. However, certain western parts of the Ili region were to remain under Russian control. In addition, Russia obtained significant economic and commercial privileges in Eastern Turkestan. The Qing Empire also undertook the obligation to pay a large indemnity to Russia.

For Russia, this treaty was regarded as an important political and economic achievement. Russia managed to preserve its influence in the region without completely relinquishing Ghulja. At the same time, the commercial privileges obtained under the agreement served to strengthen Russian economic interests [Petrovsky N. F. "O Kul'dzhinskoy voprose." *Turkestanskaya vedomosti*. 1880. No. 17. P. 2].

However, the Treaty of Livadia provoked strong dissatisfaction within the Qing Empire. Chinese public opinion and political circles considered the treaty contrary to the interests of the state. In particular, the territorial and economic concessions granted to Russia were heavily criticized. As a result, the envoy Chun Hou, who had signed the treaty, came under severe criticism, and the Beijing

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government refused to ratify the agreement [Kim H. Holy War in China. Stanford, 2004. P. 267].

The refusal of the Qing Empire to ratify the Treaty of Livadia further complicated the Ili Question. Chinese ruling circles regarded the agreement as incompatible with national interests and rejected the territorial and economic privileges granted to Russia. Consequently, diplomatic relations between the two states became tense once again, creating the necessity to reconsider the Ili Question [Khalfin N. A. Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii. Moscow, 1960. P. 243].

After the cancellation of the Treaty of Livadia, new negotiations began between the Russian and Qing Empires. This time, the Qing government adopted a much firmer position than during the previous negotiations. The successful military campaigns led by Zuo Zongtang in Eastern Turkestan and the restoration of Qing authority in the region significantly strengthened Beijing's diplomatic position [Kim H. Holy War in China. Stanford, 2004. P. 274].

As a result of prolonged negotiations, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg was signed on February 24, 1881. This treaty occupies an important place in history as the principal international agreement that resolved the Ili Question. According to the treaty, Russia agreed to return the greater part of the Ghulja territory to the Qing Empire. However, certain territories in the western part of the Ili region remained under Russian control [Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitaem. Saint Petersburg, 1889. P. 228].

The Treaty of Saint Petersburg was not limited solely to territorial issues. According to its provisions, Russia obtained a number of commercial and economic privileges in Eastern Turkestan. Russian merchants were granted the opportunity to conduct free trade in certain regions, the right to expand consular activities was recognized, and additional conditions were created for the development of economic relations. The Ili Question became one of the most important political issues in relations between the Russian and Qing Empires in the late nineteenth century. This issue was not merely a territorial dispute, but

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was also closely connected with the clash of geopolitical interests in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan. While the Russian Empire sought to strengthen its political and economic influence in the region, the Qing Empire attempted to preserve its territorial integrity [Khal'fin N. A. *Politika Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii*. Moscow, 1960. P. 251].

The Ili Question also occupied an important place within the broader system of international relations. In particular, Great Britain closely and cautiously monitored Russia's growing activity in Eastern Turkestan. For this reason, the issue emerged as an integral part of the "Great Game" policy that unfolded in Central Asia during the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The complex political situation that emerged in Eastern Turkestan during the second half of the nineteenth century had a significant impact on the emergence and development of the Ili Question. The weakening of Qing political authority in the region, local uprisings, and the establishment of the Yettishar State intensified the political activity of the Russian Empire in Eastern Turkestan. As a result, the Ili region became an important geopolitical space where the interests of two major empires collided.

The study demonstrates that the Russian occupation of Ghulja was not limited solely to military or security considerations. Rather, it formed part of Russia's broader policy aimed at strengthening its political influence in the region, protecting its economic interests, and consolidating its strategic position. At the same time, the Qing Empire sought to restore its authority in Eastern Turkestan and preserve its territorial integrity.

The process of Russo-Chinese negotiations revealed the complex relationship between the political interests and diplomatic approaches of the two states. The Treaties of Livadia and Saint Petersburg represented important stages in the resolution of the Ili Question. In particular, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg created

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the conditions for resolving the conflict between the two sides through diplomatic means.

The study also confirms that the Ili Question occupied an important place within the system of nineteenth-century international relations. This issue influenced not only relations between the Russian and Qing Empires, but also the broader geopolitical processes unfolding in Central Asia. Therefore, the Ili Question can be regarded as one of the major political and diplomatic events in the history of Eastern Turkestan.

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