Living with the Problem: Managing War on the Northwest Frontier, 1880-1907

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On 22 July 1880 the British government recognized Abdur Rahman Khan as Emir, or ruler, of Afghanistan. This marked the formal end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War. But it made no real impact on a different kind of military conflict, one that overlapped with issues of state between Afghanistan and British India. This was a chronic, low intensity military confrontation in the borderlands that straddled the boundary between the two states. For the British, the problem was that these two conflicts seemed to weave into one. Lepel Griffin, British negotiator in Kabul, presented the Emir with a memorandum that expressed this British point of view, and their principal objective:

> … since the British Government admits no right of interference by Foreign Powers within Afghanistan, and since both Russia and Persia are pledged to abstain from all interference with the affairs of Afghanistan, it is plain that Your Highness can have no political relations with any foreign Power except with the British Government.[1]

The poorly defined line of sovereign demarcation between Afghanistan and British India was more than 2000 km long. If the state of Afghanistan remained independent but weak, that could provide physical security against invasion to British India. The British generally agreed this made Afghanistan a strategic buffer zone for their own imperial defence. But there were two fundamental problems. If a weak Afghanistan fell under the control of a strong hostile Power, that Power might use it as a springboard from which to invade India. The British saw Russia as such a Power; alarm over apparent Russian intrigue provoked two British invasions of Afghanistan, in 1839 and 1878. But while a British presence in Afghanistan might keep invasion at bay, it gave no such protection against borderland incursion.

The tension between defending against invasion and controlling incursion explains what made the protracted conflict on this imperial Northwest Frontier one of history's greatest examples of the most difficult problem of war termination: how to terminate a conflict that has no particular or direct cause in the first place—how to stop a war over something that simply cannot be resolved. Three of the most common roads to resolving a conflict, as opposed to stopping a particular war, simply never applied in this case. Neither belligerent could ever break or annihilate the other by sheer brute force. Neither would, or even could, capitulate and submit. And neither could find any basis on which to maintain long-term coexistence that ruled out military force. The obvious question is why not? Answers come through closer

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1 British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR), L/PS/20 Memo 12, Note on some points connected with the North-western Frontier of Afghanistan, with special reference to Badgheis and Panjdeh, 13 March 1885.

examination of geography, politics, state building, culture, and the interplay of all these things with ambitious imperial projects to reorder a modern Asia. The northern half of the borderlands connecting Afghanistan with British India, from the Bolan Pass in the south to Chitral in the north, was dominated by some of the most rugged mountain terrain on the planet, home to equally rugged people. Long before the British became the paramount power in India, these borderlands were a two-way route of invasion, and a zone of chronic violent conflict. By the eighteenth century the mainly Pathan or Pushtun-speaking peoples who lived in these borderlands found themselves positioned between Persian or Afghan-based power to the west and Indian-based power to the east. Pushtun mountain dwellers constituted an important community in what became the independent kingdom of Afghanistan; but they were an intensely tribal people, both connected and divided by multiple networks of clan relationships. Working relations with neighbours to the east collapsed after the Sikh kingdom in Punjab emerged as the strongest power in the region. This Sikh kingdom pushed into the Pushtun heartland in 1818 by occupying Peshawar. This was the principal town of the Pushtun peoples. It was also a vital strategic location, dominating the eastern entrance to the Khyber Pass—the principal route of movement, for armies and trade, between India and Afghanistan. The Sikhs annexed Peshawar in 1834. This provoked both the Pushtuns and the government in Kabul, neither of whom wanted this gateway to their own territory to remain in hands they saw as hostile. By conquering and annexing the Punjab, in 1849, the British inherited this problem.[2]

These were however only the latest political twists in a deeper conflict that was—pardon the pun—as old as the hills. The mighty Indus River rose in Tibet and flowed southwest into the Arabian Sea, running roughly parallel to, and east of, the high mountain ranges of the Pushtun borderlands. The river thus formed a "natural frontier" that gave whoever governed western India a more easily defined, and defended, northwestern boundary. But that meant giving up fertile, heavily populated plains west of the river—which lay, of course, along the foothills of the Pushtun-inhabited mountain borderlands. These highland peoples ranged from nomadic to village-based, relying on some valley farming and much livestock grazing. Trade was central to their way of life, and war could be bad for business. But the opportunity to toll or tax trade moving through their mountain passes, and the temptation presented by richer farming lands in the Indus valley, honed a sharper edge. Time and time again Pushtun mountain-dwellers raided the Indus valley or attacked trade caravans, seeking easy wealth. Sometimes these violent actions were driven by larger political conflicts, but more often they merely reflected local conditions. This dynamic of belligerent hill people preying on more affluent lowland economies was hardly unique. But it could be seen as especially acute. These mountains were so hard to penetrate, and so easy to defend, that even without complications of ethnicity, religion, culture, and politics, local and imperial, this would have been one of the most unruly "frontier zones" in the world. Those complications arguably made it the worst.

2 Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History of Afghanistan from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009 (2002)); Tamim Ansary, *Games without Rules: The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan*: *A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Just trying to control this frontier presented the British, as the new paramount power in the Indus valley, with a full time military challenge. Pushtuns were a plurality in Afghanistan, the largest community in a multi-ethnic kingdom. But many Pushtuns also lived on the other side of the poorly defined international boundary, in British India. Whoever governed in Kabul usually relied on ties of blood and religion to maintain working, if loose and volatile, relationships with the borderland tribes. The Emirs faced two complications. First, they could never comfortably rely on the fundamental political loyalty or military support of the Pushtun mountain dwellers, who remained stubbornly independent in practice, and for whom notions of loyalty to the state were much less important than loyalty to clan and tribe. But second, Pushtun rejection of the international division of their territory compelled Kabul to remain interested in cross-border politics, and the condition of tribes living on the other side of the poorly defined boundary. British relations with those same peoples were much more difficult.

