

Eureka Journal of Humanities and Social Research (EJHSR)

ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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<https://eurekaopenaccess.com/index.php/4>

THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ILI REGION FOR THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

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Abstract

This article examines the geopolitical significance of the Ili region for the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century. The study analyzes the natural-geographical position of the region, its resource potential, and transport and communication capabilities within the framework of Russian foreign policy. It also explores the connections of the Ili region with the Qing Empire, Central Asia, and international trade routes. The author argues that the Ili region played a crucial role in strengthening the Russian Empire's influence in Eastern Turkestan and shaping the regional balance of power.

Keywords: Ili region, Russian Empire, geopolitics, Eastern Turkestan, Qing Empire, international relations, trade routes, strategic region.

Introduction

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the clash of interests of major empires intensified precisely in the Ili region of Eastern Turkestan. This period was marked by significant political transformations in Central Asia, and the Ili region became the center of this rivalry. The main reasons for its geopolitical significance were as follows: first, control over trade routes—the Ili Valley was an important crossroads of trade routes between Central Asia and East Asia and held great economic importance. Second, military-strategic location—the Ili Valley constituted a strategic territory between the Russian and Qing Empires. Third, natural resources—the Ili Valley possessed rich land and water resources,

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where agriculture and animal husbandry were well developed. This was because the geographical location of the region represented an important point for the geostrategic interests of empires. Specifically, the Ili region was situated in a highly significant part of the region: it was bordered by the Tian Shan Mountains to the north, while to the south it was enclosed by the Talhi Mountains and from the north by the Narat Mountains; it was also located in the area where the Khorgos River flows from the west. Therefore, the relief of the region narrows from the east and opens toward the west, forming a triangular shape. For this reason, Europeans referred to this area as the “Ili Delta¹.”

It is known that in 1758, after the Dzungar Khanate was occupied by the Qing Empire, the Ili region was transformed into a military colony on the northwestern borders of the Qing Empire. The reason was that the Ili region possessed natural defensive fortification lines and served as a natural economic supply base, which further strengthened its geostrategic position. In addition, one of the factors increasing the region’s geopolitical significance was its location at the crossroads of the ancient Great Silk Road. Initially, the Ili region was regarded by the Qing authorities solely as a military territory, consisting of fortified settlements where Manchu and Chinese soldiers were to reside. A military governor was appointed to administer the region; he was stationed in the city of Ghulja and was subordinate to the Qing Empire’s office of foreign affairs. Under his authority were garrison commanders and a small number of officials².

In general, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ili region was not only an important geostrategic military stronghold for the Qing Empire, but also became a central focal point of the political and economic interests of the Russian Empire. For this reason, a number of political and economic agreements were concluded between the Russian and Qing Empires. In particular, interstate

¹ Noda. J. Reconsidering the Ili Crisis: The Ili Region under Russian Rule (1871–1881). Waseda University, Organization for Islamic Area Studies (WIAS), Japan, 2016. – p. 163.

² Почекаев П. Ю. Specific Features of the Legal Status of the Ili Province between 1760 and the 1860s // Известия Уральского федерального университета. Серия 2. Гуманитарные науки и искусство. – 2018. – Т. 20, № 4 (183). – С. 152

Eureka Journal of Humanities and Social Research (EJHSR)

ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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relations between Russia and China in the second half of the nineteenth century rose to a qualitatively new and systematic stage in diplomatic, political, and trade-economic terms. The main stages of interstate relations were as follows: the Treaty of Ghulja (1851), the Treaties of Aigun and Tientsin (1858), the Convention of Beijing (1860), the Chuguchak Protocol (1864), the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1881), the New Margilan Protocol (1884), the St. Petersburg Agreement (1894), and the Moscow Treaty (1896)³.

Thus, after border issues between the two countries were determined in accordance with the Convention of Beijing of 1860, the protection of imperial interests in political and economic terms became the most important diplomatic issue serving to strengthen Russia's position in Eastern Turkestan. For this purpose, first of all, the first Russian consulates were established in 1851 in order to protect Russia's political rights in the region. Russian representatives I. Zakharov and A. Tatarinov carried out their activities as envoys in Ghulja at the beginning of 1852

Documents related to this activity, preserved in numerous instructions in the Asian Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contain interesting materials on the initial stage of diplomatic relations between Russia and China. The archival data note that, in accordance with the Russo-Chinese Treaty of Ghulja of 1851, Russian representatives were present in the cities of Ghulja and Tarbagatai, and that the envoys were assigned tasks such as establishing Russian trading posts (factories) in the Xinjiang region, maintaining relations with local Chinese authorities and merchants, supervising monetary trade operations, and monitoring the course of Russo-Chinese trade. The establishment of consular posts played a significant role in the further development of diplomatic relations between the two empires. Already in 1861, the first Russian diplomatic representative was appointed to China. However, even before that, in 1858,

³ Темников Е.Г. Территориальный вопрос в межгосударственных отношениях России и Китая во второй половине XIX века // Учёные записки Казанского государственного университета. Гуманитарные науки. 2007. Т. 149, кн. 4. С. 203.

