

The Great Game – myth or reality?

Updated extract from "Tajikistan and the High Pamirs" Odyssey 2011 - © Robert Middleton 2004-2015

“Listen in the north, my boys, there's trouble on the wind;
Tramp o' Cossack hooves in front, gray great-coats behind,
Trouble on the Frontier of a most amazin' kind,
Trouble on the waters o' the Oxus!”
Rudyard Kipling, *Soldiers Three*

“More people debated the Great Game than ever played it.”
John Keay *When Men and Mountains Meet*, p. 140

The expression ‘Great Game’, describing the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires for influence, control and expansion of territory in Central Asia in the nineteenth century was coined by Lieutenant Arthur Conolly (1807-1842), a British Political Officer¹ of the 6th Bengal Native Light Cavalry, who initiated British reconnaissance and map making in the region and was executed along with fellow British officer Charles Stoddart by the Emir of Bukhara in 1842. In 1837, he wrote two letters to his fellow ‘Political’, Henry Rawlinson (one of the most distinguished ‘players’ in the Great Game as soldier, archaeologist, explorer and historian – at that time a Lieutenant, but later a Major-General, knight and President of the RGS), in which he wrote: “You've a great game, a noble one, before you”;² and, in another letter: “If only the British Government would play the grand game.”

In 1837, Count Nesselrode, Russian Foreign Minister from 1822 to 1856, had created another highly appropriate term for this conflict, ‘Tournament of Shadows’, but it was the ‘Great Game’ that caught the popular imagination. The works of Rudyard Kipling, in particular *Kim*, published in 1901, revived enthusiasm for this period of empire and, almost a century later, the term took on a new life through the stirring tales recounted by, among others, John Keay in *The Gilgit Game*, published in 1979, Peter Hopkirk in *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (1990), and Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac in *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia* (1999).

If the object of the contest was hardly different from what was taking place simultaneously in the ‘scramble for Africa’ and elsewhere around the globe, attention was drawn to Central Asia by concerns in press and Parliament in Britain about threats to India, the jewel in the Crown of the British Empire, and by the publication of the adventures of many of the colourful characters involved. Central Asia was also associated with the Silk Road and with names and places redolent of romance and mystery. In one of his more poetic moments, on the Dorah Pass in the north-west of Chitral looking across the entrance to the Wakhan, Colonel Algernon Durand, British Agent in Gilgit from 1889-1894, described well the fascination that still attaches to Central Asia:

We stayed a short time at the top, looking out over the Badakshan mountains towards that mysterious Central Asia which attracts by the glamour of its past history, by the veil which shrouds its future. Balkh, Bokhara, Samarkhand, what visions come trooping as their names arise. The armies of Alexander, the hordes of Gengis Khan and Timur go glittering by; dynasties and civilisations rise and fall like the waves of the sea; peace and prosperity again and again go down under the iron hoof of the conqueror; for centuries past death and decay have ruled in the silent heart of Asia.³

¹ Political officers - many of whom were Army officers on secondment - were responsible for the civil administration of frontier districts in India.

² Rawlinson was at that time facing a Persian army in Kandahar and its Russian ‘advisers’.

³ *The Making of a Frontier*, Algernon Durand, London 1899, p. 88.

The main theatre of Anglo-Russian rivalry was in and close to the Pamirs: the present-day frontiers in the region were determined as a result of the agreements reached by Russia and Britain during this crucial period in their relations.

Colonial policy

The extension by Russia and Britain of their zones of influence in Central Asia was bound to bring the two Empires into a conflict over their respective interests. For the British, the primary concern was to find a sound “scientific” defensive frontier for India, although the commercial consideration of finding markets to the north for the produce of India was also thrown into the equation. For the reformist Tsar Alexander II, after the Russian defeat in the Crimea War in 1854-56, the objective was to find new opportunities for territorial (and commercial) expansion in the only direction remaining, east.

As at other times, failure of Russia on the side of Europe was followed by a great advance on the line of least resistance in Asia, with enormous accessions of territory. When this advance had been left to the Cossacks and peasants, the line which it followed had passed due eastward, north of the centres of Asiatic population, to the Pacific. But in this reign takes place a purely military advance in another quarter, central Asia, in character quite unlike the penetration of Siberia, except in so far as the independent initiative of Russian generals might distantly recall the unfettered enterprise of the Cossacks. The way was cleared in 1859 by the surrender after a gallant resistance of the priest-prince Shamil, which brought to a close the long struggle against the gallant mountaineers of the Caucasus.⁴

Within ten years, Russia was well on the way to constituting a major empire in the east. Although the Russian move in this direction was certainly anticipated by British statesmen,⁵ it was nevertheless viewed with consternation by a significant section of the press and public and – more particularly – those in the field in India. The next forty years were marked by the manoeuvring, manipulation, duplicity, courage, posturing, self-delusion, chivalry, brutality and sometimes plain recklessness that now go under the name of ‘Great Game’.

Rules of the Game

For most of the 19th century, the definition of the role and frontiers of Afghanistan as a territory lying between the two Empires was of central importance in Anglo-Russian relations. Since the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Britain was the undisputed major power in India and, already in 1809, recognising the strategic position of Afghanistan, concluded a treaty with the Afghan Amir, Shah Shuja.

British policy towards Afghanistan suffered from lack of consistency. While on the Russian side, General Kaufmann was Governor-General of Turkestan from 1867 until his death in 1882, there were, during this period, no fewer than five Viceroys of India; similarly, while the Tsar exercised autocratic rule in Russia, the same period saw three changes of government in Britain. If Russophobia was generally a constant in Britain during this period, there were conflicting opinions about whether imperial interests would be best protected against supposed Russian ambitions by an Afghanistan that was: a) an independent and centralised state with institutions that could withstand encroachment (or blandishments) from Russia; b) a weak client state, totally dependent on external military support and subsidy; c) a buffer whose territorial integrity was best protected by agreement between (and in the mutually acknowledged interests of) the two main protagonists; or d) totally dismembered and permanently weakened. Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, future Viceroy of India, commented acerbically in 1889:

⁴ Bernard Pares, *A History of Russia*, London 1965, p.428.

⁵ In 1800, three months before his death, Tsar Paul had ordered the conquest of India.

Our relations with Afghanistan in the forty years between 1838 and 1878 were successively those of blundering interference and of unmasterly (I have always supposed it to be a *lapsus calami* to write 'masterly') inactivity.⁶



General Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann (1818-1882)
(Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

Inextricably linked to the imperial rivalry was the perception that most of Central Asia – and especially the Pamirs – was a ‘blank spot’ on the map: hence, as we shall see in later chapters, the central role of the explorer as a forerunner and agent of conquest and empire. This, combined with the declining ability of China to police its western frontiers and make good its territorial claims in Central Asia, gave urgency to laying down the markers of empire.

The Game was indeed one of high stakes: the players came into close territorial contact and friction was inevitable. The accounts of the main protagonists – and some histories of the period – suggest that this was a fraught and tense period in relations between the two Empires, during which, despite external courteous and ‘gentlemanly’ behaviour, ruthless intrigue was threatening peace and stability and that war was only narrowly avoided – the blame for which was generally attributed to the other side of the border from that on which the observer was standing.

A dispassionate look at the official record of diplomatic intercourse between the two Powers, however, shows that, during the whole period, each behaved according to fairly clear and consistent rules. Formal and informal contacts were intense and business-like and each was truly concerned to minimise flashpoints.⁷ As a consequence, there was never any real danger that their respective inroads in Central Asia would lead to armed conflict between them. The drama lay more in the contest between the ‘peace’ and ‘war’ factions within each country than in relations between the central governments themselves. In the British case, the determination of policy was complicated by differences of perception and judgement – sometimes extreme – between the government in London and the administration in Calcutta/Simla, as well as by some vociferous sections of Parliament and public opinion, fed by a jingoistic press.

Certainly, if anyone was having fun during this time, it was the adventurers on the ill-defined frontiers who enjoyed the free run given to them by their chiefs in the military and intelligence services to hunt and play ‘hide-and-seek’ in the wide open spaces of Central Asia.

⁶ George N. Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia in 1889 and the Anglo-Russian Question*, London 1889, pp.356-7.

⁷ For the period 1836-1844 in particular, cf Ingle Harold N., *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain, 1836-1844*, University of California Press, London 1976, pp. 118-120 and *passim*.