The phrase "the British" really means government ministers, senior officials, and military advisers in London, the same array of people in Calcutta, seat of the government of British India, and governors, resident advisers, officials, political agents and military commanders on the spot, in Punjab and along the Northwest Frontier. After 1849 these groups of stakeholders disagreed more frequently than they agreed, but on some basic issues there was a broad consensus. The most important of such was to treat two problems as one connected vital interest: the local security of the imperial Northwest Frontier, and the governance and security of the whole Kingdom of Afghanistan. That would have been complicated enough. The British made it much worse by including the larger geostrategic dilemma: fear that the Russians would use force to topple them as the paramount power in India, and that the invading Russian army would come through Afghanistan. These perceptions created a layered combination of concerns. That combination shaped a war on the Northwest Frontier that, quite simply, defied termination. It defied termination because there could never be any basis for resolution that would fundamentally address all the layers of the problem—any effort to resolve one layer invariably aggravated another.

The British could chasten and dominate Afghanistan, but not conquer nor annex it. They could physically punish Pushtun incursions along the Northwest Frontier, or sometimes contain or conciliate them—but they could never stop them completely. Nor could they ever compel the many Pushtun borderland tribes and clans living on the British side of the boundary to accept "normal administration," submit to the modern state, and abandon their independent way of life. Fear of Russian ambitions provoked British aggression, but this made it more difficult to maintain a pliable Afghanistan, and secure a quiet Northwest Frontier. "Forward" strategy provoked violence in return. But on the other hand, less aggressive approaches did not stop intrigue in Kabul, or unrest on the frontier—this usually provoked enough alarm and anxiety in India, and/or London, to prompt a return to more aggressive strategy. The rivalry with Russia was in fact resolved, at least for a generation, by the great Entente of 1907. But even this did not bring frontier warfare to an end, or prevent yet another Anglo-Afghan War, or end British suspicions of Russia. Why not? What made this conflict so intractable? What really defied resolution—and thus made termination impossible?

The answer to these questions was Afghanistan. Three themes dominated: strategic

geography; the nature of the Afghan state, and its place in the wider states system; and the relationships between Pushtun tribesmen in the borderlands and that Afghan state. This chapter will concentrate on British perceptions of these three themes. It will analyze how the British tried to terminate this war on their imperial Northwest Frontier. And it will explain why they finally accepted that this war could only be managed—never terminated, much less resolved.

Should we even describe the situation along the Northwest Frontier, after 1849, as warfare? There were times of little or no physical violence, or military operations. There were periods when for a variety of reasons—judicious subsidies, the use of co-opted auxiliaries, intelligent local networking and alliance building, skillful personal diplomacy—many Pushtun clan or tribal groups made no incursions, launched no attacks. The British Indian state twice formally declared war, according to its own understanding of how such things were done, against the Afghan state; but it could not, did not, declare war against sub-state Pushtun adversaries. Legally, British India managed this frontier conflict as an emergency policing operation—albeit one often prosecuted at a very high level of violence, involving concentrated military force, the deliberate use of ruthless firepower, and punitive destruction of property. We should nevertheless accept the situation on this Northwest Frontier as a state of war. The overriding reason was the relationship between the principal belligerents.

The British Indian government claimed sovereign authority right up to a territorial boundary with Afghanistan. Before 1893 that boundary was poorly defined, the product of much older agreements and traditional understandings on the ground; from 1893 it was more sharply delineated by scientific survey, formalized by a bilateral treaty; but it always divided Pushtun settlement areas. And the Calcutta-based government found it extremely difficult to try to govern the mountain-dwelling tribal Pushtuns the same way it administered more docile peoples in the Indus valley. After 1849, a tacit notion gradually hardened into an effective understanding that shaped policy: there were really two frontiers. Well within the space claimed by British India there was a notional inner line of demarcation, to the east of which "normal administration and government" could operate. Between that line and the ambiguous international boundary with Afghanistan, the British treated the "tribal lands" of this Northwest Frontier, and the people who lived in them, as incorrigibly violent subjects who could only perhaps be controlled, but not really governed. The state government of the Punjab administered this area after 1849—but day to day work was carried out by resident Political Officers, supported by army garrisons. The British adopted the older Sikh strategy to provide the physical protection of a buffer zone west of the Indus valley. That compelled them to try to impose their own definition of "order" on Pushtuns who lived on the "British" side of the frontier—which invariably also meant entanglement with their cousins across the line.[3]

Nearly all Pushtuns rejected such overlord-ship, and expressed very local understandings of loyalty and identity. They rarely accepted higher authority of any kind for very long. And they were accustomed, over many centuries, to struggling for survival in the hardest of environments, both physical and political. This meant their military power amounted to the

3 Jules Stewart, *The Savage Border: The Story of the North-West Frontier* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013) (2007); Hugh Beattie, *Imperial Frontier: Tribe and State in Waziristan* (London: Routledge, 2013 (2002)); Paddy Docherty, *The Khyber Pass: A History of Empire and Invasion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007).

entire adult male population. This rarely produced any large or long lasting concentration of military force. Pushtuns rarely agreed for long about any wider or higher political issue. Most of the time they took to the field in small local forces, pursuing very local goals, melting back into their mountains and villages if things got too rough. But when they accepted any external authority as legitimate or worthy of support, rather than just strong enough to coerce them, it was not, could not, be British or Indian. Probably the only real Pushtun consensus was this: they wanted British India to leave them and their territories alone. This meant leaving them to carry on trading, taxing, and raiding as they saw fit, and to decide for themselves how, or whether, to fit into, or relate with, the Afghan state.[4]

Most British decision makers, most of the time, believed they could not afford to do any such thing. Pushtun society, culture, politics and geography made Pushtun military power too decentralized and fluid to pose the level of threat to British India that Russia seemed to pose. But these things also made it difficult for the British to either control Pushtun people and space or accept that it was secure and benign. On the larger scale, that same problem applied, in British eyes, to the Afghan state. It could not defend itself against Russia. It could be chastened, but was much harder to subdue, let alone control. And neither Pushtun tribal leaders nor Afghan emirs could ever produce what the British really wanted: stable and reliable control of territory and people. Stable and orderly people and space could fit safely into the larger "modern" international states system that imperial Great Powers sought to build in Asia, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The British, however, saw Afghanistan as a whole, and the Pushtun borderlands, in terms of geopolitics, as "empty space." That was their intolerable, but intractable, problem.

