

Strategy Notes for *The Great Game*

I enjoy this effort by John Gorkowski, courtesy of Legion Games. Not only does it cover a rarely gamed era in world history, but it conveys the “feel” of the Great Game without a lot of rules overhead. It has a lot going for it...a reasonable playing time (3 hours is about the maximum for the campaign game), lots of historical immersion, and a canvas for deviousness that is much more wide open than in most wargames. While ostensibly a wargame, there are lots of diplomatic and underhanded “gamey” aspects to *The Great Game* that while historically correct, may turn off some grognards who want to line up Cossacks against Redcoats and simply duke it out. If you are looking for an immersive combat experience in central Asia, this is definitely NOT the game for you. But if you are into embracing the subtle move-counter-move-counter-counter-move plotting that went on for those 50-odd years in the middle of the 19th century, you may enjoy what *The Great Game* has to offer.

The fore-going paragraph may make it seem like I am writing a review, but I leave that to others who are far more adept at such things. I simply want to offer up some strategy points that I think will make your games more enjoyable and give you a better chance to win.

And chance is really what this game is all about. There is a lot of chance involved in the card draws for each decade (You draw seven and can return two to draw two more), as well as in the implementation of a strategy revolving around said cards. If you aren't into wide swings of fate due to events outside your control, again this game may not be for you. But in my experience this is the very thing that makes the game so enjoyable....you can't really control events, all you can do is set them in motion with some sense that you can effect the tide of history as it swirls around central Asia. So far, here is what I have learned about winning *The Great Game*.

1. Emissaries (and Spoilers) are bastards.

An Emissary card has a Value of 1, so it will go first in the round unless your opponent also plays one, in which case you roll a die to see who goes first. For the Emissary to sway his Vassal State (VS) target he has to roll a five or higher on one die, 33% odds of success, not great, especially since if he fails, he dies (or worse). Since the die roll is modified by the Emissary's Diplomacy rating (which can vary from 0 to 3), you can up the odds in your favor...which still entails a risk UNLESS you are a Russian in Tehran with a Diplomacy rating of 1 or more which guarantees success because all Russian Emissaries in Tehran get a +3 modifier... UNLESS your adversary plays a Spoiler card, which can reduce the die roll by the spoiling officer's Diplomatic rating (got that?). Even so, the Brits have to assume that the Persian army will eventually come knocking on the doors of the Raj. The British have to choose their Emissary plays much more carefully after 1840, because they tend to be less diplomatic and/or less able to sacrifice an officer on even a 66% chance of success...but that's about the best the British can do.

The benefits of a successful Emissary play can range from ho-hum to devastating. If a VS is in your rival's camp, all your brave officer can do is return the VS to neutral. But if Afghanistan or Persia can be swayed into your camp, then you also get to deploy their army, which is HUGE. On top of that, you also get to use the one action point from the Emissary card, so for example you can claim the Afghan army and then move one space and attack your rival's army, which you can't do with your own army (unless the Crimean War card has been played, which is a one-time one-round-only event).

But Emissaries can be used for other nefarious purposes. If you can bring a VS into your camp that is within range of your army, you can then move into it and preclude any invasion by your rival's Imperial Army (again, unless the Crimean War is in play). For example, a Brit with Afghanistan pacified can then sway Bokhara with an Emissary and can then move 1 strength point to the fortress/capital and not only keep the Russians out, but make it suicidal to attack (the Brits will roll one die and subtract it from 16 to assess losses on the attackers before the Persians even get a shot off). Likewise, the Russians can do the same if they can get an Imperial SP into the capital of Baluchistan...the British can't attack it, and the Afghans (if a British vassal) would be rolling at best two dice after the initial onslaught.

This is all great stuff, but again, it is all luck-dependent on the initial Emissary mission. You can't base your strategy on it, you can only plan to take advantage of an advantageous turn of fortune, much like the real Great Game. I have often cursed my card draw because I did not get an Emissary card to play when I thought it was a perfect plan...and I have often cursed my Emissary card when my poor officer failed and never returned from his mission.

