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The Great Game of 19th Century: The Significance of Tribal Belt as Buffer to the Buffer State of Afghanistan



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Abstract: *The Great Game of 19th century between the Imperial British and Czarist Russia encapsulated the geo-political tactics and strategies of expansion which paved the way for their intense rivalry and competition in Central Asia. Great Game was power politics to gain influence, authority and ascendancy in the region. It was a game having rules and boundaries for the worthy players (Ahmad, 2017). The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan and Tribal Belt made them pawns on the geo-political chessboard of the Great Game. Afghanistan's location was vital for carving out a buffer state, moreover it was considered more pragmatic to declare the adjacent Tribal Belt a buffer to the buffer. The Great Game revolved around moving one's pawns on the chessboard with acumen. Afghanistan being the buffer state and the Tribal Belt as buffer to the buffer were used to avoid escalation and to move the pawns on the chessboard whenever expedient.*

Key Words: Great Game, Imperial Powers, Buffer State, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Tribal Belt

Introduction

The Tribal Belt along Afghanistan border has witnessed the making of significant history in its mountain passes as hordes of invaders, the Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Kushans, Huns, Ghazanavids, Ghorids, Mongols, Mughals and Durranis invaded India through these vital passes, which caused the rise and fall of different dynasties in the subcontinent. Afghanistan being a buffer state between the Czarist Russia and British India assumed the central role in 19th century 'Great Game' between these formidable powers. These two imperialist powers emerged strong competitors after the defeat of Napoleonic

France in the early nineteenth century. Britain due to military intervention by its rival France had lost its most important colony, i.e. America in 1783. But it had found an affluent and resourceful possession in India. Britain by 1832 had effectively established suzerainty over nearly 100 million people of Indian subcontinent. Russians too after Napoleon raised to the occasion by reviving the dream of Peter the Great to expand the empire southwards. While the Russian empire gradually extended its sway south over the Turks lands and the wild steppes of Asia, the British empire navigated its way north through the sprawling ancient lands of India. The unabated expansion of Imperial Russia was of an immense

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concern for Britain to the extent that Afghanistan's transit routes were looked upon for the first time in the history to be of negative rather than of positive strategic value.

The British had established mastery over India without stepping foot on Afghan soil, however Afghanistan's passes were considered important to deny them to competing powers. Afghanistan being 'Highway to Conquest' and 'Crossroads of Asia' had conferred upon a new role of buffer state in 19th century. The British presumed that the more isolated it from the remainder of Asia, the better it would serve their interests. It had become imperative for the Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston in London, Governor-General Lord Auckland in Calcutta, and the entire Russo phobia wing of parliament to exert control over Afghanistan. After crossing the Indus in 1849, the British administration came to know about the importance of close relationship between the tribes and the Afghan regime. It was an established fact that the bordering tribes were decisive factor in the power politics of Afghanistan. The Tribal Belt being a gateway to India was viewed important player in the geo-strategic implications of Great Game. Afghanistan has assumed prominence as buffer state between the two rival competitors in Asia and the Tribal Belt emerged as a buffer to the buffer state. It no denying the fact that the history of empires is replete with the policy of creation of buffer zones and shatter zones but hardly in the annals of history, a powerful and ascendant empire like Britain needed a buffer state and a buffer to the buffer state for political and diplomatic ascendancy. This article will highlight the significance of Tribal Areas as buffer to the buffer state of Afghanistan in the 'Great Game' of 19th century played by imperialist European rivals for hegemony, power, prestige and glory in the strategic region.

The Genesis of Great Game

The British considered the preservation and the security of its Indian Empire second only to the

security of their own homeland. The prevalent perception of invasion through the Afghan passes almost from the time immemorial had haunted the princes and people of India (Chakravarty, 2002). The only seriously vulnerable point along her frontiers was in the extreme north-west, on her borders with Afghanistan and Baluchistan. This was a fact which no statesman could have forgotten. Ahmad Shah Abdali, the founder of modern Afghanistan attacked Delhi in 1761 barely four years after Clive had laid the foundation of British Empire and annihilated the Maratha armies at Panipat and since then the minds of officials of East India Company were troubled by fears of fresh invasions. This fear was further heightened by the rise of Napoleon, the French outreach to the Indian courts as well as Persia, and the warrior like disposition of the Afghans. The British initial attempt was to send missions on the behest of Governor General Marquis Wellesley to Sind and Tehran to counteract the French moves and the success of these missions temporarily managed to assuage British fears (Huttenback, 1962).