As Hopkirk notes there was, however, a difference of approach between the two sides: "... in the coming years, 'scientific expeditions' were frequently to serve as covers for Russian Great Game activities, while the British preferred to send their officers, similarly engaged, on 'shooting leave', thus enabling them to be disowned if necessary."⁸ Of course, the explorers on both sides made significant contributions to geographical knowledge, but both Russians and British saw success in Central Asia as a basis for building reputations and careers; in the case of the Russians – in the early years of Central Asian conquest, at least – by sometimes exceeding their orders; in the case of the British, self-promotion was achieved through the somewhat unseemly rush to publish personal accounts of adventure and survival in exotic places.⁹ Harold Nicolson, the sympathetic biographer of Lord Curzon, one of the most intrepid among them, referred, for example, to "the valuably portentous books which he published on his return."¹⁰

The Pamir expeditions of the Russians almost always incorporated a serious scientific component and, whatever their other aims, brought back major contributions to cartography, botany, zoology, glaciology, ethnology and linguistics. Other travellers noted this also in their encounters with the Russians: Wilhelm Filchner, a Lieutenant in the Royal Bavarian Infantry, for example, noted on his way to the Pamirs in 1900¹¹ that the Russians had a highly professional cartographic department in Tashkent and a well-equipped astronomical observatory in Marghilan, where he was surprised to see that the main telescope had been made in Hamburg. Filchner further remarked that the Russian road from Osh was well-provided with regular distance (verst) markers and that the Pamirsky Post (the Russian military base at present-day Murghab) at the end of the road already had a meteorological station where readings were taken three times a day, even though the base had only been in existence since 1893 and the fort was not built there until 1895.¹² Moreover, when Filchner arrived at Pamirsky Post, a Polish professor, B. Stankewitsch, had just been assigned there to make scientific measurements.

The Great Game was a story of personalities, of whom the most visible were the men on the spot. Seen against the wider canvas of British-Russian relations in the latter part of the 19th century, however, their influence on events was marginal: their actions were the pin-pricks on the edge of empire, frequently provoking temporary flare-ups of tension but rarely achieving any fundamental change of direction. Several of the players were considered by their political superiors as loose cannons and were frequently the object of their wrath – and sometimes even disavowed publicly, as was the darling of the British public, Younghusband, for his appalling massacre of Tibetans in 1904. Their flamboyance and the daring of their adventures has tended to obscure the actions (often out of the public gaze) of their political and military masters at the centre of power, whose decisions determined the outcome of the Game.

Anglo-Russian flashpoints

Russian expansion in Central Asia was viewed from the outset with much suspicion by the British. In 1865, Rawlinson, always an advocate of a hard line towards Russia, nevertheless admitted:

It is certain that the absorption of Georgia, the acquisition of the frontier provinces of Turkey and Persia, and the gradual subjugation of the Kirghiz Steppe, although cited by McNeill in his famous pamphlet 'On the progress of Russia in the East', as proofs of her insatiate thirst of conquest, were amply paralleled by our own annexations in India during the same period ... and

⁸ Hopkirk, p.204.

⁹ As we shall see later in Chapter 5, Ney Elias was a notable exception to this practice and his career probably suffered as a result.

¹⁰ Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase 1919-1925 – A Study in Post-War Diplomacy*, London 1934, p. 27.

¹¹ Wilhelm Filchner, *Ein Ritt über den Pamir*, Berlin 1903, p. 33.

¹² Murghab still has a functioning meteorological station and, surprising as it may seem, there are still websites that provide the weather forecast for the high Pamir plateau (e.g.

<http://www.weatheronline.co.uk/Tadschikistan/Murghab.htm>).

excepting, therefore, that a certain mutual distrust was created between the two European powers, no great evil arose from their respective territorial extension.¹³

Later, in 1871, Rawlinson also conceded that

although the question of the Russian approach to India was of great interest, it was one which we might look steadily in the face without any sense of danger... the nearer England and Russia approached each other in Central Asia, the more advantageous it would be in some respects for both nations, inasmuch as it would remove impediments to free communication, promote trade and put an end to the anarchy and disorder which were at present rampant ...¹⁴

Curzon agreed

Those who have read descriptions of the country from the Caspian to the Amu Daria, in the pre-Russian days of rapine and raid, when agriculture was devastated, life and property rendered insecure and entire populations were swept off in unheard-of barbarity into a life-long servitude, can form some idea of the extent of the revolution by which peace and order and returning prosperity have been given to these desolated tracts; and the traveller, who once dared not move abroad without a powerful escort, is enabled to wander with impunity over the unfrequented plain.¹⁵

At the time, not all in Britain saw it this way, however, and there were a number of major flashpoints in Anglo-Russian relations.

1837-41 – Persia and the first Afghan War

Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia goes back at least as far as the Treaty of Turkomanchai in 1828, by which Russia obtained important concessions from Persia and significant influence at the Shah's court. The British feared that, from Persia, the Russians would attempt to extend their influence to Afghanistan and would thus obtain 'the key to India'.

At the time Afghanistan was, however, unstable and far from being a unitary state. Under the leadership of the first Pashtun ruler, Ahmad Shah (1722-1772), founder of the Durrani dynasty, Afghanistan began to take shape as a nation after centuries of foreign invasion and internal fragmentation. His death, however, was followed by a long period of unrest and Afghanistan disintegrated into a group of small units, each ruled by a different Durrani leader.

In 1826, Dost Mohammed took the throne in Kabul and began to consolidate his power. In 1834 he defeated an invasion by a former ruler, Shah Shuja', but, during the unrest, Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler, occupied Peshawar. In 1836, Dost Mohammed's forces defeated the Sikhs, but did not follow up by retaking Peshawar, and approached Lord Auckland, the new British governor general in India, seeking an alliance for dealing with the Sikhs. Auckland was unwilling to assist in the return of Peshawar to Afghan control but instead sent a mission led by Alexander Burnes, to Kabul: nominally to negotiate a commercial treaty but in reality to attempt by threats to persuade the Amir to have nothing to do with the Russians. The mission included John Wood, who left Kabul in November 1837 to make a brief detour to look for the source of the Oxus and discovered lake Zorkul in the Great Pamir.

In 1837, Persia laid siege to Herat, over which Dost Mohammed's authority was at best fragile, if not non-existent. The British, with firm evidence of Russian complicity (in the machinations of the new Russian envoy to the Persian court, Count Ivan Simonich), protested vigorously to St. Petersburg, the first in a series of diplomatic exchanges between the two powers in relation to Central Asia. The Russians claimed, however, to have had no part in the Persian decision to attack Herat and to have advised the Shah against it. British pressure was so strong, however, that Simonich was recalled from Persia and his successor was instructed

¹³ *The Quarterly Review*, October 1865 (reprinted in *England and Russia in the East*, London 1875, p. 145).

¹⁴ *PRGS*, Vol 15 No. 3 (1870-1871), pp 198-199.

¹⁵ Curzon, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

to limit his relations with Afghanistan to purely commercial matters.¹⁶ Russia also undertook not to interfere in Afghan affairs.

Dost Mohammed, understandably, considered that the British were demanding much and offering little. John William Kaye, in his monumental *History of the War in Afghanistan* (London 1874) comments:

[Burnes's] mission failed. What wonder? It could by no possibility have succeeded. If utter failure had been the great end sought to be accomplished, the whole business could not have been more cunningly devised. Burnes asked everything; and promised nothing. He was tied hand and foot. He had no power to treat with Dost Mahomed. All that he could do was to demand on one hand and refuse on the other. He talked about the friendship of the British Government. Dost Mahomed asked for some proof of it; and no proof was forthcoming. The wonder is, not that the Ameer at last listened to the overtures of others, but that he did not seek other assistance before.¹⁷

Thus began a period of deep distrust in Anglo-Afghan relations that resulted in the first Afghan war, much incompetent British meddling in Afghan affairs, a number of minor military operations, the deposition and subsequent reinstatement of Dost Mohammed and a further war (1878-1880), the consequences of which weakened rather than strengthened British influence in Afghanistan.

Alexander Burnes was recalled, his mission unaccomplished, and when Dost Mohammed agreed in April 1838 to receive a Russian envoy, Ivan Vitkevich, claiming to bear a message of goodwill from the Tsar, it was too much for Auckland.¹⁸ In October, he issued the so-called 'Simla manifesto' in which he declared that

The disloyalty of the present Emir of Afghanistan in treating with the Russians and failing to respect British interests makes it necessary to remove Dost Mohammed and restore Shah Shuja' to the throne.

Kaye points out that Auckland had just left Calcutta for the quieter atmosphere of Simla with only a few staff:

Lord Auckland was not wanting in judgment or sagacity, and his integrity of purpose is undoubted; but he lacked decision of character; he too often mistrusted his own opinions, and yielded his assent to those of irresponsible advisers less single-minded and sagacious than himself. The men by whom he was surrounded were among the ablest and most accomplished in the country; but it was for the most part a dangerous kind of cleverness that they possessed; there was too much presumption in it. These secretaries, especially the two younger ones, were too ardent and impulsive; they were of too bold and ambitious a nature to be regarded as anything better than perilous and delusive guides. But Lord Auckland entrusted himself to their guidance. Perhaps, he scarcely knew to what extent he

¹⁶ "...when Lord Durham, in 1837, was directed to seek from the Russian Minister an explanation of conduct so much at variation with the declarations of the Muscovite government, the answer was, that if Count Simonich had encouraged Mahomed Shah to proceed against Herat, he acted in direct violation of his instructions." (John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, W.H. Allen 1874, p. 295.