2. Rebellions are a bitch.

If you can't sway a VS to your side with diplomacy in *The Great Game*, then your other option is the military one...conquest. A VS with a fortress capital usually requires at least two action rounds to subdue, maybe more depending on your officer's leadership (Tactical rating). At the start of the game, the British have two neighboring VS that can be conquered with little Russian interference: Baluchistan and the Punjab. The Russians have their "sphere of influence" too...Kazakhs, Khokand, Turcomans, and Khiva are hard for the British to contest. Once an IP embarks on the conquest of one of these VS, the threat looms that your rival will eventually play a Rebellion card and wreak havoc on your Imperial holdings. There is a caveat...the Rebellion card is a 50% chance at unleashing the wrath of the native population. The details of rebellion allow the "sponsoring" IP to place a dr12's value of Rebel strength points anywhere in the VS, and they are disbanded once the conquering power's SP are driven from the VS. On the first turn of rebellion they roll a dr6 vs any defenders, which means they will always get their licks in.

If the rebellion succeeds in liberating the VS, what do you get as the sponsoring (card-playing) power? Well, at best you can destroy an enemy army with your rebellion, and then flip the VS back to neutral. Your rebels will then be disbanded, so unless you can

march in to conquer it or make an Emissary play, you still won't control it. But your rival will be hamstrung. The IP that loses a rebellion will have to waste valuable cards and action rounds to retake his once-proud possession...allowing you to get busy elsewhere. While a British-sponsored rebellion in Kazakhs may seem like a waste since it can't be reinforced, it does strip the Russian of three Spaces he needs for victory.

It's hard to defend against a rebellion due to the random strength that can materialize. Since any VS that has been conquered has defacto had its fortress destroyed, it is easy to retake unless enemy SP have infiltrated before you can get there. So it makes little sense to play a Rebellion card (again, only successfully launched 50% of the time) if your opponent won't lose any SP and he can easily take it back next turn. Better to use the card as a combination with other cards in the decade that can remove enemy SP as well.

3. Imperial Persuasion of Persian Commitments?

The flipping of VS allegiance and removal of rival Imperial SP is not only a diplomatic game or one of inciting rebellions. The Imperial Commitments and Persian Persuasion cards are avenues toward tilting VS allegiances through military action. Persian Persuasion allows an IP to emasculate the rival-controlled Persian army by occupying any two spaces in Persia. In practice, the Persians are usually in the Russian camp (due to the +3 Emissary modifier), so it is usually the British who need this event to relieve the Persian pressure. They then threaten the subsequent swaying of Persia to the British side if they have an officer surplus and an Emissary card, but still the damage to the Russian position would take time to repair.

The Imperial Commitments card is a perfect way to get your enemy out of your way. Removing half your rival's army from the front lines gives you an amazing opportunity to make headway into the enemy's sphere of influence. The killer aspect to this card is that it is largely wasted unless you can follow it up with a Rebellion card, a big military move, or a game broadening event (see "High, Asia"). The last thing you want to do is play this card and then play a card for reinforcements. You need to either attack with your VS army, or attempt a Rebellion. Anything else negates the primary power of the card.

4. Shooting Informants

Playing the Shooting Leave card is really like rolling in a crap game. Until you play it and roll a four or more on a dr6 (modified by your diplomacy rating and taking into account any rival officer's Diplomacy rating if your opponent plays an Informant card in response), you have a chancy-chance to not only reveal your opponents hand but steal one of his cards. Sounds great, but in practice this will only happen if you have extra officers lying about (British in 1840, Russian in 1850 or 1870) AND it is only worth it if you play it early in the decade, not only to scope out your rival's intentions, but also to potentially use the card you take (stealing a Gunboat Diplomacy or Campaign card can seriously derail your rival's plans). It is usually a low-priority card play, since it is totally

luck dependent, but it can be a game changer since you can completely stop your opponent's nefarious plans (if he has any).