Becoming the paramount power in India made the subcontinent a cornerstone of the global project the British Empire had by then become. The Empire sought to reorder the world, including Asia. But apparently remorseless Russian territorial expansion, accompanied by much vocal boasting and threats, suggested that the Russian Empire had its own agenda to reorder Asia. Every effort to resolve the conflict along the Northwest Frontier unfolded against this perceived backdrop of more distant, but more dangerous, Russian ambitions. But every effort to respond to Russian behavior, real or imagined, provoked volatile reactions on the

4 The various peoples referred to as Pushtun, or Pathan, speak some dialect of Pashto, an Eastern Iranian language that belongs to the Indo-European family. Many still follow Pashtunwali, or Pakthunwali, a largely unwritten code of customs, norms, laws and practices that long pre-dates Islam, and defines Pushtun culture. It can also be translated as "the code of life." Dialects and divisions abound, more than 100 subtribes normally being recognized. From the eighteenth century the Durrani and the Ghilzai have been the dominant clans, often jockeying for control of Kabul and the Afghan state. O. Caroe, *The Pathans 550 BC-AD 1957* (London: Macmillan, 1958), remains in print and is a classic study. Other important studies include C. Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan* (London: Curzon, 1997), and J.W. Spain, *The Way of the Pathans* (London: Robert Hale, 1962), and *The Pathan Borderland* (The Hague: Mouton and Co, 1963). The young Winston Churchill captured a very widespread British image of the Pushtun peoples: "Except at harvest time, when self-preservation enjoins a temporary truce, the Pathan tribes are always engaged in private or public war. Every man is a warrior, a politician, and a theologian. Every large house is a real fortress, made, it is true, only of sunbaked clay, but with battlements, turrets, loopholes, flanking towers, drawbridges, etc, complete. Every village has its defence. Every family cultivates its vendetta; every clan, its feud. The numerous tribes and combinations of tribes all have their accounts to settle with one another….," in *My Early Life* (London: Butterworth, 1930), 134.

inherently fractious Northwest Frontier. To the British the two challenges blended into one. The Russian threat made it too risky to be less intrusive on the Northwest Frontier; but Pushtun hostility seemed too closely connected to wider political dynamics to assume it was just a local policing problem that could easily be contained. The root cause of the Second Anglo-Afghan War was in fact a long-standing British debate over how to defend India. That debate focused on the Northwest Frontier. It pitted advocates of the so-called Forward Strategy against those who argued Close Borders would be more effective.

The Forward Strategy rested on a key premise: Russia was hostile. Russian policy was imperial expansion, Russia sought to dominate Asia, British power in India stood in their way, Russia sought to topple British power in India. Afghanistan was weak and could be overrun by Russia, which would then be poised to invade India. Worse, Afghans could use well-established channels of Muslim intercourse and agitation to subvert the large Muslim minority in India, turning it into a fifth column. To protect India, the British not only had to militarize their Northwest Frontier but also dominate Afghanistan. Russian armies must be met as far north of the Northwest Frontier as possible. One influential memorandum in 1868 insisted that "interference in Afghanistan has now become a duty, and that any moderate outlay or responsibility we may incur in restoring order in Cabul [sic] will prove in the sequel to be true economy."[5]

The Close Border rebuttal revolved not around Russian intentions but around a diagnosis of Afghanistan: the country was too poisonous to digest. The British were particularly hated and feared because of their 1839 invasion and subsequent interference, but any Power trying to conquer Afghanistan would suffer for it. An influential memorandum in 1867 argued that sheer facts of geography and distance, plus the deeply rooted Afghan tendency to unite against any external invasion, meant the Russians could not overrun Afghanistan without bogging down in protracted conflict, at the end of very long supply lines, against determined resistance. Provided the British left Afghanistan alone, they would very likely be asked to help evict any Russian invader. Non-interference would also strengthen any British demand for other Powers to leave Afghanistan alone, and allow the British to concentrate on what should be their real priority: strengthening the government, economy, infrastructure and defence of India. As for the danger of having to fight along the Northwest Frontier, borderland peoples were so hostile to all outside interference that if the British allowed the Russians to be the aggressor then surely "There is perhaps not one of these tribes who would not seek our aid against any invader … Which party would be best able, under such circumstances, to win them to its side; we, or

[5] The author was Maj.-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, noted Orientalist scholar often referred to as "the father of Assyriology," Fellow of the Royal Society, who served in a variety of posts in Asia from 1827 to 1855. In 1868 Rawlinson was Member of Parliament for Frome and had just been appointed to the Council of India, a body established to advise the Secretary of State for India, with particular powers over expenditure. Rawlinson served on the council until he died in 1895, emerging as the foremost champion of the Forward Strategy; he published his views in 1875 in the book *England and Russia in the East.* A modern printing of his memoir is George Rawlinson, *A Memoir of Major-General Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson* (London: Adamant, 2005). An accessible discussion is Karl E. Meyer and Shareen B. Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), chap. 6.

the Russians?"[6]

Whatever the merits of the argument, by the mid-1870s the Forward Strategy dominated in London and Calcutta. This was largely due to Russian behaviour. Russian territorial expansion into Central Asia, spurred by the sting of defeat in the Crimean War, moved Russian forces appreciably closer to British-controlled territory. The Russian appetite for expansion, broadcast by much ambitious talk, could seem insatiable. Russia also seemed to lay down a marker in 1864, through a celebrated public memorandum written by Foreign Minister Alexander Gorchakov. Gorchakov insisted Russia sought only to establish secure permanent frontiers, and defined how that could be done. It was necessary to absorb territories which did not have "some organized form of society and a government to direct and represent it," because such societies' "turbulent and unstable character makes them most undesirable neighbours." But Russia could and would stop wherever it encountered a government which would "accept that peaceful and commercial relations with [Russia] are more profitable than disorder, pillage, reprisals, and a permanent state of war."[7] Such language precisely described British attitudes to their own Pushtun and Afghan neighbours, which made many British officials doubt any claim there were clear limits to Russian ambitions. Gorchakov sought to justify Russian expansion in Asia as a common interest of the "modern" projects of "civilized" empires. But his test also seemed calculated, to the British, to condemn the indigenous states of Central Asia, as well as Afghanistan, as "undesirable neighbours" who must be controlled—politically empty space.