¹⁷ Kaye, *op.cit.* p. 308.

¹⁸ Although Dost Mohammed may have hoped to strengthen his negotiating hand with the British, it is difficult to see how he could have refused to see the Russian envoy. Kaye comments (p. 308) "No better proof of his earnest desire to cement an alliance with the British Government need be sought for than that involved in the fact of his extreme reluctance to abandon all hope of assistance from the British, and to turn his eyes in another direction. It was not until he was driven to despair by resolute refusals from the quarter whence he looked for aid, that he accepted the offers so freely made to him by other States, and set the seal upon his own destruction. 'Our government,' said Burnes, 'would do nothing; but the Secretary of the Russian Legation came with the most direct offers of assistance and money, and as I had no power to counteract him by a similar offer, and got wigged for talking of it at a time when it would have been merely a dead letter to say Afghanistan was under our protection, I was obliged of course to give in.' What better result Lord Auckland could have anticipated, it is hard to say. If the failure of the Mission astonished him, he must have been the most sanguine of men."

was swayed by their counsels; but it is my deliberate conviction, that if he had not quitted Calcutta, or if he had been surrounded by older and more experienced advisers, he would have followed a line of policy more in accordance with his own feelings and opinions, and less destructive to the interests of the empire.¹⁹

Nevertheless, hard on the heels of the manifesto, a British expeditionary force was dispatched and Kabul was taken. Dost Mohammed was deposed and replaced by the unpopular Shah Shuja'. Again, Kaye's judgement is harsh:

The oldest, the most experienced, and the most sagacious Indian politicians were of opinion that the expedition, though it might be attended at the outset with some delusive success, would close in disaster and disgrace. Among those, who most emphatically disapproved of the movement and predicted its failure, were the Duke of Wellington, Lord Wellesley, Sir Charles Metcalfe, Mr. Edmonstone, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Sir Henry Willock, and Mr. Tucker.²⁰

Indeed, in 1841, an uprising forced the British out of Kabul and on its retreat the British force was almost annihilated at the Khurd Kabul pass. Shah Shuja' was murdered in 1842, his son, Fateh Jung, fled Afghanistan and Dost Mohammed returned as ruler. British policy was in tatters.

Gerald Morgan, in one of the major recent studies of Anglo-Russian rivalry²¹, comments:

The First Afghan War, besides being a military disaster, had settled nothing; indeed it delayed for many years to come any settlement of India's north-west frontier and in the long run added greatly to Anglo-Russian rivalry.

The judgement of Meyer and Brysac is even harsher:

Only a willing suspension of disbelief can explain what came to be called the First Afghan War. As originally envisioned, the operation was based on four assumptions: that Ranjit Singh's Sikhs would do most of the fighting²²; that Afghan Herat was about to fall to Persia; that Dost Mohammed was little more than a Russian vassal; and finally, that Afghans would tolerate, indeed even welcome, a British puppet in his place. Before a single soldier crossed the frontier, it was apparent that these assumptions were all mistaken or misguided.²³

1859-1873 – Russian territorial expansion

As noted, Tsar Alexander II had approved early in his reign a strategy of military expansion in Central Asia. His advisers convinced him that as the British were sufficiently preoccupied elsewhere they would not seriously threaten force against Russian imperial ambitions. In addition,

what finally persuaded the Tsar was something which had happened in America, whose Southern States had long been Russia's principal source of raw cotton. As a result of the civil war there, supplies of this vital commodity had been cut off, badly affecting the whole of Europe.²⁴

The climate of Central Asia was ideal for cotton production. As is by now well known, this attraction was subsequently to prove disastrous: for the ecology of the region, by the diversion of water resources, and for the economy, by dependence on a monoculture. The problems of water allocation and management inherited by today's Central Asian Republics from Russian and Soviet obsession with cotton production are likely to be a serious future cause of friction between them.

¹⁹ Kaye, *op.cit.* p. 315.

²⁰ Kaye, *op.cit.* p. 378.

²¹ Gerald Morgan, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia 1810-1895*, London 1981, p. 36.

²² The Tripartite Treaty concluded between Auckland, Ranjit Singh, and Shah Shuja' in June 1838 provided that the Lahore Government would maintain an auxiliary force of not fewer than 5,000 men to provide support to Shah Shuja'.

²³ *Tournament of Shadows*, p.63.

²⁴ Hopkirk, p.302.

In 1864 Prince Gorchakov, the Foreign Minister, had stated that Russian aims were not to extend Russian dominion beyond reasonable limits, but “to establish it on a firm basis, ensure its security and develop its commerce and civilisation”²⁵ – aims that should have struck a chord with British colonial administrators. He announced that Russian objectives were to: a) establish two fortified frontier lines, one from China to lake Issyk-Kul, the other from the Aral sea along the Syr-Daria, with a series of forts offering each other mutual assistance against marauding tribes; b) situate these forts in fertile country; and c) base the frontier on “geographical, political and natural conditions” – while at the same time seeking the stability of a sedentary population. Gorchakov pointed out that “the United States in America, France in Algiers, Holland in her colonies – all have been drawn into a course where ambition plays a smaller role than imperious necessity” but was honest enough to conclude that “the greatest difficulty is knowing where to stop.”

In 1865, the Russians took Tashkent and, in 1867, General Konstantin Kaufmann was instated there as Governor-General of a new province of Turkestan. By 1868, Bukhara, Khodjent and Samarkand were in the hands of the Russians. Kuldja (Yining), in Chinese territory, was occupied in 1871 (it was vacated in 1881, but the Russians obtained the right to establish a consulate there); Khiva fell to the Russians in May 1873 and Kokand was annexed in February 1876. Prince Gorchakov justified these annexations on the ground that constant raids by lawless tribes made advance unavoidable until order had been restored and the threat removed. The British ought not to have been surprised for, as Bernard Pares notes wryly in his *A History of Russia*, “the same plea has been made for the advance of other empires.”²⁶ Another strong reason for Russian aggression was the large number of Russian slaves held in the Central Asian khanates.

Bukhara, Kokand, and Khiva alike harassed Russian merchant caravans, looting the merchants’ goods and carrying Russian subjects away to slavery. The three principalities also purchased Russians who had been taken captive by Kazakh raiders, for the same purpose of enslavement. The death rate under harsh treatment and heavy labor was high, but the raiding of Russian caravans provided an easy way of replenishing the labor supply. The condition of the unfortunate slaves was long a matter of concern for St. Petersburg.²⁷

For some vociferous – and sometimes influential – British circles, however, Russian expansion in Central Asia created an intolerable threat to India. The primary thrust of any Russian invasion was anticipated from the west through Afghanistan; later, a secondary threat was feared from the Pamirs. Progressive Russian territorial advance towards Afghanistan, coupled with uncertainty about the loyalty of successive Afghan Amirs, created an atmosphere close to paranoia in Indian political circles and the British press (the latter frequently drummed up by the former). In the late 1870s and early 1880s the ‘Russian threat’ was taken seriously as far away as South Africa and New Zealand, where coastal batteries were set up in Cape Town and Fort Kelburn in Wellington, respectively. How real was the threat?

Gerald Morgan concludes that

There is no real evidence, except for Tsar Paul’s aberration, of any serious plans to invade India – which is not to say that no plans were ever considered.²⁸

Moreover, few political leaders in Britain (and certainly not all in India) really believed that Russia would be foolish enough to attempt an invasion of India, or that, if she did, she stood any chance of success. This judgement was based, in addition to political assessments, at least in part on the major logistical problems of such an invasion.

²⁵ Suhash Chakravarty, *Afghanistan and the Great Game*, Delhi, 2002, p. 14 and Hopkirk, p. 304.

²⁶ Pares, p. 429.

²⁷ O. Edmund Clubb, *China and Russia – The “Great Game”*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1971, p. 93.

²⁸ Morgan, p. 8 - in 1801, Tsar Paul had proposed to Napoleon an alliance against England.