5. Speaking of Gunboats...

This card can be either a decade defining one for you or not...depending on the military situation. British play of this event is limited to Persia, but it instills a fear into the Russians lest you maraud into the the Persian Gulf and knock the 20 Persian VS SP out of the Tsar's arsenal with a sortie from the Raj onto the Persian ports. The beauty for the Royal Navy is that there is no luck involved...if you have two SP in port and the Persian ports are empty, you have effectively sent the Persians home (not that they can't come back, but this is a game-defining moment when/if it happens).

For the Russians, this is basically an event that can either bypass the Turcomans and the desert to get IP SP into Persia fast, or a way to mobilize troops for the invasion of Khiva without worrying about desert attrition over the Aral Sea (it used to be a sea, anyway). Naturally, if the Russians already have Khiva and have some IP SP in Persia, this card is only worth the 3 value and it's event is rather meaningless.

6. High, Asia!

So, the High Asia cards are another set of wildcards in the game (for the Russian, it's Kossacks and Military Surveyors, the British have Pundits and Royal Geographic Society, all value 2 cards)...Since you only play them if you have them and your opponent never has to play them if he has them, the odds of you getting both and playing them in six hands is less than 50% by my calculus...since I've played it's only happened once (for the Russians) and they could not get troops in to conquer Kashgaria, nor did they have an Emissary to sway it. But boy did the British sweat that possible Emissary play! Realistically, had the Russians swayed Kashgaria they would have tipped the balance of power and won...but they had no Emissary play and no troops to conquer the capital. Kind of a bummer since they had finally gained access, and since it appears to be so rare an occurrence. I believe that this is the goofiest part of *The Great Game*, because if one side gets in, the other is still shut out, and four uncontested Kashgaria spaces for your side will usually spell VICTORY. I feel Kashgaria also favors the Russian since it borders the Raj and the Punjab, forcing the British to leave IP SP on the borders; but others may feel the opposite, that since it borders those areas the British can move troops through faster once they gain access. Either way, your entire game changes when High Asia is accessed due to the massive Victory Space sway Kashgaria holds. Luckily, for your opponent to take advantage, he has to give you at least some forewarning since two card plays are needed. Again, this is the chanciest part of a "chancey" game, so be aware that High Asia is like playing the slots...you never know when you will get lucky, if ever.

7. The Mighty Pen

This event is a straight-up monkey-wrench in the works of your opponents turn, provided you play it at the right time. With five action rounds per turn, "Pen Mightier than the Sword" effectively stalls your opponent's offensive...providing that he was not already planning to take reinforcements next turn. It is best played after a successful "Shooting Leave", when you can glean your opponents plan for the turn and relieve him of a card AND an event/action that he wants to take before you can move to thwart him. Timed right, you can really gain an advantage in either beating him to a wobbling VS, or protecting one of your own. Timed wrong, and you simply watch him play yet another Campaign card for another 4 SP of reinforcements. I tend to either play it early (to gain a march or set up a rebellion for next round) or late (round four, where you know he can't react). It is also a wonderful play if your opponent waited to play his High Asia card on the last round, because he will lose the event for the decade. Therefore, a rule of thumb is to NEVER hold a High Asia card and try to play it late in the decade...you will lose it to "The Pen" and may never get it back!

8. Big Guns and the Crimean War

The Martini-Henry Rifles & Krupp Guns card event is only good in the 1870's...but boy what a boon if you get it! With the right leader and IP SP combination, it can obliterate anything in it's path. Alas, the odds of you actually getting it in the 1870's are less than 50%, so don't hold your breath. As for the Crimean War Card, it's best to play it for the event if you have it even if you can't do any serious damage with it, just because you would probably rather have it out of the game than worry about your opponent having it later. If you can actually use it to destroy some rival IP SP, all the better, but you don't want this card to ever be in your opponents hand if you can avoid it. It can be devastating if rival armies are in close proximity.

9. Campaign promises

Campaign cards are usually not played for campaigns. Since they are the highest Value cards, they tend to get played for reinforcement, and since there are so many of them in the deck (7!) players tend to get multiples. This can be a tough card to decide on. So often, the Campaign card is the only one that lets you link up disparate forces (and leaders) and allow you to make a decent attack...but at the same time, you may need more troops in the theater BEFORE you can make that decent attack. Having one in your hand gives you a tough choice, having two gives you military flexibility, having none forces you to rethink which of your lesser cards (Gunboat Diplomacy? Big Guns? Rebellion??) you can use to bring troops into the fray. Make no mistake, every decade will require you to make good any losses you have incurred, and to build up forces for future operations. Campaign cards are the best for this, even though your sabres may be rattling. Since they are relatively plentiful, you should expect one of these cards to be in every hand you draw...but you can't count on it!