The British government in order to thwart any hostile movement of the rival foes issued instructions to authorities to forge close and friendly relationship with border states along the Indus and even with the Tatar tribes of Caspian region (Chakravarty, 2002). The British made persistent efforts to ensure that the competing European rivals neither gain foothold in India nor establish relations with the neighbouring states. However, the relationship between the rival powers of Russia and Britain was characterized by their forward moves and subsequent conquests in Caucasus and India. The conflict and rivalry between them was predictable and unavoidable due to their predominance in Eurasia. Russia inaugurated a new phase in its activity in Central Asia at the end of Crimean war by conquering one Khanate after the other. The British statesmen, diplomats and politicians remained extremely anxious about the constant and persistent expansion of Czarist Russia. India was the most precious and brightest jewel of the British crown

and wellspring of Empire's affluence and prosperity. The British policy makers viewed the Russian expansionist policies in Central Asia as a new and dangerous threat to their Indian possessions. The Russian forward move had established complete control over the Caspian; she had annexed the northern province of Persia, the peace conditions was imposed on her and by 1836 Russian influence in Tehran had become paramount. "The Directors", wrote Lord Ellenborough "are much afraid of the Russians so am I. I feel confident we shall have to fight the Russians on the Indus" (Law, 1881). The Russian relentless expansion carried with it all the legends and justifications of the 19th century commonly associated with the western concept of 'white man's burden.' The Russians advocated that 'The white Tsar' being surrounded with a halo of mystic might viewed by the Asiatic masses as their saviour and moulder of their destiny (Wright, 1902). The Russians believed that the geographical proximity accorded them a special right in Central Asia and the British were called upon to show more accommodation and appreciation and less suspicion and jealousy towards its Europeanising mission (Malozemoff, 1958). However, the Russian forward thrust was not entirely unprovoked. The annexation of Sind and Punjab, the introduction of the subsidiary system for Kashmir, the occupation of Herat after Persian war and forging cordial relationship with Dost Muhammad, Amir of Afghanistan were the British policies to have lasting effects on the relationship with the arch rival Russia (Chakravarty, 2002).

The Designs of Russia', a book authored by Colonel De Lacey elaborated in great detail how the Russians could affect a successful invasion of India through Afghanistan further strengthened the apprehensions of the public figures (Evans, 1829). Russo phobia by the end of 1837 was a major element in a segment of British public opinion (Gleason, 1950). An officer of Bengal Cavalry, Captain Arthur Conolly (1807-1842) is credited with the coining of the term 'the Great Game' to explain the nineteenth century jousting

in Central Asia between Imperial Russia and Great Britain. The 'Tournament of Shadows' was the term fashioned by Count Nesselrode, the Russian Foreign Minister in 1837 to illustrate the contest for mastery in Asia. It was, however the term 'Great Game' that gained currency and captured the public imagination. The Great Game was instrumental in the production of some of the most interesting and popular writings of Empire as exemplified in 'Kim' the best known work of Kipling. The upper and middle classes of Victorian England advocated Great Game as an analogy and extension of the public school philosophy. The concepts of 'honour and glory' and 'the service of Queen and country' were cultivated in the minds of general public during the height of Great Game (Ahmad, 2017).

Afghanistan as Buffer State between Two Imperial Powers

The manic element in Russo phobia became more and more pronounced as a consequence of deeper anxieties about the future and security of the British Empire. The protection of the British India's frontiers and its routes became the British foreign policy unquestioned axiom. Afghanistan throughout the 19th century formed on the imperial chessboard of Asia a buffer between the two European Empires. The Great Game having potential political, economic and diplomatic ramifications was keenly contested field for possession and exercise of moral influence over Afghanistan, as she incorporated all the routes that linked India with Central Asia. Her boundary lines touched Persia, Merv, Bukhara, China and, of course, British India. Afghanistan became a major bone of contention between the two rivals in the region and the lion and bear both had fixed their eyes on her. She assumed the front line state status in the 'Great Game' diplomacy mainly due to her geo-political location, her destiny was determined in St Petersburg and London. The importance of Afghanistan to British India was vividly described by Lowell Thomas "Afghanistan is the gateway to India, with its incalculable wealth. Throughout history, Afghan trails have

echoed to the march of northern hosts that looked with lustful eyes on India's riches" (Thomas, [1998](#)).