In 1836, the British Ambassador in St. Petersburg, Lord Durham, had written in a dispatch to Palmerston that the power of Russia had been greatly exaggerated: "There is not one element of strength which is not directly counterbalanced by a corresponding weakness." In 1840, Captain H. Garbett, stationed at Bamian during the Afghan war, had reconnoitred the passes of the Central Hindu Kush, mapped all the possible routes and concluded that any advance on India by the Russians in this region could only be accomplished by 'light' troops and that a large Russian army could not advance from Turkestan across the Hindu Kush into British India.²⁹

In a famous 'Minute' written in 1867, the Viceroy, Sir John Lawrence, commented on the possibility that the Russians might occupy Afghanistan:

I do not pretend to know what is the policy of Russia in Central Asia; what may be her views hereafter in India. But it seems to me that common sense suggests that her primary interest is to consolidate her hold on those vast regions now in her possession, in which there must be 'room and scope enough' for the exercise of all her energies and all her resources. Russia has indeed a task before her in which she may fail, and which must occupy her for generations. To attempt to advance before her power is firmly established, is to imperil all she has hitherto accomplished. I am not myself at all certain that Russia might not prove a safer ally – a better neighbour than the Mahomedan races of Central Asia and Cabul. She would introduce civilization; she would abate the fanaticism and ferocity of Mahomedanism, which still exercises so powerful an influence on India ... But, supposing that Russia has the desire, and possesses the means of making a formidable attack on India ... in that case let them undergo the long and tiresome marches which lie between the Oxus and the Indus; let them wend their way through difficult and poor countries, among a fanatic and courageous population, where, in many places, every mile can be converted into a defensible position; then they will come to the conflict on which the fate of India will depend, toil-worn, with an exhausted infantry, a broken-down cavalry, and a defective artillery.³⁰

In 1873, even the War Office conceded that "the Russians in any invasion of our dominions whether from the side of Chinese territory or Afghanistan, would have most formidable obstacles to encounter", pointing out that the distance from Samarkand to India via Bamian was about 900 miles, the number of men to be transported would certainly not be less than 30,000 and when and if they ever reached India, they would find a highly disciplined force under a British leader with good railway communications and fertile country in the rear.³¹

In November 1878, Prime Minister Disraeli declared that "it is not possible for any remote foe to threaten our Indian Empire from the side of the North-West Frontier, because the communications are so difficult and the geographical conditions adverse." Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, whatever his public posture, once advised an anxious contemporary to use large-scale maps: "A great deal of misapprehension arises from the popular use of maps on a small scale. If the noble lord would use a larger map, he would find that the distance between Russia and British India was not to be measured by the finger and thumb, but by a rule."³²

²⁹ An article by Professor Nigel Allen of the University of California at Davis, in the journal *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, 2001, 42, No. 8, pp. 545-560 elucidates this issue by referring to the 'magisterial' *Routes in Asia* by General Frederick S. Roberts (1878) of the British Army in India, in which Section 2, "Routes in Afghanistan" is a reprint of Captain H. Garbett's 1840 report. Prof. Allen points out that "Roberts' compendium, with accompanying maps at different scales, has never been cited by any scholar in the 20th century, yet it remains a pivotal source of information on why the British in India never advanced beyond the crest of the Hindukush as a military force."

³⁰ The Minute is given in full in Appendix 2 of Morgan, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry*.

³¹ *Russian Advances in Asia*, War Office, 1873. Quoted in Chakravarty, p.17.

³² Quoted in Hopkirk, p. 362.



From: Fred Burnaby, *A Ride to Khiva: Travels and Adventures in Central Asia*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1877.
(Markus Hauser, Pamir Archive)

George Nathaniel Curzon (who became subsequently Viceroy of India), argued in 1889:

The overwhelming strategic importance of Merv in relation to India is a dictum which I have never been able to understand. I have seen it argued with irreproachable logic, in magazine articles, that Merv is the key to Herat, Herat the key to Kandahar, and Kandahar the key to India. But the most scientific demonstrations of *a priori* reasoning must after all yield place to experience and to fact. Russia holds Merv; and she could tomorrow, if she chose to bring about a war with England, seize Herat; not, however, because she holds Merv, but because she holds the far more advanced and important positions of Sarakhs and Penjdeh. But even if she held Herat she would not be much nearer the conquest of India. A great deal of nonsense has been talked in England about these so-called keys to India and Lord Beaconsfield [Disraeli] never said a truer thing, though at the time it was laughed at as a sounding platitude, than when he declared that the keys of India are to be found in London, and consist in the spirit and determination of the British people...

Curzon's conclusion was that not "a single man in Russia, with the exception of a few speculative theorists and here or there a giddy subaltern, ever dreams seriously of the conquest of India. To anyone, Russian or English, who has even superficially studied the question, the project is too preposterous to be entertained."³³

As for the much feared 'Pamir gap', in any strategic sense it was largely a misnomer. If, as we shall see when we get to the 'Pamir incident' of 1891, the status of the territory in question was unclear, it was certainly not, in any logistical sense, a gap through which the Russians could come pouring into Chitral, Hunza or Kashmir. Some myths die hard, however. As late as 1973, Sir Clarmont Skrine, Consul-General in Kashgar from 1922-4 and an old Central Asia hand, wrote:

[In 1873] the most dangerous situation was that created by the gap that had been left between the demarcation line and the Chinese frontier of Sinkiang. For here on the high and inhospitable plateau of the Pamirs, which has been aptly called the Roof of the World, a corridor of unclaimed

³³ *Russia in Central Asia*, pp. 120-121.

territory existed which allowed the Russians free access to the south through the passes of the Hindu Kush into the hill states of India.³⁴

Others, who had actually travelled on and surveyed the routes, disagreed. Colonel William Lockhart, who led the British military survey in Hunza and Chitral in 1885, argued on his return that

earlier fears attached to the region, especially to the Baroghil Pass, were exaggerated, although a secondary Russian thrust might be directed across the Pamirs in support of a full-scale invasion via the Khyber and Bolan. But because the Pamir passes were closed every winter by snow, while in summer the numerous rivers became raging torrents, only during the short spring and autumn would the region be vulnerable.³⁵

After his travels in the region a few months later, the British explorer Ney Elias concurred. Curzon considered that it might be used by the Russians as “a diversion, which might be troublesome but could not be really serious.”³⁶ William Robertson (later Field-Marshal Sir William), a staff officer in the North-West Frontier section of the Intelligence Branch of the Indian Army, was sent to the edge of the Wakhan in 1894 to survey possible invasion routes. He commented in his memoirs that at that time

the activities of Russia were feared – quite needlessly – to constitute a threat on India, in the future if not in the present. It is incomprehensible why those who held such a view never seemed to appreciate the tremendous topographical difficulties to be overcome.³⁷

Even Colonel Algernon Durand, who, as British Agent in Gilgit from 1889-1894 was closer to the front line than any, considered that “no man in his senses ever believed that a Russian army would cross the Pamirs and attack India by the passes of Hunza and Chitral.”³⁸ Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Strachey, a member of the Council of India during the critical period 1875-1889, and who spent most of his distinguished career in India, used even stronger language:

It is a wonderful thing that rational people should talk about a region of this sort as something to be coveted and something even possibly to be fought over, and one might really almost as rationally talk of fighting for the possession of, shall I say, a square mile of the moon, or of Sirius. ... The possibility of anything like military operations being carried on over a country of that sort is so perfectly ridiculous that to my mind it is perfectly astounding that it should appear to be seriously discussed. The way in which the question of the occupation of this region, either by Russia, Afghanistan, China, or Britain, occupies some people's minds, I can only regard as an illustration of the folly of humanity.³⁹

In 1887, the French adventurers Bonvalot, Capus and Pépin made the first north-south crossing of the Pamirs to India by Europeans; on arrival in Chitral they were arrested as suspected Russian spies and sent to Simla where, on discovery of their identity, they were debriefed by the British authorities. Their account of the extreme difficulty they had experienced on their three-month trek from Osh ought to have persuaded the British that the Russian presence in Kokand was neither close nor threatening.

Ralph Cobbold, the second Englishman to reach the Western Pamirs in 1898, agreed.

Without wishing to pose as a strategist, I should say from some personal acquaintance with this part of the frontier that it would be an impossibility for any body of troops to force a passage to India by either of these [Chitral and Hunza-Nagar], and from information recently acquired during a journey on the Upper Oxus, it is evident that the Russians recognise the two routes I have

³⁴ C.P. Skrine and Pamela Nightingale, *Macartney at Kashgar – New Light on British, Chinese, and Russian activities in Sinkiang, 1890-1918*, Oxford 1973, p.9.

³⁵ Hopkirk, pp. 433-34.

³⁶ *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 297.

³⁷ Sir William Robertson, *From Private to Field-Marshal*, London 1921, p. 56.

³⁸ Durand, p. 41.