This combination of rhetoric and territorial expansion fostered British tendencies to see every hint of Russian intrigue or political activity in Kabul as hostile military conspiracy. That provoked renewed British interest in controlling not just the boundaries of Afghanistan but also its government. When this combined with a British government that adopted a more assertive approach towards imperial defence in general, the result was another invasion of Afghanistan, designed to make sure that whoever governed the country rebuffed Russian pressure and followed a British lead. But not much was gained. The British invasion toppled one Emir and brought another to the throne, to be sure. But the only way the British could guide Afghan politics was to get involved in dynastic and tribal rivalries, which backfired. The British found themselves trapped in the internal politics of a country that resented them bitterly for this. Turning to Abdur Rahman amounted to admitting the 1878 invasion solved nothing. When in exile he lived under Russian protection. The best the British could hope for was not much

6 The author was Sir John Lawrence, who became an even more prominent member of the Council of India. Lawrence was one of the great figures of the British Raj. He went to India in 1829 as a servant of the East India Company and played such a prominent role in the Anglo-Sikh Wars and the subsequent successful British incorporation of the Punjab that he became Chief Commissioner. From 1863 to 1869 he served as Viceroy and wrote this Minute in that capacity, to explain why he believed the British should not interfere in Afghan succession politics. We lack a good modern study of Lawrence, who is discussed with insight by Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: St. Martin's, 2000). Meyer and Brysac, chap. 6, vividly summarize the Lawrence-Rawlinson exchange.

7 An annotated translated text of the Gorchakov Memorandum is available online at the *Empire in Asia: A New Global History* research project website: http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/hist/eia/documents_archive/gorchakov.php. See also William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), chap. 7; Meyer and Brysac, chap. 6; and Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha, 1994 (1990)).

comfort: Rahman's own inclination was to build a strong Afghan state that could withstand interference from either Great Power. And the new relationship did not start well. The British secured full control of both ends of the Khyber Pass and compelled the new Afghan regime to acknowledge this. They did this to strengthen their military position at this vital location, as well as secure at least one politically visible gain. But this only increased Afghan and Pushtun resentment. That was reflected by the heaviest British military defeat of the war, at Maiwand, which took place days after the official ceremony in Kabul that supposedly ended the conflict. The British exacted retribution, but the overall result of Afghan resistance was to force the more aggressive champions of the Forward Strategy to back down from plans to partition Afghanistan and occupy some of its more strategic positions, especially Kandahar.[8] This left the British in an arguably even more difficult position. Building a viable Afghan state that could be effectively governed by a central authority was challenge enough; demanding control of the foreign policy of that state forced the British to assume responsibility for defending it, without receiving any gratitude or credit whatsoever from its government or peoples.

This second war in Afghanistan thus left the British debating two concerns: how to control the government of Afghanistan and defend the country, and its borders, against Russian ambitions; and how to deter, defeat, or at least control Pushtun incursions into India or raids in the Indus valley. Steady Russian military advances into modern day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan made these concerns more serious. This escalated into a major crisis in the spring of 1885, when Russian military forces chased Afghan forces out of the oasis territory of Penjdeh (modern Serhetabat). This provoked a redrawing of the international boundary that brought Russian forces within striking distance of Herat. The two imperial Great Powers defused the crisis by diplomacy, setting up a bilateral commission to survey and redraw the boundary line of demarcation along the northern frontier of Afghanistan.[9] But this shifted the balance of debate, in both London and India, still more strongly towards the Forward Strategy.

From the 1830s makers of British grand strategy saw Herat as a vital position from which an invader could outflank the Hindu Kush mountain range, which protected Kabul against invasion from the north, and penetrate Afghanistan from the west. British strategic thinking identified control of government in Afghanistan as requiring control of its three main towns: Herat in the west, Kabul in the east, Kandahar in the south. After Penjdeh most British planners concluded that to protect India the British must be ready to do three things in Afghanistan:

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8 National Archives, United Kingdom (NA), CAB38/5, General Staff War Office Memorandum, Defence of India: Information regarding the Second Afghan War, 20 June 1904, narrates the military operations. See also Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Anglo-Afghan Wars 1839-1919*, Part II (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009); T.A. Heathcote, *The Afghan Wars 1839-1919* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2007 (1908)). D.S. Richards, *The Savage Frontier: A History of the Anglo- Afghan Wars* (London: Pan Books, 2003 (1990)).

9 The Penjdeh Crisis and northern Afghan border questions are documented in detail in BL, IOR, L/PS/20 Memo 13, Telegraphic Correspondence with Sir P. Lumsden subsequent to his arrival at Sarakhs, November 1884-November 1886; Memo 14, Correspondence respecting the Demarcation of the Northwest Frontier of Afghanistan from the Heri-Rud to the Oxus, Parts 1 through VI, July 1884-December 1886; Memo 16, Correspondence relative to the Boundary of Afghanistan on the Upper Oxus: Question of Shighnan, August 1884-March 1893; and see also Memo 12, Memoranda Relating to the Frontiers of Afghanistan, April 1884-September 1885. These documents include many Russian telegrams and memoranda. See also James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

occupy and hold Kandahar if necessary, to screen the southern regions of the Northwest Frontier; make sure that whoever governed in Kabul allowed the British to control their foreign relations; and make sure no other power, especially Russia, took Herat. The most aggressive champions of the Forward Strategy argued Herat must be protected in order to preserve an independent Afghanistan, but in the same breath insisted India's military security required defensive positions along the Hindu Kush, deep inside Afghanistan, well beyond the Northwest Frontier.[10] How could this be arranged without provoking even greater Afghan resentment? The most consistent effort to resolve this grand strategy debate focused on capabilities, on what the military now calls "ground truth." Critics of the Forward Strategy emphasized it. Well-established Russian base areas remained a long way away from Afghanistan. The territory in-between was dominated by vast steppe-land, arid desert, or rugged hills, and the unruly populations of the weak states in the region were not well disposed towards Russian control. To move large armies through these regions into Afghanistan, and keep them supplied, would be a daunting operation, even if they met little effective resistance. On the other hand one Russian development project threatened to change the strategic equation: railway building. The construction of the Transcaspian Railway, which by 1890 ran from Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea all the way east to Tashkent and Khokand, gave the Russians a much enhanced lateral line of communication. That line ran parallel above virtually the entire length of the northern boundary between Afghanistan and the states of Central Asia, themselves now disappearing into the Russian Empire. Russian power now seemed poised to swallow Afghanistan—and too close to the Northwest Frontier for comfort.[11] This provoked the Afghan and British governments to look more closely at the delineation of the boundaries of Afghanistan, which both hoped would strengthen military security in their borderlands for each of them. But when negotiations in 1893 produced a more precise line of demarcation, this helped provoke one of the most violent periods in the history of British defence of their Northwest Frontier.