10. Flashman

I never heard of Flashman until I bought this game, and I have read two books on *The Great Game*. (I still haven't read the Flashman series books, but I will get them into my kindle soon). I totally understand why John Gorkowski didn't originally have him in the game, and why Legion demanded he be present, given the allure of a literary character that could help sell the game. I kind of like having him around, it's another wild card that favors the British who can get awfully leaderless in the midgame. The Emir's Daughter card is actually a fun card to draw as the Russian, because not only can you defuse Flashman, you can also use the 3 Value of the card if he doesn't show up for a nice reinforcement late in the decade.

11. It's not all Luck and Card Play...

You may think after reading this that *The Great Game* is totally luck-dependent...but in my estimation, it is no more luck-dependent than the actual Great Game. So many arbitrary factors conspired over those 50+ years to force both the Russians and the British to take the "long view"...go step by step, press one's advantage, and persevere after a debacle. *The Great Game* captures this mindset of the two Imperial Powers quite well. There are a few things the game stresses that should be noted to close out this strategy article, so bear with me for a few more paragraphs.

The Russians are always ahead in Persia, but since Persian spaces do not count for victory, the real key lies in Afghanistan. It is in the British sphere of influence, and a successful British Emissary play there will give the British 10 SP to deploy in defense of the Raj, which will eventually include Baluchistan and the Punjab. Total up the spaces and you get a whopping 14 of them that can be held as long as Afghanistan is in the British camp. The Russians have it easier, yet harder, in their immediate sphere of influence. Kazakhs is an easy 3 spaces, and Khokand can be reduced with sound tactics moving packets of troops through the desert to avoid the deadly desert attrition. That only gives the Russian 9 Spaces, however. To win, the Russian must find a way to get 5 more Spaces without ceding any others to the British. They can reduce the Turcomans (4 Spaces, but difficult to conquer due to the desert, so an emissary play here is better) , or take Khiva (easier to conquer, especially with Gunboat Diplomacy, but immune to Emissaries due to it being only 2 Spaces), conquer Herat (only one Space, and which has to be done with Persians most likely), and/or Bokhara, which is only possible if no British SP are present, which means keeping Afghanistan out of the British hands through Emissaries or Rebellion).

Rebellions are the best way for either power to decrease an opponents Spaces, but it doesn't take much to re-conquer a liberated VS if your troops are nearby. So, British-sponsored rebellions in Kazakhs or Russian-sponsored rebellions in the Punjab are rarely effective in the long term. It is usually in the center, namely Herat, and Bokhara, where the game will be won. Both border Afghanistan, which makes that VS so critical.

High Asia is the wildcard, and with it comes risk. It is further away from Orenburg than Delhi, so the British can win a race there if they have access, even if the Russian sponsors a rebellion. The 4 Kashgaria Spaces will become crucial in determining the

winner, yet one side may be locked out while the other has total access. When this occurs, the rival that is “locked out” has to decide where else to go in search of a win in *The Great Game*. This is where the competition for the VS armies of Afghanistan and Persia becomes even more critical, because they are capable of flipping Herat, Bokhara, and to a further extent, Baluchistan or Turcomans.

So we come to the conclusion that Afghanistan is crucial. If the Russians are precluded from sponsoring a rebellion there, they need to get into either Herat or Bokhara and bottle them up. When it is 1870 and they have a leadership superiority, they can go in and try for the Emissary play if they have the card for such a move.

Lastly, fortunes can turn on a dime in this game. An Imperial Power can lose half it's spaces in a few rounds dues to rebellions, military conquests, and/or Emissaries. All you can do is try to mitigate the damage and take what is rightfully yours...and isn't that really the theme of the real Great Game?