³⁹ Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society on 23 November 1891 (*Proceedings RGS*, Jan. 7, 1892).

commented on as presenting far greater difficulties of access to India than other roads through the Hindu Kush, respecting which the Russians are thoroughly well informed.⁴⁰

1873 – the first Pamirs Border Agreement

During the period up to 1873, there were active negotiations between the British and Russians with a view to reducing tension in the region. In 1869, Britain suggested that both countries recognise some territory as neutral between their possessions. Agreement could not be reached at that time, supposedly because some of the territory in question was claimed by the Emir of Bukhara, although more likely because Russia saw further opportunities for territorial expansion. Russia agreed, however, to recognise as belonging to Afghanistan all the territory that the Afghan Amir then held and to exercise her influence to restrain Bukhara from aggression on Afghan territory.

In 1873, as a result of these negotiations, an exchange of letters took place between the Russian and British Foreign Ministers, Prince Gorchakov and Lord Granville, in which Russia reaffirmed that Afghanistan was beyond her sphere of influence and within that of Britain, while claiming similar freedom of action for Russia in Central Asia. Lord Granville stated that the British considered the following territories as belonging to the Amir of Kabul, but, by an unfortunate error, omitted the passage in square brackets in the communication to the Russians – a source of later confusion:

1. Badakhshan with its dependent District of Wakhan from the Sarikul (Wood's Lake) on the east to the junction of the Kokcha river with the Oxus [on the west, the line of the Oxus] or Penjah forming the northern boundary of this Afghan province throughout its entire extent.
2. Afghan Turkestan, comprising the districts of Kunduz, Khulm, and Balkh, the northern boundary of which would be the line of the Oxus from the junction of the Kokcha river to the post of the Khojah Saleh, inclusive, on the highroad from Bokhara to Balkh. Nothing to be claimed by the Afghan Ameer on the left bank of the Oxus below Khojah Saleh.
3. The internal districts of Aksha, Seripool, Maimanat, Shibberjan, and Andkoi, the latter of which would be the extreme Afghan frontier possession to the North-West, the desert beyond belonging to independent tribes of Turkomans.
4. The western Afghan frontier between dependencies of Herat and those of the Persian province of Khorassan is well known and need not be defined.

There was a degree of legal uncertainty (not to say wishful thinking) in the Amir's claim to some areas south of the Oxus: a contemporary British report stated that "it was only by the middle of 1870 that a semblance of Afghan sovereignty was extended to Andkoi, Siberghan, Siripul, Tashkurgan, Badakhshan and Kanduz when representatives of Siripul, Tashkurgan and other states attended a great entertainment" given by the Kabul government.⁴¹

It will be noted, in the light of subsequent events and accusations of Russian treachery, that the 1873 agreement makes no mention of any supposed Afghan claims to Merv (or Panjdeh), and that, at this time, the Russians limited themselves to expressing doubts about the Amir's claim to Badakhshan, suggesting that the "facts themselves seem to point rather to the real independence of Badakhshan than to its absolute subjection to the Ameer of Cabul," and proposed instead to "allow the present state of things to continue: Badakhshan and Wakhan would thus form a barrier between the Northern and Southern States of Central Asia ... strengthened by the combined actions [of] England and Russia."⁴² This was what the British had suggested a few years earlier, but was now unacceptable to them.

The Russian response to the British refusal of their proposal was a model of moderation:

⁴⁰ Cobbold, p. 301.

⁴¹ "Statement regarding the recent political States of Maimena, the Petty Chiefs between Balkh and Oxus and Badakhshan", 1872, quoted in Chakravarty, p. 123.

⁴² Quoted in A.V. Postnikov, *Схватка на «Крыше Мира» - Политики, разведчики и географы в борьбе за Памир в XIX веке* (Struggle on the "Roof of the World": Politicians, spies and geographers in the contest for the Pamir in the 19th century), Moscow 2001, p. 120.

The divergence which existed in our views was with regard to the frontiers assigned to the dominion of Shere Ali. The English Government includes within them Badakshan and Wakkan, which according to our views enjoyed a certain independence. Considering the difficulty experienced in establishing the facts in all their details in those distant parts, considering the greater facilities which the British Government possesses for collecting precise detail, and above all considering our wish not to give to this question of detail greater importance than is due to it, we do not refuse to accept the boundary line laid down by England. We are the more inclined to this act of courtesy as the English Government engages to use all its influence with Shere Ali in order to induce him to maintain a peaceful attitude, as well as to insist on his giving up all measures of aggression or further conquest. This influence is indisputable. It is based, not only on the material and moral ascendancy of England, but also on the subsidies for which Shere Ali is indebted to her. Such being the case, we see in this assurance a real guarantee for the maintenance of peace.⁴³

It was unfortunate that the British were not ready at this time to enter into a treaty with the Russians confirming this understanding – which was in essence the definitive frontier agreed just over twenty years later, including the notion of a neutral buffer zone (the Wakhan). Had they done so, a source of future tension might have been removed and the second Afghan war avoided.

The unwillingness of the British to guarantee Afghan territorial integrity continued to dog Anglo-Afghan relations. The Amir was not satisfied with the Anglo-Russian agreement, on which he had not been consulted, and tried to play on British fears of Russian intervention. His requests for money, arms, troops and a British commitment to protect his frontiers – although supported by the Viceroy of India – were turned down flat by London.

This refusal to entertain Sher Ali's request was most undiplomatic, even if a Russian invasion was not feared. Greatly disappointed, the Amir felt that he could no longer rely on British support or be sure of their professions. Had he been promised help in the event of foreign invasion, the history of Anglo-Afghan relations could have been different. Disillusioned in the British, on the arrival in Kabul of a Russian Muslim agent in the second quarter of 1875, he began exploring Russian intentions and gave him access.⁴⁴

1876-1881 – British 'forward policy' and the second Afghan war

The response by the British Conservative government to the Amir's 'infidelity' in dealing with the Russians was to reverse the previous 'masterly inactivity' and initiate a more 'forward policy'.⁴⁵ Viceroy Northbrook (a Liberal), in disagreement with the change, resigned and was replaced in early 1876 by the inexperienced (but Conservative) Earl of Lytton.

As yet, however, there were no signs of renewed tension with Russia. In May 1876, Prime Minister Disraeli made the following declaration in Parliament:

Russia knows full well there is no reason we should view the material development of her empire in Asia with jealousy, so long as it is clearly made aware by the Government of this country that we are resolved to maintain and strengthen, both materially and morally, our Indian empire... I believe, indeed, that at no time has there been a better understanding between the Courts of St. James and St. Petersburg than at the present moment.⁴⁶

The treaty of San Stefano in March 1878, following the Russian defeat of Turkey, significantly strengthened Russia's freedom of action in the east. In view, however, of the

⁴³ Letter from Prince Gorchakov to Lord Granville, quoted in *Indian Frontier Policy*, General Sir John Auye, London 1897.

⁴⁴ D.P. Singhal, *India and Afghanistan – A Study in Diplomatic Relations*, University of Queensland Press, 1963, p. 11. (Reprint by South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1982). The author of this excellent but little known book analyses meticulously (and quotes extensively from) the contemporary diplomatic correspondence of the period. His judgements are sound and well-backed.

⁴⁵ An expression 'borrowed' from Sir James Macintosh by J. Wyllie, an official in the Government of India's Foreign Department' (Morgan, p. 77).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Singhal, p. 16.

rising power of Germany, the Russians agreed to a significant withdrawal from these gains in the Treaty of Berlin that followed in July, as part of an effort to reduce tensions with the British.

Meanwhile, in June 1878, Kaufmann – contrary to stated Russian policy, and apparently on his own initiative – sent Major-General Stolietov from Samarkand to Kabul with proposals for an alliance, offering a guarantee of the Amir’s borders that the British were still unwilling to contemplate, while not insisting on control of his foreign relations. The Amir – under extreme pressure from Kaufmann – received Stolietov with honours. This enraged Viceroy Lytton, who – without waiting for proper authority from London – immediately dispatched a British mission to Kabul preceded by an intemperate and threatening communication to the Amir, insisting that he receive the mission and accept British control over his foreign relations.

When the Amir temporised, Lytton – this time with reluctant approval from London – despatched an ultimatum requiring him to submit a written apology for his conduct, failing which he would be considered an enemy of the British government. In desperation, the Amir sought support from the Russians. In fact, Stolietov had already been recalled only shortly after his arrival⁴⁷ and Kaufmann, now aware of what he had set in motion, offered the Amir no support and advised him to make peace with the British.



General Nikolai Grigorievich Stolietov (1834-1912)
(Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

It was too late: Lytton had already decided that the Amir must be deposed and had set in motion the events that led to the second Afghan war. The British were convinced that a secret agreement existed – Curzon claimed later (wrongly) that “General Stolietoff left Kabul at the end of September [1878] with a signed treaty in his pocket.”⁴⁸ Although Disraeli and his Foreign Minister, Salisbury, hoping for a broader settlement with Russia, were furious at Lytton’s headstrong action and disobedience of instructions, they put a bold public face on it.⁴⁹ No answer to Lytton’s ultimatum was received within the narrow time frame allowed and, on 21 November 1878, war was declared. “Sher Ali must have seen that the time allowed was farcical and, even if an apology were advanced, some other pretext would be found to subdue his independence.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Tournament of Shadows*, p. 184.