The Durand Line traced the boundary between British India and Afghanistan that to this day forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, running from the junction point of modern day Iran, Afghanistan and the Pakistani state of Beluchistan in the south, to the Wakhan region in the north. The militarily crucial zone ran from Waziristan to Chitral, where

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10 BL, IOR, L/PS/20 Memo 12, Item I, Note by Maj.-General P.S. Lumsden on the Aspect of Affairs at Herat and in Central Asia, 24 July 1885; Item K, Memorandum by Col. A.S. Cameron, Some Observations as to the Military Value of a suggested Frontier Line between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire, 19 April 1885; Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*; Hopkirk, *The Great Game*; Alice Albinia, *Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River* (London: John Murray, 2008).

11 A 1927 comment that could have been written word for word in 1890 captured how strongly Russian railway development affected British strategic thinking: "Strategically the Northwest Frontier of India embraces the whole possible area of operations between the Russian Central Asian railway and the British railheads in India," in BL, IOR, L/MIL/17/13/8, Indian Army General Staff Memorandum, Amendments to a Study of the Existing Strategical Conditions on the Northwest Frontier of India, January 1928. But the most likely nature and scale of the threat, and the question of how to confront it, remained the subject of lively debate: NA, WO33/49: War Office Memorandum, Report of the Indian Mobilization Committee Regarding the Strategical Situation in Central Asia, 31 May 1889; Joint Memorandum, Director of Military Intelligence, War Office, and Military Secretary, India Office, Indian Army Field Force, 19 August 1889; Minute on Indian Army Field Force memorandum, Adjutant-General to the Forces (General Sir Garnet Wolseley), 25 August 1889.

a more precisely surveyed boundary arbitrarily cut across many Pushtun tribal areas more crudely than the previous loosely defined line. British military concerns, based on the need to dominate commanding heights and control access to passes and valleys, dictated the results of this quite unequal survey. This notion of a “scientific frontier” expressed a long standing British desire, raised as a major issue by then Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in the 1870s, to clarify a more concrete boundary. The line was determined by modern understandings of topography, terrain, watersheds, and military requirements for movement, operations, and fortifications. Local custom, understanding, and usage were not respected if not convenient. Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this military prism was to extend Afghanistan’s formally demarcated territorial boundary in the far northeast to include a narrow finger of land, running along the Pamir range of mountains in the Wakhan region that projected from the Himalayas. This formed a corridor, rarely more than 20 kilometers wide, that served one purpose: to connect Afghanistan to China, by interposing Afghan territory between British India, at its most extreme northwest, and Russian-controlled territory, at its most extreme southeast.[12] The practical military threat Russia could pose in such a remote region did not warrant the offence this attitude caused. By treating Afghanistan as a protectorate whose own interests did not, when push came to shove, merit much consideration, the British provoked the Afghan state into more active sympathy with tribal anger at the reordering of Pushtun territory.

The short-term result was an explosion of violence along the Northwest Frontier. This was actually triggered by British involvement in tribal politics of succession, as well as recurring Pushtun incursions into British India, but the new boundary inflamed everything. This forced the British Indian Army to mount major military operations, in great force, into most of the principal valleys and Pusthun settlement areas along the Northwest Frontier: Mahsud in 1894, Chitral and the Swat Valley in 1895, and the most violent of them all, Malakand and the Tirah, in 1897-98. These were only the largest and bloodiest of more than 60 substantial punitive expeditions or military operations the British Indian Army carried out in the borderlands after 1858. Many British Political Officers and military commanders felt these latest outbreaks were driven by a wave of Muslim fanaticism, stirred up by agitators moving through tribal areas. Most also felt the Afghan government aided and abetted the violence. There was some evidence that both these factors were involved, particularly the continuous flood of modern weaponry into the borderlands from the international arms trade that ran through Afghanistan. But the deeper and more damaging causes were familiar ones: local resentment at external interference in their politics and land, not to mention anger caused by the military operations

12 BL, IOR, L/PS/20/Memo 18, Command Paper 8042, Afghan Boundary Agreement and Copy of Correspondence relating to Afghan Proceedings in Kafiristan, June 1896. L/PS/18/A 82, Note by Sir Stewart Payley on the Pamir Question and the Northeast Frontiers of Afghanistan, 19 November 1891, outlines in detail British concerns leading towards the Durand Line negotiations. This is continued in L/PS/20 Memo 17, which holds relevant documents ranging from July 1892 through July 1894. The main point is well expressed in the memorandum Military Considerations Connected with the Pamir Frontier, written on 9 July 1893 by Col. J.C. Ardagh, Indian Army Intelligence Branch: “For military purposes, therefore, a frontier following the highest watersheds is defective, and we should aim at keeping our enemy from any possibility of establishing himself on the glacis, occupying these longitudinal valleys, and therefore preparing to surprise the passes. We should therefore seek a boundary which shall leave all these longitudinal valleys in our possession or at least under our influence.”

themselves. Particularly violent incursions or raids provoked, as common policy, harsh measures of "control." Farms and crops were destroyed, granaries smashed, villages torched, populations driven to take refuge in the hills. Escalating these measures of retribution only created a vicious circle. Heavy-handed punishment brought about local capitulation under duress; but at the next opportunity fighting flared up again, triggered by some particular dispute but fueled by basic resentment.[13]

The only way to break this vicious circle was to change policy where the problem was the worst: at the most local level, on the spot. Some useful methods and ideas had long been proposed, and sometimes implemented: build working relationships with local tribal and clan leaders that focused on specific and temporary issues; delegate authority and decisions to those who faced the problem on the spot; make the administration of the area a separate responsibility; bribe tribal leaders, with "subsidies," to stay quiet and cause no trouble; concentrate on defending against incursions, rather than pre-empting or punishing them. But at the very end of the century they all came together, at least for a time, due to the energy and vision of a quite unique Viceroy: George Nathaniel Curzon.