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Russian trade had been opened in Chinese seaports, and the consular posts in Ili and Tarbagatai became the first diplomatic missions of foreign states in the Qing Empire⁴.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire, proceeding from its political and economic interests, began to send scientific and political expeditions in order to study the region more deeply. In particular, the “Russian Geographical Society,” established in 1845, organized numerous scientific, commercial, and military expeditions to Central Asia.

With the aim of understanding the geopolitical aspects of the Ili region specifically from the perspective of Russian interests, expeditions were organized by Russian scholars and military engineers. Along with studying the social life of the population, the economy of the region, and trade processes, they also investigated its geography, zoology, and botany. The main purpose of assigning these tasks to the expedition members was that, through the study of geography, it would be possible to determine the strategic position of the Ili region as a transit territory of great importance for the Russian Empire’s overland foreign trade and to identify and examine convenient routes for commerce in this area. It was noted in issue No. 21 of the newspaper **Golos** (1876) that the broad low plains leading from the Kyrgyz steppe to Ghulja constituted the main natural route connecting Central Asia with Eastern Turkestan; that the city of Ghulja, located on the banks of the Ili River, represented the most convenient strategic “key” to entering the valley. In general, the Ili region, surrounded on the north, south, and east by the Borokhoro, Tien Shan, and Kumul mountain ranges, was transformed into a natural fortress, making access to the region difficult, since entry routes consisted of only a limited number of passes. It was precisely during the Muslim uprising of the 1860s that access routes for Russian trade remained open through Ghulja,

⁴ Кудрявцева Е.П. Первые российские консульства в Китае // Вестник МГИМО-Университета. 2018. №3 (60). С. 59–71.

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which increased its importance for Russia as the only strategic corridor for access to Eastern Turkestan⁵.

The main reason for organizing these expeditions by the Russian Empire is explained by the intensification of geopolitical competition in the region. In particular, the activities of Britain, which sought to enter the region through India and expand its sphere of influence, posed a serious threat to Russian interests. Therefore, the Russian Empire organized expeditions specifically related to the geographical conditions of the Ili region in order to limit Britain's political and economic influence in Ili and to strengthen its own position in this territory. For this reason, the logistical characteristics of the region were thoroughly examined. One such expedition was the geographical and ethnographic observations conducted in 1870 in the Ghulja region by Baron K. Kaulbars. In his essay entitled *"The Ghulja Province,"* written on the basis of these observations, valuable information about the Ili River is presented. The main reason for this was that establishing river trade along the Ili River was one of the key political and economic objectives of the empire. At the section where navigation along the Ili River begins, the main current of the river flows from the northeast toward the south, which further strengthens the natural logistical conditions of the region. This, in turn, defines the geostrategic role of the river as a natural means of transport within the Ili region⁶.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the location of the region among the Tien Shan Mountains created an important strategic advantage for whichever state controlled it. This territory, as a natural fortress, was extremely convenient for exercising military control and ensuring border security. In particular, the natural defensibility of the Ili region and the difficulty of enemy penetration ensured that it always retained high military and political significance. Moreover, the presence of fertile lands, the availability of fish resources through river

⁵ Туркестанский сборник. 196 том. Ст. 51-59.

⁶ Туркестанский сборник. 95 том..117-149 с.

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systems, and abundant reserves of drinking water made it possible to sustain and supply military forces over a long period. These aspects further increased the geostrategic importance of the region. Valuable information by Yu. A. Sosnovsky is presented in Volume 151 of the *Turkestan Collection*. According to the author, in order to understand the true geopolitical position of the country, it is necessary to become closely acquainted with Inner China. Therefore, it was decided by the empire to send a special expedition aimed at studying the natural, economic, and political conditions of this region. The expedition was tasked with conducting a topographical study of the route from the Zaysan post to the provinces of Southwestern China and determining the extent to which this route was suitable for trade. It was also assigned to identify, in the event of future development of trade relations, which locations would be appropriate for establishing consulates or trading posts, and in which areas it would be sufficient to limit activities to trade agencies. Another important task of the expedition was to collect as complete information as possible about the Muslim uprising, which would help determine the future political fate of the affected territories. These general tasks were developed in coordination with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, and War, and were officially approved after being presented to the Emperor by the State Chancellor on January 5, 1874⁷.