The first endeavour of the British to dominate and control the Hindu Kush was launched on 10th December, 1838. The British marched in, deposed Afghan Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, entered Kabul and not only occupied the strategically vital line of Kabul and Kandahar, but also took possession of approaches to the Hindu Kush. The British for two years succeeded in maintaining the balance of power in its favour as no one could imagine the extent of calamity that lay in waiting for them. The Afghan resentment against the British continued to grow during the winter of 1841. On the 2nd November a mob in Kabul attacked Burner's house, a British official, and he along with his brother lost their lives. The outbreaks continued throughout the country and the British eventually found their position untenable. The terms for their withdrawal were discussed with Akbar Khan, the son of Dost Muhammad, however Sir William Macnaghten, the British Political Agent was killed during parleys with Afghans. On 6th January 1842 approximately 4,500 British troops, with 12000 camp followers, marched out of Kabul as they made their way towards Jalalabad through winter-bound mountains, however their lines were attacked and their retreat had bloody end. The British doctor William Brydon one of the few survivors managed to ride his injured horse through the difficult mountains reported the disaster to British authorities in Jalalabad. The first Anglo-Afghan war failed in its main purpose of establishing a friendly buffer state. It is generally believed that there had been few military expeditions in British history which were planned so poorly and executed more incompetently than the first Afghan war (Holt, [2005](#)). The first Anglo-Afghan war stirred Anglophobia among Russians. The English invasion of Afghanistan was seen by them as a step to forestall them in Central Asia. Despite the Afghan debacle, the British forward move did not stop and they steadily brought large portions of

India under its control, Sind (1843) and Punjab (1849) were brought within the British Indian territory. The annexation of Punjab finally extended the British frontier up to the base of the Afghan mountains, but the boundary line was still not clearly demarcated. Henry Rawlinson, a staunch supporter of the Forward School in 1868 restated arguments for military and diplomatic initiative across the border. His main arguments were that the Amir of Afghanistan should be supported by the British government in order to get control of Afghan territory to set up a permanent mission in Kabul to reduce the Russian influence and to occupy the strategically important city of Quetta (Ghose, 1960). The Conservatives came to power following the general elections in 1874, and the British political life witnessed a new sense of imperial consciousness after the settling of Prime Minister Disraeli in 10 Downing Street. The new cabinet comprised of many members who had long been critical of the policy of 'Masterly Inactivity'. The old policy was thus replaced by a foreign policy having strong imperialistic aims and a provocative diplomacy. The new policy meant the expansion of the British influence right up to the frontiers of the Hindu Kush as well as the creation of a strong barrier against Russian expansion in Central Asia (Awan, [1982](#)). The British Conservative Government and Viceroy Lord Lytton wanted Afghanistan to be a vassal state instead of a neutral buffer state with an Amir firmly under the thumb of the British resident in Kabul (Fletcher, [1965](#)). "I am pretty certain", Lytton wrote, "that the Ameer, if not actually against us, would not be even passively with us in any war with Russia and without his acquiescence we cannot attempt to strike a deadly blow at Russia" (Lytton, [1878](#)). Viceroy Lord Lytton presumed that Afghanistan would sooner or later come under the influence and authority of one of her neighbours. Hence, the most important question to him was which one would take the lead in exercising the 'necessary and unavoidable' control over Afghanistan (Lytton, [1877](#)).

Granted that British influence must be paramount, Lord Lytton put it bluntly, "I know of only two ways in which such influence can be gained: the first and the rudest is by conquest as we have established ourselves over most of India and as Russia has established herself in the Khanates; the second is by friendly intervention, agents and treaties" (Lytton, 1876). If, however, the second alternative did not succeed, Lytton favoured attacking Afghanistan to establish influence by force of arms (Lytton, 1878). In August 1878, in order to counter the Russian mission, the Viceroy desired of Sher Ali, Amir of Afghanistan to accept the arrival of British mission at his court. Lytton wrote, "If Afghanistan does not gravitate towards the British, it must gravitate towards the Russian Empire. And between bodies of equivalent gravity the attractive force of one that is in movement will always exceed that of one which is motionless" (Lytton's Note undated). He further wrote about the Amir of Afghanistan that he would be treated as an enemy if he showed inclination towards Russians. "A tool in the hands of Russia I will never allow him to become; such a tool it would be my duty to break before it could be used" (Lytton, 1878). Lord Lytton dispatched a mission through Khyber Pass, which was intercepted at Ali Masjid Fort by the Afghan troops. The turning back of Chamberlain's mission was a clear signal to the British of the Amir's procrastination (Depree, 1968). The British decided to impose their terms on Afghanistan militarily. The Second Anglo-Afghan war repeated the story of 1830's in the name of security and protection of the Indian Empire against the belligerent and aggressive designs of Russia in the region. Columns of the British army in November, 1878 marched towards the Afghan cities Kabul and Kandahar, using the three vital passes Khyber, Kurram and Bolan. Kurram and Khyber Passes fell into British hands within the span of two weeks and by the end of January, 1879, Sher Ali, Amir of Afghanistan died near Balkh, in northern Afghanistan having failed to secure Russian assistance. At the end of the war Yaqub Khan, Amir of Afghanistan started