Curzon assumed office in January 1899 with truly striking credentials. He spent most of the previous 15 years preparing himself for this very office. He travelled throughout the region, making some very rugged voyages indeed, ranging from Russia, into Persia, through Afghanistan and Central Asia, including the Northwest Frontier, then India, into China, and eventually to Japan. This included a visit to Kabul in 1894, where he had long conversations with Emir Abdur Rahman about international problems. Curzon published two best-selling volumes chronicling his travels and analyzing lands, peoples and politics. And he also served a term as Under Secretary at the India Office, presenting its policy in the House of Commons. No senior British politician, civilian official, or military officer, in the UK or India, came close to matching his overall understanding or familiarity with the large region he was now required to defend. Nor did many come close to tackling those problems with the self-confidence that so marked the man lampooned for life as "a very superior person."[14] After settling into his office and making the grand tour of his new domains, the Viceroy launched, with great vigour, a frontal assault against the vested military and political interests, especially in India, promoting the Forward Strategy.

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13 BL, IOR, L/PS/20/Memo 18, Command Paper 8037, Correspondence relating to the Occupation of Chitral, 1896; India Office, *Military Operations on the Northwest Frontiers of India 1897-98* (London: HMSO, 1898); Pioneer, *The Risings on the North-West Frontier* (Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1898); Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 4. The most important modern British study of military operations in the Northwest Frontier borderlands is Tim Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Modern Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

14 BL, IOR, Curzon Papers, Mss Eur F111 56, Memorandum by Curzon on his Visit to Afghanistan, 2 December 1894. Curzon's most influential tomes, both published in London by Longmans, Green & Co., were *Russia in Central Asia and the Anglo-Russian Question*, 1889, and *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 vols., 1892. Also relevant was *The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus*, published by The Royal Geographical Society in 1896. David Gilmour, *Curzon: Imperial Statesman* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1994), captures Curzon's personality very well, but the best source for Curzon's career in India and experiences in Asia is the large collection of his papers held in the British Library.

Curzon made two commanding arguments. First, Russian behaviour was a concern, and might become a problem, but should not be treated as a war waiting to happen. Second, the political arrangements and military strategy used to handle Pushtun incursions on the Northwest Frontier were both fundamentally flawed, and must be revised. Curzon did not doubt Russian ambitions in general, or their willingness to cause problems for the British in India. But he did reject the argument that they could or would carry out a militarily dangerous invasion of India through Afghanistan. And the Viceroy agreed the Pushtun borderlands could neither be abandoned nor overrun, but also insisted they could and must be treated differently. To solve the grand strategy problem, Curzon argued that the Russian threat should be met on a much wider plane than in Afghanistan. To manage the Pushtuns, he suggested the opposite: the solution should be pursued much closer to the problem.

Curzon was the most important British official to hear so clearly what so many Russians said for so long: threatening India was useful, because it rattled the British so badly. That threat could be used to compel the British to make concessions elsewhere. This was the strategy Henry Kissinger described so vividly, many years later, as “linkage.” Bellicose Russian officers who made ambitious plans to invade India through Afghanistan, for example Alexsey Kuropatkin in 1886, or Captain W. Lebedev in 1898, served a useful purpose. Rattling the British chain in India could pay off in the Far East, or the Balkans. Curzon did not suggest this was bluff. Rather he argued that two could and should play that game. The Viceroy argued that a more assertive British policy which contested Russian designs in Persia, contained Russia at the Dardanelles, and resisted Russian pressure in the Far East, would do more to bolster the security of Afghanistan than any heavy handed British intervention there. The British government concluded that Curzon went too far, and tried to rein in what they saw as too independent a grand strategy for India, one demanding too many British commitments and resources. But Curzon did undermine the dominance of the Forward Strategy, through withering criticisms he aimed at the political and military assumptions it rested on. These he rebutted by drawing confidently on personal experience. His skepticism emboldened allies in the War Office, whose Director of Military Operations dismissed a 1903 Indian Army war-game scenario about “a Russian advance through Afghanistan on India” as based on such a skewed set of assumptions that “it is inconceivable that Russia would in any circumstances be favoured to this extent.” And Curzon’s pressure played a role in an energizing of British policy towards Russia that did indeed help relieve pressure on Afghanistan, by diverting Russian

attention elsewhere.[15]

Curzon turned the same confident criticism onto two longstanding pillars of British policy on the Northwest Frontier: the government of the Punjab and the British Indian Army. The Viceroy argued that a state government responsible for a large territory whose main concern was to develop the breadbasket of all India could not be expected, at the same time, to effectively administer the very different challenges of a very different region. Asking it to govern both settled populations inside the de facto "administrative frontier" and tribal incorrigibles on the other side of that notional line was asking for confusion. The Northwest Frontier should instead be made a separate area of administration; the notional line should become official. The new province should be run by an officer concentrating exclusively on the problems of the borderlands, and reporting directly to the Government of India. His resident Political Officers should be given greater latitude to manage the affairs of their own districts. This proposal provoked bitter debate in both India and London, but eventually Curzon won the day. Once again he drew on his own extensive knowledge of the area. He also enjoyed the strong support of political officers on the spot, and exploited London's desire for order in the region.[16] But this all had to be implemented, and Curzon's plans to do that provoked trouble with the army.