According to Colonel Yu. A. Sosnovsky, the issue of supplying wheat from the Ili Valley created significant opportunities for Russia. On this basis, it became possible to accumulate reserves, construct storage facilities, and strengthen the system of provisioning the army with food supplies. If the army began to rely on local suppliers, this could turn into a powerful trade and economic instrument for Russia. Therefore, the issue of military supply could also be easily resolved within the Ili region⁸.

⁷ Туркестанский сборник. 151 том. 84 с.

⁸ Туркестанский сборник. 151 том. 100 с.

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In general, the expedition dispatched under the direction of Sosnovsky was assigned the following tasks:

1. To conduct a topographical survey of the route from the Zaysan Post to the southwestern provinces of China;
2. To determine the advantages of this logistical route for Russian trade;
3. To make efforts to establish consulates and diplomatic missions in these favorable areas⁹.

In 1858–1859, an expedition to the Ili region was also organized by Chokan Valikhanov and the Russian military topographer Pyotr Kuzmich Obruchev. This expedition was likewise carried out within the framework of the geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire in Central Asia. The main objective of the expedition was to study the political, economic, and ethnographic situation in Eastern Turkestan, as well as to prepare for the expansion of Russian trade routes. The tasks assigned to the expedition were as follows:

1. Through conducting ethnographic and geographical research, Chokan Valikhanov was to collect valuable information about the Turkic peoples of Ghulja and its surrounding areas, in particular the Uighurs, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs; to study their way of life, customs, agriculture, and trade conditions; and to analyze the geographical, economic, and socio-political situation of the Muzart Pass between Ghulja and Kashgar.
2. To study the trade routes in the regions of Kashgar and Ghulja, to analyze the state of Chinese rule in these areas, to meet with local elites and merchants in order to gather information important for Russia, and to assess the prospects for developing trade and diplomatic relations with the Qing Empire in the future, as well as to examine the influence of Britain and other states in the region¹⁰.

The geo-economic significance of the Ili region as a transit corridor of the valley was also noted in the Ghulja–Tian Shan–Lob Nor expedition of Nikolai

⁹ Туркестанский сборник. 151 том. 1 с.

¹⁰ Валиханов Ч. Ч. Собрание сочинений в пяти томах. Алма-Ата: Главная редакция Казахской советской энциклопедии, 1985. Т. 2. 210 с.

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Mikhailovich Przhevalsky. According to the author's observations, Ili clearly occupied a central place in the regional transit and trade system by the end of the nineteenth century. The very fact that the expedition began in Ghulja confirms that this city functioned as a strategic "gateway" to Eastern Turkestan. The high population density of the Ili Valley, the development of horticulture and animal husbandry, and the presence of villages and market points along trade routes all contributed to the economic vitality of the region. As the author noted, the natural conditions of the valley—abundant rivers, extensive pastures, and lands suitable for livestock—facilitated caravan movement and enhanced its transit capacity. The fact that the expedition proceeded from Ghulja toward the Tian Shan and Lob Nor, and that the necessary equipment and a large caravan were assembled precisely in this location, demonstrates the importance of Ili as a logistical center. The routes passing through the region, crossing mountain passes, connected the directions of Turkestan and Tibet. For this reason, the author evaluates Ili as one of the most convenient transit routes in Central Asia, both in terms of natural-geographical conditions and from the perspective of trade and transport infrastructure¹¹.

It is true that the "Muslim Uprising" that occurred in the region during a certain period had a significant impact on the economic and social life of the area. One of the main objectives of the Russian Empire was to strengthen trade relations with Kashgar through Ghulja. Among the notable expeditions was that of Colonel Poltoratsky, organized in the summer of 1867 to the Naryn region. The main task of this expedition was to survey the well-known Muzart Pass in the Tian Shan. For the Russian Empire, the Muzart Pass, located on the border between the Ili region and Kashgar, was of great importance. Trade routes passed through this pass, making it a convenient strategic route for Russian merchants. According to sources, on May 22, 1867, V. A. Poltoratsky set out with a small military detachment from the camp of the Tian Shan unit, located near the Russo-Chinese

¹¹ Туркестанский сборник. 160 том. 231-241 с.