⁴⁸ *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 328, footnote

⁴⁹ In 1877, Lytton had already stretched the bounds of propriety by circulating a pamphlet recommending an alliance with Germany against Russia – a breach of protocol that almost led to his immediate recall.

⁵⁰ Singhal, p.40.

Lytton had greatly over-reacted to a non-existent threat.

The fact that, during all the ten years Abdur Rahman had spent in Turkestan, von Kaufmann made no attempt to build him up as a potential Russian ally when the time was ripe, may be taken as one more sign that Russia had no intention of invading Afghanistan. The first chance had offered itself many years earlier when Russia withdrew and disowned the Vitkevich mission which had promised well. The second offered itself when Stoletov went to Kabul carrying a draft treaty with Sher Ali in his pocket. But again the mission was promptly recalled by von Kaufmann and although Stoletov did visit Kabul subsequently there were no offers of arms nor apparently any secret promises.⁵¹

The Indian historian D.P. Singhal states definitively: “A close scrutiny of these letters [between the Amir and Kaufmann in 1878], which are now available for public inspection, does not reveal any secret alliance between the Amir and the Czar.”⁵²

In a study of the death toll from famine in India at this time⁵³ - for which the policies of Lytton bore a large measure of responsibility - Mike Davis points out that “it was widely suspected that the new viceroy’s judgement was addled by opium and incipient insanity. Since a nervous breakdown in 1868, Lytton had repeatedly exhibited wild swings between megalomania and self-lacerating despair.” A recent history of the British Empire paints an equally critical picture of the man: Lytton was

a self-indulgent seigneur posing as a bearded bohemian. He wrote erotic verse and dawdled away whole evenings flirting with pretty women, occasionally availing himself of their company by promoting their husbands. He kept people waiting in the sun while he finished his cigar. He preened himself in velvet smoking jackets, floppy cravats, bell-bottomed trousers, square-toed shoes and flashy jewellery. He succumbed to hysterical depressions, hardly alleviated by his French chef, his Italian confectioner and his German band.⁵⁴



Lytton in Calcutta, 1877 PERMISSION???

Sher Ali fled to Russian territory and died there in February 1879. He was replaced on the throne by his estranged son Yakub Khan. After a period of negotiations with the new Amir, the treaty of Gundamak was concluded in May 1879, ending the war but subjecting Afghanistan’s foreign policy to British control accompanied by some territorial concessions to India on the north-west frontier. The status of the Amir became analogous to that of the

⁵¹ Morgan, p. 189.

⁵² Singhal, p.40.

⁵³ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts - El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London 2001, p. 34.

⁵⁴ P Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997*, London 2007, p.233.

Indian princes and he was promised aid against foreign aggression, but only at the discretion of the British. An army under General F. Roberts entered Kabul on 24 July 1879.

The treaty involved the British in serious responsibilities for the sake of protecting the Indian Empire from imaginary attack, for no Indian or British authority – Lytton least of all – considered the danger of Russian invasion from that side a real one. If Russia had resources enough to undertake such an expedition, would she not have aided the Amir against English interference and won the sympathy of the Afghans by helping them in their hour of need? The facts indicate that Russia was not foolish enough to attack the strong Indian Empire from the side of the north-west frontier. All she wanted was to frighten the British in Asia by her diplomatic moves and thus lessen their grip in Europe. In this she was quite successful.⁵⁵

The distractions of the war, the complications arising from the treaty of Gundamak, the problem of succession to the throne in Kabul and a change of government in London (brought about to a significant extent by popular dissatisfaction with the failure of the ‘forward policy’ in Afghanistan) enabled the Russians to consolidate their territorial expansion without threat from the British. The new British cabinet considered that there was no formidable danger to the security of India and decided on the withdrawal of British forces from Afghanistan. In 1881, the new Viceroy, the Marquis of Ripon, a cooler head than Lytton, recommended a treaty with Russia that, by giving legal recognition to the Russian presence in Central Asia, would give Britain a freer hand in Afghanistan without having constantly to look over her shoulder at Russian intentions. The cabinet had, however, an abiding distrust of Russia and London’s attention was distracted by flashpoints elsewhere, in Egypt and the Sudan. Another opportunity was missed.

Ironically, the Russians were faced at precisely the same moment with a serious if temporary threat to their hegemony in Central Asia. In 1878 the Turkomans repulsed an attack by a Russian force at Dangil Tepe and subsequently succeeded in regaining territory along the Amu Darya. Mikhail Dmitreyevich Skobelev, who was subsequently to play a major part in regaining Russia's footing in the region, wrote:

If we consider our position during the last six years, we cannot avoid regarding the abyss which opens before us with terror, for it may well disorganise the economic and political condition of the empire. The English have succeeded in convincing Asiatics that they have forced us to stop before Constantinople and abandon the Balkan peninsula. Thanks to their agents' zeal, a version of the Treaty of Berlin, very disadvantageous to ourselves, has been spread throughout Asia. Great God, what sacrifices of blood and honour will this peace, so painful to Russian hearts, entail!⁵⁶

Alarmed at the Turkoman successes, the Tsar passed the command of the Russian troops to Skobelev.

1882-1890 – “Scientific” frontiers

Under Skobelev's leadership, subsequent Russian territorial gains again became a major source of concern to Britain. In 1882, Merv capitulated and, in Ashgabat in February 1884, the Turkoman tribes swore allegiance to the Tsar. The desirability of agreeing on “scientific frontiers” was now recognised by both sides, albeit with differing degrees of urgency. Negotiations began in mid-1884 on the formation of a joint Anglo-Russian boundary commission, but no agreement was reached on the starting point for their work or on the line on which the frontier was to be drawn.

The Russians were now in no hurry and, indeed, were still advancing. In April 1885, they attacked a recently established Afghan post in Panjdeh: the absence of an agreed frontier line made the legal situation ambiguous, but the Afghans threatened to take action, and sought British support.

⁵⁵ Singhal, p.46.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Francis Henry Skrine, *The Heart of Asia; A history of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the earliest times*, London 1899, p. 288.

Skobelev was responsible for the merciless Russian assault at Geok-Tepe in 1881, which dealt the final blow to Turkoman resistance.⁵⁷ Reports of the slaughter at Geok-Tepe were carried by the violently Russophobic press in Britain, and by 1885 British public opinion had, once again, reached fever pitch, aided and abetted by the supporters of the 'forward policy'. British troops were ordered into position near the Afghan border, the British fleet was placed on full alert and ships were moved to within striking distance of Vladivostok, where Russia was perceived to be most vulnerable.

None of the three governments, however, really wanted or was ready for war – despite public sabre rattling and manifestations of popular outrage. The Amir doubted the reliability of British promises of support and feared defeat by the Russians. The British were concerned about their long supply lines to one of the furthest points in Afghanistan from their base (and were doubtful about their welcome by the Afghan population en route); Sudan was the main theatre of British military activity at the time and military resources could not be spared for a further adventure in Afghanistan. While the Tsar was unwilling to disavow the actions of his senior officers, neither he nor his cabinet wanted war with Britain: they had other objectives. As Curzon observed at the time: "To keep England quiet in Europe by keeping her employed in Asia, that, briefly put, is sum and substance of Russian policy."⁵⁸

A compromise was found that enabled the Russians to stay in Panjdeh while at the same time laying a solid base for the work of the boundary commission on the north-western frontier of Afghanistan, which commenced in November 1885, and, with the exception of the last few kilometres of the frontier up to the junction with the Oxus, was finished in nine months. The latter issue was finally settled in July 1887 by direct negotiations between the two governments.

This was a major achievement⁵⁹ and is proof that there was already a long-standing potential for agreement on essential questions. All that remained was to determine the extent of Afghan dominion over the Pamir region and the tribal areas contiguous with India in the west. While the latter were of exclusive concern to the British, the former required further negotiation with the Russians who objected (with British diplomatic support) to the Amir's claim to areas to the north (Darwaz) and east (Shughnan and Rushan) of the Oxus. Both parties considered the 1873 agreement between their respective Foreign Ministers as still valid: under this agreement, the Russians, while not refusing the claim of Afghan sovereignty over Badakhshan and Wakhan, had pointed out the need for a legally binding agreement and definition of frontier lines in the eastern confines of the Wakhan. They also wanted a reciprocal agreement from the British not to meddle in the affairs of Russia's new Central Asian territories.