The hard military framework of security for the Northwest Frontier was provided by the network of forts and garrisons now dotted through the region, especially at Peshawar and along the Khyber Pass. Forward Strategy supporters pressed hard for ambitious developments to bolster that framework, most notably by constructing railway lines up to and through the main

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15 The large number of surviving nineteenth century documents that relate to British concerns about Russian military ambitions in Asia and regarding India can only be summarized by selection here: NA, WO106/6208, Analysis of General Kuropatkin's Scheme for the Invasion of India, War Office Intelligence Branch Memorandum, August 1886; CAB38/5, General Staff War Office Memorandum, Defence of India: Observations on the Records of a War Game played at Simla, 1903, 5 May 1904. BL, IOR, Curzon Papers, Mss Eur F111 695, Indian Army Intelligence Branch Memorandum, On the Power of Russia to Operate against Northern Afghanistan, 1899; F111 698, War Office Intelligence Division Memorandum, Distribution of the Russian Military Forces in Asia, June 1902; F111 699, Indian Army Intelligence Branch Memorandum, Russian Advances in Asia No. V, 1882-1884, 1885; F111 700, Indian Army Intelligence Branch Memorandum, Russian Advances in Asia No. VII, 1890-1895, 1896; F111 701, War Office Intelligence Division Memorandum, Twenty Years of Russian Army Reform and the Present Distribution of the Russian Land Forces, 1893; L/PS/18/A141, Abstract and Extracts of Translation by Mr. Robert Michell of *To India: A Military and Strategical Sketch, A Project of a Future Campaign*, by Capt. W. Lebedeff, [Russian] Grenadier Guards, St. Petersburg, 1898, concludes by summarizing the long-standing Russian view of the usefulness of making threats to British India: Russia should occupy in Central Asia "a still stronger position, with the object of utilizing it whensoever our opponent [the British] displays an animosity similar to that which he displayed during the Crimean Campaign and at the period of the Congress of Berlin." Lebedev, a hawk, argued "The occupation of Herat, then of Candahar and Cabul [sic], and, finally, the inclusion within our sphere of influence of the whole of Afghanistan, such will be our further steps in Central Asia; this is needed for the profit of Russia, and we must not forego it." See also Alex Marshall, *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800-1917* (London: Routledge, 2006).

16 Curzon's agenda can be studied in detail through the correspondence preserved in the British Library, in particular IOR, Curzon Papers, Mss Eur F111 158, Correspondence with Hamilton, Salisbury and Godley, 1899; F 111 159, Correspondence with Hamilton, Salisbury and Godley, 1900; F 111 160, Correspondence with Hamilton, Salisbury and Godley, 1901; F 111 161, Correspondence with Hamilton, Brodrick, Salisbury, Balfour and Godley, 1902. These candid exchanges indicate Curzon's readiness to draw on such personal experiences as travelling on the Transcaspian Railway, and discussing geopolitics with Abdur Rahman in Kabul, when challenging civil and military orthodoxy.

mountain passes and increasing the forward deployment of regular combat forces. Curzon flatly opposed all this, and went much further. He argued that the military tended to base all decisions on tactical considerations, and to rely on punitive measures of retribution to all incursions, which simply escalated the vicious circle of raid and retribution. The Viceroy also insisted that the officer corps of the army let itself be too influenced by the many chances for glory and promotion provided by active service on the frontier. Curzon was by no means the first senior official to make these arguments. But he was the highest ranking, most determined, and most articulate—and he made them in the aftermath of the bloody fighting of 1897-98 that unnerved the British public, as well as its government. On this as well Curzon eventually got his way. The number of regular troops forward deployed provocatively inside Pushtun areas was markedly reduced. Mobile columns were regrouped in safer base areas in the Indus valley. They were replaced by increasing the number of locally raised irregular volunteer forces or tribal militia, contracted to maintain order and security. Subsidies paid to unruly tribes to keep them quiet, having been foolishly reduced in what turned out to be a search for false economy, were wisely restored. Curzon met the first major challenge to his policy, raids by the Mahsud Waziri clan, by combining the tactic of sending in a field force to scatter the raiders with the more patient strategy of blockading Mahsud territory until they submitted. He then settled for confiscating their modern weapons, imposing a manageable fine, and requiring tribal leaders to stand accountable for any further incursion. This lighter touch sent out the overall message: provided the region remained relatively quiet, British India would now tread as lightly as possible along the Northwest Frontier, but would respond proportionately to any new challenges.[17]

Curzon's policies were timely as well as inherently sensible, and made a real impact on both levels of the intractable problem. Curzon himself paid the price for being right about most things most of the time, and especially for falling out with the army. His Viceroyalty ended in controversial resignation in 1905, but his policies and strategies endured. That same year Russia was humiliatingly defeated in a war with Japan, a conflict made possible when the British, practicing linkage, made a defensive alliance with the Japanese in 1902. This greatly relieved the pressure the British felt regarding India, assisted by a strong Russian turn towards European priorities after defeat in Asia. That enabled the great Entente with Russia in 1907 that seemed, at the time, to resolve the long-running imperial rivalry that so complicated the problems of Afghanistan and the Northwest Frontier. This was not however the end of the problem, mainly because that rivalry was never its only cause. There was a very long and complicated epilogue.

During the Great War the Afghan government resisted German and Turkish pressure to join the war on the side of the Central Powers, and invade British India. This Afghan decision to respect their treaty commitment and remain neutral was welcome indeed to the British, who

[17] Curzon summarized his views in *Frontiers*, the 1906 Romanes Lectures, published in 1907 by Oxford University Press. Roderick Matthews, *Lord Curzon: The Wisest Fool in Hindustan?* eBook published by IDEAINDIA.COM in 2008, is worth reading, but David Dilks, *Curzon in India, Vol. 1, Achievement* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1969), remains the most important study of Curzon's Viceroyalty, including a penetrating analysis of the frontier reforms and strategic arguments in chapter 9.

were hard pressed. The Empire was forced to mobilize a huge Indian Army to support what became a global total war, but had to reduce the military presence near the Northwest Frontier to worryingly low levels, in order to send expeditionary forces overseas. This was a calculated risk. Emir Habibulla in Kabul was pressured by many Afghan factions to turn against the British. And the Northwest Frontier remained, lighter tread notwithstanding, a region that could only be managed—not secured, much less governed. The British Indian Army was forced to mount two large operations against incursions or raids in 1908, followed by six more during the Great War, from 1914 through 1918. Nor did a year go by without the need to conduct local small-scale military operations somewhere in the region. Afghan resentments finally bubbled over in 1919. Habibulla was assassinated; his successor Amanullah took advantage of British distractions with serious internal unrest in India to invade the country with his regular army in May, launching a Third Afghan War. Both sides quickly agreed to an armistice; but in the process many Pushtun tribesmen on the Indian side of the Durand Line, especially in Waziristan, rallied to the Afghan invasion. This forced the British Indian Army to mount another major campaign to "restore order" to the area. The British finally agreed to return full control of foreign policy to Afghanistan, to secure the armistice. This however did not change the frontier dynamic in the borderlands.