negotiations for a settlement with the Government of India which culminated in the signing of Treaty of Gandamak on 26th May, 1879. By this treaty, Afghanistan was deprived for the first time of its traditional character of a 'buffer state' and its Amir became virtually a feudatory of the British crown (Kazmi, 1984). Lord Lytton achieved the objectives of his Afghan policy through the Treaty of Gandamak. He remarked, "we do not covet one inch of Afghan territory....But we cannot allow it to fall under the influence of any power whose interests are antagonistic to our own" (Fletcher, 1965).

Tribal Belt as Buffer to the Buffer State and Bulwark against Foreign Invasion

Afghanistan was gateway and highway of conquest to India and Tribal Areas encapsulated all the major routes which linked Afghanistan to India. Sir Harry Lumsden, Commandant Corps of Guides and Assistant Commissioner Mardan elaborated the geographical edge and strategic significance of Tribal Belt, "Providence has blessed us with a strong line of Frontier, covered by rugged and barren hills, through which there are but a limited number of passes by which an army could approach India, and the military art teaches us that the best position of the defence of such ground is on our own side of the passes"(Governor's Committee Report, 1997). Lord Lytton was of the view that the actual reason which had kept the British frontier stationary for thirty years was the difficulty of subduing the wild mountain tribes in a rugged country (Lytton Minute, 1876). He firmly believed that if tribes were not brought under British administrative control, the Indian army would encounter resistance and face difficulties in crossing the passes which were too numerous to be effectively guarded particularly in the time of crisis (Alder, 1963). Lytton elaborated the importance of mountain passes in Tribal Belt, "what gives the fortresses of Coblenz and Mainz exceptional value but that they command both sides of a great natural obstacle, the Rhine? What gave the celebrated Quadrilateral strength but that its

fortress gave its holder the power of operating on either side at will? What constitutes the value of Nice and Savoy to France, but that their possession turns an unfavourable boundary line into a favourable one by giving France command of the mountain passes? That the mountain line is a strong line to him who holds the passes and debouches and a dangerous snare to him who does not, is an elementary military axiom”(Lytton Minute, [1876](#)). Lytton believed that India had the strongest geographical barriers provided, “we had the command of the external debouches of our great mountain barriers which we do not possess now but which we are determined to possess at any cost” (Lytton, [1877](#)).

In a dispatch to the Secretary of State, the Government of India stated, “The advance of Russia to the frontiers of Afghanistan, and the great development of her military resources in Asia had admittedly increased the necessity for strengthening the British line of defence, and that among the points requiring special attention were the northern passes of the Hindu Kush” (Durand, [1977](#)). The British main concerns were that Afghanistan would be the theatre of operations whenever war broke out between the two powers and the Russian agents could foment rebellion amongst local tribesmen straddling the frontier (Beckett, [2005](#)). These two factors determined the British policy towards Tribal Belt. The securing of tribesmen allegiance and loyalty was considered imperative in the ‘Ring Fence’ strategy not only for the defence of India, but also as a barrier against unreliable Afghanistan (Brobst, [2005](#)). A Defence Committee Report chaired by Sir Donald Stewart in 1885 advocated the fortification of the areas neighbouring the British territory as it was deemed impossible to occupy the Scientific Frontier itself. The Secretary of State, Lord Kimberley in 1885 recommended that India should have a properly armed frontier (Bangash, [2016](#)). In 1887, Mortimer Durand drafted a sweeping new active Frontier Policy, he proposed the establishment of close relations with the tribes to turn Tribal Belt into active defensive barrier. He suggested the bringing of tribesmen in the ambit

of British administration to take firm control of the passes and routes for the safe passage of the British forces to the country beyond whenever necessary (Alder, [1963](#)).

Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in India (1885-1892) was the chief proponent of the Forward Policy and advocated the idea of securing a ‘Scientific Frontier’ along the Hindu Kush as he was of the view that the tribesmen will play prominent role in future struggles between the two imperialist powers (Beckett, [2005](#)). He emphasized the significance of active Forward Policy, “The Forward Policy must...be gradually and judiciously but steadily pursued until we obtain political control over the robber haunted No-man's Land which lies on our immediate frontier, where everyman's dwelling is a miniature fortress fortified against his neighbour, and must be continued until our influence would be felt up to the boundary of our ally, the ruler of Afghanistan” (Bruce, [1960](#)). The British Government desired a boundary between Afghanistan and India to be drawn on scientific lines for defence purposes. On 12th November, 1893, two separate agreements were signed, the Afghans accepted to relinquish their claims to all lands north of the Oxus, and in the south agreed to a definitive border with British India (Misra, [1975](#)). The British India finally gained the control of Tribal Belt through Durand Agreement. The Amir of Afghanistan lost control over Swat, Bajaur and Chitral. Similarly he agreed to relinquish his claim to Waziristan (Foreign Department, [1895](#)). The Durand Line Agreement was of immense value to the British as it provided it a clearly demarcated boundary called ‘Scientific Frontier’ which placed all the major routes having strategic and defensive importance under the authority of British India.

The buffer-zone status conferred on the region determined to the great extent the peculiarity of colonial policy in Tribal Belt. “Afghanistan” in the words of Lord Roberts “was to India what the English Channel was to Britain” (Beckett, [2005](#)). Britain and Russia agreed on the status of Afghanistan as a ‘buffer state’ in 1860's, however Britain launched two military

expeditions against it to gain influence in Afghanistan to control its policies. After accepting Afghanistan as buffer state, the Tribal Belt was conferred upon the status of a buffer to the buffer state and an active line of defence. According to Akbar S. Ahmed, the complexities, difficulties and peculiarities of Great Game were understood well in Delhi, Kabul and Moscow. Accepting these complexities, the tribesmen residing between the administrative border and the Durand Line were deemed a buffer to the buffer. The countries on either side of it had each realized that any attempt to increase their influence with the tribes would raise the suspicions of the other. However, considering the peculiarity and complexity of the problem, there was no other acceptable solution than the acceptance of buffer status of the region, thus the strategy of buffer to the buffer worked successfully for the players of Great Game (Ahmad, 2017). The controlling of the bordering tribes as the vital 'gate keepers' of the British Indian Empire was the main goal of the British Great Game strategy. After securing strategic mountain passes and acquiring scientific frontier the Tribal Belt served as buffer to the buffer state of Afghanistan to secure the geo-strategic and geo-political interests of the Great Britain in the region.

Conclusion

The policies of buffer zones, shatter zones and scorched earth have remained common in the annals of empires. However, these policies had been less common in the history of a vigorous, aggressive and growing Empire at its zenith as the Great Britain was in the 19th century (Ahmad, 2017). The British in India, as elsewhere had their

legends, myths and heroes. But behind these lay the concrete realities of trade and diplomacy. If the search of an expanding market for the British goods was the goal, Afghanistan by virtue of its striking location on the map provided an ideal entrepot. If the objective was to launch military offences in Central Asia, the cooperation of the Afghans was indispensable for successful execution. Russia was viewed both commercial competitor as well as political foe. The Russian designs in Central Asia led Britain to increase its influence in Afghanistan which eventually led to first Anglo-Afghan war in 1838-40. The Czarist Russia's rapid advances in Central Asia in 1860s increased Russo phobia in Britain. Afghanistan became the fulcrum of the Central Asian Question which was formally introduced into diplomatic dialogue between London and St. Petersburg in 1869. The British authorities agreed on the expediency of committing Russia to a fixed line on the map. In 1870s, the British government pursued aggressive imperialist policy towards Afghanistan which resulted in the second Anglo-Afghan war in 1878-80 and consequently Afghanistan's foreign policy became the domain of the British government. During 1890s, the British adopted aggressive Forward Policy towards Afghanistan and Tribal Belt which resulted in Durand Line Agreement. This agreement not only placed the entire Tribal Belt under the administrative control of British India, but also made Tribal Areas a buffer to the buffer state of Afghanistan and thus British secured its interests in the strategic region during the 'Great Game' against its arch rival and competitor Imperial Russia.

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