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border. It is noted that he then crossed to the right bank of the Tekes River and proceeded along the Tian Shan gorge toward the Muzart Pass. According to the data of Poltoratsky's military expedition, the Muzart Pass was the main and only communication route between the Ili region and Kashgar. However, after the Muslim Uprising and the occupation of Ghulja, this route fell into neglect and, in many places, became quite difficult to traverse¹².

Colonel Poltoratsky's expeditions to Ghulja were closely connected with the strategic interests of the Russian Empire in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan in the late nineteenth century, and his military surveys contain valuable information. In particular, the in-depth study of the logistics linking Central Asia with Eastern Turkestan was of special importance for imperial interests. During these expeditions, he collected detailed data on the natural conditions of the region, road networks, rivers, mountain systems, and settlements. The geographical routes of Poltoratsky's Ghulja expedition passed through Chimkent, Tashkent, and Kokand, where primary attention was given to road conditions, irrigation systems, and trade routes. Departing from Kokand, he proceeded through the Fergana Valley toward Osh and then onward to Kashgar. Along this route, mountainous areas—especially the geography of the Pamir and Tian Shan ranges—were studied. The Kashgar–Ghulja trade route was also a focus of attention. Poltoratsky advanced into the interior of Eastern Turkestan and reached Ghulja, located in present-day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He studied the natural geographical features of the Ili River valley and the surroundings of Ghulja. At that time, Ghulja was one of the major trade and military centers, and its geostrategic location attracted great interest from Russian military personnel and merchants. He made observations on the main trade routes leading to Ghulja and their conditions. In addition, he examined the population and economy of the

¹² Туркестанский сборник. 7 том. 4 с.

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ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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region, studying the economic activities, trade, and agricultural systems of the local Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Chinese inhabitants¹³.

In general, the Russian Empire carried out numerous expeditions to study and analyze the socio-economic and political conditions of the region. In these processes, many Russian scholars and military specialists made significant scientific and practical contributions. Among them, researchers such as Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangel, Aleksey Ilyich Soslovsky, Vasilii Vasilevich Kaulbars, and Aleksandr Konstantinovich Geys systematically studied the topographical, ethnographic, and military-political situation of the region and collected valuable data.

In addition, figures such as Vasilii Alekseevich Poltoratsky, Pyotr Petrovich Petrovsky, Ivan Fyodorovich Babkov, Ilya Ivanovich Zakharov, Gerasim Alekseevich Kolpakovsky, Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalsky, Mikhail Ivanovich Venyukov, Aleksandr Alekseevich Arnov, Karl Vasilevich Struve, Aleksey Fyodorovich Golub, Aleksey Ivanovich Andreyev, as well as the Kazakh scholar Shoqan Valikhanov, achieved important scientific results through comprehensive studies of the Ili and Muzart regions. Their research, in particular, served as an essential scientific foundation for the Chuguchak Protocol of 1864 and the subsequent processes of border demarcation. The data collected during these expeditions not only revealed the natural-geographical and socio-economic characteristics of the region but also clearly demonstrated its geopolitical significance. In conclusion, in the nineteenth century the Ili region emerged not only as a strategic space where the interests of major powers clashed, but also as a territory of particular geopolitical, economic, and military importance. Its natural-geographical location—situated at the intersection of mountain systems, fertile valleys, and major trade routes—made the region attractive to external powers. In particular, water resources, pastures, and arable lands further increased the economic potential of the Ili region.

¹³ Туркестанский сборник. 95 том. Ст. 134.

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ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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At the same time, the Ili region played an important role as a transit zone connecting East and West, which contributed to the development of trade relations and increased its strategic significance. These very factors intensified the interest of the Russian Empire in the region and stimulated its political and military activity. The scientific expeditions organized by Russia were not limited to purely academic research; rather, they were aimed at collecting detailed information on the natural resources, population, economy, and transport routes of the region. This information later served as an important source for shaping the empire's military-strategic plans and diplomatic policies. Scientific knowledge became closely intertwined with practical policy, facilitating the expansion of Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern Turkestan.

Moreover, political processes in the Ili region had a significant impact on the balance of power in the wider region. Relations between Russia, the Qing Empire, and local forces were complex and multifaceted, turning the region into a میدان of international competition. As a result, Ili became not only a center of territorial control but also a focal point in the struggle for political influence. Overall, in the nineteenth century the Ili region took shape as a geopolitically significant, resource-rich, and strategically important area, serving as a key base for the implementation of Russian imperial policy in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan. From this perspective, the study of the Ili region holds not only historical importance but also considerable relevance for understanding contemporary geopolitical processes.

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ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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