The maps that had been used in drafting the 1873 agreement were vague and inaccurate. The Russians were using a map drawn up in 1759 on the basis of Chinese surveys that had been prepared in separate squares and compiled into a single map in Peking. By a perverse error, the square containing Wakhan and Badakhshan had been turned from east and west to north and south and the Russians, believing from this map that Wakhan was contiguous with Karategin, were therefore concerned about the concession to the Amir of territories so far to

⁵⁷ "Fireside theorists are apt to reprobate the bloodshed of Geok Tepe and the slaughter of the wounded foe at Omdurman as unworthy of civilisation. A superficial acquaintance with the Asiatic character would convince them that an extreme application of the Virgilian *debellare superbos* is the least cruel policy which can be adopted in dealing with the forces of savagery and fanaticism. Geok Tepe was the last stronghold of Central Asian independence, and its capture must rank among the decisive battles of the world." Skrine, p. 397.

⁵⁸ *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 321.

⁵⁹ The record of the boundary commission's extraordinarily rapid work can be found in *Northern Afghanistan, or Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission, with Route Maps*: Bk. 3 C.E. Yate, Rudolf Abraham (Editor), Cambridge 2002, together with all the material and maps from the original 1888 edition, including the plan of Balkh.

the north-east of the Oxus. Julius Klaproth (1783-1835), an oriental scholar, had made a copy of the Chinese map and sold it to both the Russian and British governments at the beginning of the century, providing at the same time a fraudulent account of the travels of an anonymous German horse-trader, Georg Ludwig von – , together with a fictitious earlier Chinese itinerary, that supposedly confirmed the map's authenticity and accuracy (see the next chapter).

The Russians recognised that the British now had better maps, based on the reports of the pundits (Faiz Buksh, The Mirza and The Havildar – see the next Chapter) and of Forsyth's second mission to Yarkand in 1873, and future negotiations were easier as a result, although there remained a few blank spots on the map. In the introduction to the British report of the 1895 Pamir Boundary Commission (see below and Chapter 6.1) Major-General Gerard pointed out that

The frontier having been fixed diplomatically [in 1873], it remained for the two Boundary Commissions to trace its subsequent course eastward to the Chinese border. This apparently simple task might have been really so, had the agreement been based on a correct map, but a variety of conflicting views was possible when our surveys showed a wide discrepancy between the topography as it really is, and as it was supposed to be when the convention was drawn up.

The Pamir incident

A few flashpoints remained. One lay in the eastern Wakhan, where a further crisis occurred in 1891. In 1888, a Russian officer had reached Hunza through the Pamirs and spent a month there: his warm reception by the Mir was a source of serious concern to the British. The officer, Colonel Bronislav Ludwigovich Grombchevsky, described his meeting with the Mir as follows:

As I was leaving Kanjut, I found the Khan seriously ill. Nevertheless, he received me in his palace [Baltit Fort] in a solemn farewell audience: in the presence of dignitaries of the country and ambassadors from Gilgit, he charged me to inform the Sovereign Emperor, that he requested the grant of citizenship of Russia for himself and his country. Safdar Ali Khan, showing me casually the letter to him from Viceroy of India, told me: "Here is the letter in which he promises to make my country an arsenal and treasury of India (i.e. to overflow it with weapons and money). I hate Englishmen and have banished their envoys. I know that the English will punish me for this, but I am not afraid of them for I have leant against a rock on which the Great White Tsar stands firm." Further he asked for two mountain guns and a hundred shells, promising never to admit this to the English. The ruler of Kanjut finished his speech with the words: "I pray for health of the White Tsar, my great Patron" and, turning to the West, made a prayer together with all who were present.

This request put me in extremely awkward circumstances. I had visited Kanjut for scientific purposes, not having any political mission and did not know what to answer the Khan, who was being courted by the English with generous offers. Therefore, having confirmed once again the absolutely private character of my visit, I advised the Khan to address his request to the Imperial Russian consul in Kashgar. Safdar Ali Khan prepared a mission to Kashgar, and supplied his envoy with letters in his own hand to the Consul, the Governor General of Turkestan and the Foreign Minister. The envoy was instructed to go as far as Tashkent and to hand over personally the letters to the Governor General, but our consul in Kashgar detained him and confiscated the letters, and he himself did not get to Tashkent. I have no reliable information about the further progress of the petitions of Safdar Ali Khan. It seems the letters were sent to the Asian department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the ruler of Kanjut did not even receive an answer. Apparently, the letter from Safdar Ali Khan to me dated August, 30, 1888, met the same fate, in which he inquired about the person of the Sovereign Emperor, and asks me to pass on for the information of His Imperial Majesty his unlimited loyalty, of which he writes: "Having learned about the solemn day which is celebrated by all citizens of the Great White Tsar, I with my people put on a new dress and celebrate this day as solemnly as the means of my poor country allow. I have only one cannon and I have ordered that it be fired in honour of the Great Sovereign."⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Handwritten report by Lieutenant-Colonel Grombchevsky dated 14 March 1891 (cf. <http://militera.lib.ru/research/grombchevsky/index.html>). See also *PRGS*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 171-4.

Although the Mir was certainly trying to get the maximum advantage from putting the British in competition with the Russians for his favours, this was too much for the British, who resolved to try to motivate the Chinese to assert their supposed territorial rights in the eastern and southern Pamirs as a means of blocking the anticipated Russian territorial encroachment. Captain Francis Younghusband was sent by the Viceroy to explore the extent of Chinese authority in the region and the chances it might give to hold off the Russians.

In October 1889, Younghusband's path crossed fortuitously with that of Grombchevsky in the Yarkand valley: their meeting passed off cordially and without incident – indeed Grombchevsky seemed even to support the British thesis of Chinese sovereignty over the eastern and southern Pamirs. A second with Captain Ionov, however, in Boza-i-Gumbez in the Wakhan in August 1891, although also cordial, ended with Younghusband's ignominious departure under threat of arrest by Ionov, who claimed the territory as Russian. At almost the same time, Lieutenant Davison, an officer who had joined Younghusband in Kashgar after a nearly fatal attempt to explore the Mustagh range, was arrested by the Russians in the Alichur valley near Yashil Kul, and escorted to Marghilan where he was released to an official from the British Embassy in St. Petersburg, C.H.E. Eliot, who happened to be travelling in the region as a guest of the Governor-General of Turkestan, Vrevsky. There was a public outcry in Britain and India “and once again anti-Russian feelings hit fever pitch.”⁶¹

In a letter to his father dated 4 August 1891,⁶² Younghusband wrote that:

[t]hings are looking a bit serious. I am on one side of a range of mountains and just over the other side in the Little Pamir is a Russian force which have just quietly walked in and annexed the place in total disregard of the heathen Chinese general whom they met on the way and who tried to impress upon them the fact that the Pamirs belonged to China. The Russians have done a good many barefaced things in their time but by Jove this one takes the cake.

While, on the basis of the 1873 agreement, the Russians were arguably within their rights in arresting Davison, the situation of Boza-i-Gumbez was ambiguous. The area was inhabited mainly by nomads, it was unmapped, there were no effective signs of external authority and the legitimacy of claims to it were uncertain (indeed, the Amir had made it clear to the British that he felt unable to hold the territory militarily).

The Amir was never keen in maintaining the integrity of this far-off and most inhospitable corner of his variegated kingdom. He was not keen about maintaining a frontier beyond Panjdeh; and this out-of-the-way wilderness is infinitely more unapproachable and more difficult to garrison than Panjdeh. In fact it may be doubted whether the Amir ever meant effectually to garrison it at all. His demands for assistance to enable him to do so were so preposterous, that it may even be taken for granted that he regards these back premises as only useful to him so far as they might afford an excuse for further demands ultimately.⁶³

The 1873 agreement had not covered any territory to the east of Zorkul (then known also as Sarikul, Lake Victoria, or Wood's lake).

The British were aware that the Russians were on strong ground. The Ambassador in St. Petersburg wrote to the Foreign Secretary in January 1892:

I perceive from the correspondence that the Indian government seems desirous to induce the Chinese and Afghans to meet north of Lake Victoria on the Alichur Pamir, and that it would appear that Captain Younghusband actually invited the Afghans to occupy Yashil Kul. Now, it appears to me that this would be a most dangerous policy to follow. It would be acting in flagrant disregard of the engagement of 1872-73; it would give a most legitimate “casus belli” to the Russians against Afghanistan, and we could not honourably encourage the Afghans to carry out such a plan unless we were ready to give them physical support. It seems to me absolutely necessary, if we are to enter

⁶¹ Hopkirk, p. 470.

⁶² IOLR, MSS Eur / F197 / 142.