Military operations to "restore order" in Waziristan dragged on into 1924. New tactics were used in 1925, when airpower was put to punitive and deterrent use to contain further trouble. More campaigns followed against the Mohmands in 1927, the Afridi in 1930-31, the Mohmands again in 1933 and 1935. These were not major military confrontations. But such a confrontation did break out in 1936 when British Indian Army regular forces went back into Waziristan to mount a show of force, in response to reports "fanatics" were stirring "unrest." By this time rules of engagement were tighter, so less force was used. But this time the tread lightly strategy backfired. Local controversies over religion and legal matters had indeed provoked great anger in the region, anger stoked by a charismatic religious leader, the Fakir of Ipi. The modest response was seen as weakness or lack of resolve, and fighting escalated. By 1937, 60,000 regular and local troops were deployed in the region, conducting what amounted to a full-blown counterinsurgency campaign. This petered out by 1939; and it proved to be the last major military commitment before the British finally terminated this war, at least for themselves, by withdrawing from India altogether in 1947. But the conflict remained unresolved. The successor state of Pakistan was forced to maintain the separate jurisdiction of a Northwest Frontier Province, within which the most unruly regions remain Federally Administered Tribal Areas—whose peoples still violently resist the imposition of any higher central authority.[18]

The language they used might seem quite different, and they were probably more confident they could bring about lasting positive changes in other people's countries. But British statesmen of the second half of the nineteenth century actually evaluated problems of

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18 Alan Warren, *Waziristan, The Fakir of Ipi, and the Indian Army: The Northwest Frontier Revolt of 1936-37* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Fremont-Barnes, *The Anglo-Afghan Wars 1839-1919;* Heathcote, *The Afghan Wars 1839-1919.* Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province was only renamed Khyber Paktunkhwa in 2010.

grand strategy in Asia in ways that would not confound their Western successors today. They seemed just as willing to overestimate threats and complicate their own policies. There is a connecting thread: the perception of geopolitical "empty space." The British did not fail to coerce the Afghan government in either their First or Second Afghan War. But they did not need to try, on either occasion, and gained nothing positive from military success. No Russian strategic foreign policy enjoyed greater success in the nineteenth century, at less risk, than rattling the British chain over the security of India. Before the construction of the Transcaspian Railway there was no way the Russian Army could successfully invade India, from Persia or Turkestan. After its completion, the only way it might have done so was through a supportive and allied Afghanistan. That was never going to happen. No Afghan government could submit to the over-lordship of any imperial power and maintain the confidence of its unruly, fractious, stubbornly independent peoples. Abdur Rahman did not submit to Russian pressure in the 1880s. Habibulla did not side with the Central Powers in 1915. British refusal to trust Afghan determination to remain independent made Afghans resent them more than they already would have, which complicated everything else.[19]

Forward Strategy champions seemed to credit Russian political warfare agents, and military forces, with incredible capabilities—and on the other hand gave little weight to the inherent problems of conquering Afghanistan, or British ability to retain the confidence of their Indian populations. The thread connected. A weak Asian state governed by loose traditional tribal networks could not withstand the might and wiles of a modern European aggressor. An Asian population living under the administration of a European power could not be relied on to withstand the intrigues of another such power, or its local proxies. At its crudest and most Orientalist—a common trope in this discourse—this was the language of raw military power. Only that could guarantee security. Afghanistan could not be trusted to define and defend itself. So the already unruly borderlands, whose people wanted to be left alone, must be tightly controlled, not just loosely contained.

Curzon's approach to Close Borders came closest to a viable policy for imperial defence on the Northwest Frontier. The "tread lightly on the border and do not panic about Russia" strategy was pretty effective. That was, to be sure, partly due to wider international events and distractions. And it could not terminate the borderland war, much less resolve it. But Curzon, in fact, argued that the British should not try. Pushtun borderland peoples should, as much as possible, be left to find their own way to come to terms with the wider world changing around them. Violence must be contained, but as lightly as possible, and for as long as necessary. Curzon agreed borderland tribes could not be insulated from more dangerous external influences or pressures. But he argued British policy should also consider the constant feature that so strongly defined them: determination not to march to any drum but their own.

To be fair, many Forward Strategy supporters did not disagree with one of Curzon's cardinal assumptions. They also saw the Northwest Frontier war as one that could not be terminated. But he proposed a more sophisticated, and less expensive, grand strategy by which

19 Some contemporary flavor of this Afghan political reality can be captured in Abdur Rahman (with editorial assistance from Sultan Mahomed Khan), *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan,* 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1900).

it could safely be managed. It was more sophisticated because it separated the two basic problems. Curzon tried not to bully the Afghan government more than he absolutely had to. The Forward Strategy assumed at a minimum that whoever governed in Kabul must be treated like a British puppet, because the real problem was the Russian threat. The Curzon approach required the British to swallow such fears. The Russian threat was mainly geopolitical, not military, and should be so confronted. That would at least reduce what could not be terminated: the security risks that seemed to make the war on the borderlands so worrying. Afghanistan, not just the borderlands, should be tolerated as "empty space," for as long as necessary. Great empires should play the long game, not just the "great game," and above all remember the old maxim that "all politics were local." That would at least mean coming to terms with the interminable. From 1902 until they left in 1947, this was more or less what the British did. That did not make Afghanistan or its borderlands more stable or orderly than they are now. But it probably did no harm, and some good, to Asia and the wider world.