⁶³ T. Hungerford Holdich, *The Indian Borderland 1880-1900*, Methuen, London 1901 (reprinted by Asian Educational Services, New Delhi 1996), p. 284.

upon these negotiations, that we should rigidly adhere to the binding character of the Agreement of 1872-73.⁶⁴

In correspondence with the Foreign Secretary a month earlier, the Ambassador had also confirmed that the Russians were aware that Younghusband and Davison were fishing in troubled waters:

I ought to say that in the course of conversation M. de Giers [the Russian Foreign Minister] mentioned in explanation of Colonel Yonow's [Ionov's] high-handed treatment of Captain Younghusband, that he had come across, almost everywhere he went, the traces of that officer's handiwork in exciting the Chinese against Russia. A statement made by Mr. Davison to Mr. Eliot at Margilan would seem to a certain extent to corroborate this assertion. Mr. Davison said that Captain Younghusband had in the first instance invited the Afghans to take possession of the Alichur Pamir, but on meeting with no response to his overtures had urged the Chinese to strengthen themselves there in view of a possible invasion by the Afghans.⁶⁵

Of course, the British must have believed that Grombchevsky – and possibly also Ionov, who, at the time he met Younghusband, had just returned from a short excursion over the Baroghil pass – were probably doing something very similar in Hunza immediately prior to this incident.

Although he had invaded and subjugated trans-Oxus Shughnan and Rushan in 1883 “with characteristic brutality”⁶⁶, even the new Afghan Amir, Abdul Rahman Khan, was uncertain about the actual limits of his territory. To the embarrassment of the Indian and British authorities, Younghusband had exceeded his instructions in the Pamirs: in addition to attempting to mobilise a Chinese presence in the Pamirs, he had written to the Afghan governor in Shughnan saying that the Chinese had heard he had occupied Sumantash and wished him to withdraw. As a result, in October 1891, the Amir requested “the exalted Government of India to send me a correct map, which may have been prepared with the inquiries and surveys of the English Surveyors made in those regions, showing how far the limits of the Afghan territory extend and how far those of the Chinese and Russians, so that I might be able to know about it, and with due knowledge, be able to send instructions to the Sarhaddar [governor] of Shighnan.”⁶⁷ Again, the question was whether the Amir's territories included Shughnan and Rushan on the right bank of the Oxus, as well as Badakhshan on the left bank, and Wakhan.

A contemporary British memorandum commented that

In 1877, Bokhara assumed the direct administration of Darwaz; in 1884, Afghanistan assumed the direct administration of Shighnan-Roshan. Against this action of the Amir, the Government of India remonstrated.⁶⁸

As noted, C.H.E. Eliot, from the St. Petersburg Embassy happened to be in Osh as guest of the Governor-General of Turkestan at the time of the incident: he recounts an amusing exchange on the vexed subject of Boza-i-Gumbez with the Governor of Ferghana and Colonel Galkin, chief of the Governor-General's chancery. They had backed up the Russian position, and pointed out that

Boza-i-Gumbez formed part of the Khanate of Kokan, which had been annexed ‘ipso facto’ by Russia when Kokan itself was captured. That it did form part of the said Khanate was proved by the existence there of a tomb of a Kokan tax-collector Boza by name (whence the name of the place Boza-i-Gumbez, or rather Gumbez-i-Bozas, “the tomb of Boza”), with an inscription saying that he had met his death in the discharge of his official duties ... The next day the Governor-General spoke

⁶⁴ Quoted in Postnikov, p. 251.

⁶⁵ Postnikov, p. 248.

⁶⁶ The words chosen by the distinguished Central Asian scholar Paul Bergne.

⁶⁷ Postnikov, p. 232.

⁶⁸ “Note On the Question of Delimitation on the Upper Oxus Territories” IOLR, Curzon Collection, MSS Eur F111 / 113, paras 7-8.

to me at considerable length on the same subject... The Governor-General said I must see that both the Yashil Kul and Boza-i-Gumbez were in Russian territory. The former was well to the north of the line claimed by Her Majesty's Government in 1873, and that the latter was part of the Khanate of Kokan was proved by the tomb of the tax-collector; I said I did not presume to discuss the question of boundaries with his Excellency, but that the murder of the tax-collector appeared to me to indicate that the local population did not admit the claims of the Khan of Kokan. His Excellency said that tax collectors were always killed in the east and that this proved nothing.⁶⁹

Again, however, the Russians were not anxious to pick a quarrel. As Grombchevsky complained, the Mir of Hunza never got a reply to his overtures to the Russians: the Russian Consul-General in Kashgar, Petrovsky, was far too shrewd to risk a major diplomatic incident by being perceived by the British to be encouraging the Mir and had suppressed his letter. The Russian Foreign Minister had even confided to the British Ambassador that "Grombchevsky was dangerous, mischievous and quite untrustworthy" – an undeservedly harsh comment, in the light of Grombchevsky's own description of his caution in dealing with the Mir. Finally, in February 1892, the Ambassador was informed that an apology had been made by the Foreign Minister: "I have been informed by M. de Giers that he has addressed a despatch to M. de Staal [the Russian Ambassador in London] in which admission is made of the illegality of the acts of Colonel Yonow, and regret expressed at the expulsion of the two British officers. His Excellency has obtained the sanction of the Emperor to this."⁷⁰

1892-1907 – Crisis management and the settlement of frontiers

The outcome of the incidents described above shows that, despite public protest and the clamour of many of the players of the 'Great Game', cooler heads in both Britain and Russia were at pains to avoid war and to settle their differences by agreement. Both governments appreciated the contribution made by the other to the pacification of their respective frontier regions and recognised what they considered to be the "civilising" influence each brought to bear in regions inhabited mainly by nomads and 'unruly tribes'. Towards the end of the century, both were concerned by the rise of Germany and foresaw a need to settle their differences with a view to a future alliance.

In fact, both empires had held closely to the 1873 agreement. As far as the Pamirs were concerned, the British had more than once reminded the Afghan Amir that he had no rights on the right bank of the Oxus, and, with the exception of the Ionov-Younghusband incident, the Russians had not over-reached themselves by any incursions across the Wakhan or to the left bank of the Oxus. In March 1895, Britain and Russia agreed on the basis for a final boundary settlement and a new commission was formed to draw the exact line and place the marking pillars.

From the British viewpoint, the objective was simple (as described by T. Hungerford Holdich, a member of the British team):

The object of a boundary in these altitudes was not quite the same as that of a definite frontier line in lower and flatter regions. Hitherto we had been placing a buffer of independent tribes between ourselves and Afghanistan. Here we reverted to first principles and defined a buffer between ourselves and Russia. It is not an imposing buffer – this long attenuated arm of Afghanistan reaching out to touch China with the tips of its fingers. It is only eight miles wide at one part, and could be ridden across in a morning's ride. It presents no vast physical obstacle to an advance of any sort; physical obstacles, however, are not wanting, but they lie on the Indian side, and they are rude enough and difficult enough to answer all possible purposes. It is a political intervention – a hedge, as it were – over which Russia cannot step without violating Afghan- [p. 285] istan, and the violation of Afghanistan may (or may not) be a "casus belli."⁷¹

The "Agreement on the Sphere of Influence between Russia and Great Britain", in addition to the technical boundary issues, contained the following political provisions:

⁶⁹ Postnikov, p. 239.

⁷⁰ Postnikov, p. 252.

⁷¹ Holdich, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

- § The Commission shall also be charged to report any facts which can be ascertained on the spot bearing on the situation of the Chinese frontier, with a view to enable the two Governments to come to an agreement with the Chinese Government as to the limits of Chinese territory in the vicinity of the line, in such manner as may be found most convenient.
- § Her Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of his Majesty the Emperor of Russia engage to abstain from exercising any political influence or control, the former to the north, the latter to the south, of the above line of demarcation.
- § Her Britannic Majesty's Government engage that the territory lying within the British sphere of influence between the Hindu Kush, and the line running from the east end of Lake Victoria to the Chinese frontier, shall form part of the territory of the Amir of Afghanistan, that it shall not be annexed to Great Britain, and that no military posts or forts shall be established in it.
- § The execution of this agreement is contingent upon the evacuation by the Amir of Afghanistan of all the territories now occupied by His Highness on the right bank of the Panja, and on the evacuation by the Amir of Bokhara of the portion of Darwaz which lies to the south of the Oxus, in regard to which her Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of His Majesty the Emperor of Russia, have agreed to use their influence respectively with the two Amirs.

By the end of July, the work was complete and in September final protocols were signed. Starting from the eastern end of Lake Zorkul, the agreed frontier line followed the crests of the mountain range south and then east to the junction with the Aksu river; then along the Aksu river until the river turns north and from there directly to the Chinese frontier. As Singhal comments,

The territory in question was important only from a strategic point of view, for at one point it was only eight miles wide. The Amir himself was not interested in this piece of land, for it was too distant and difficult a country for him to hold. But the India authorities did not care about the Amir's desires; they wanted to secure their own safety. The work which in prospect had seemed difficult in the event proved quite straightforward.⁷²

The Afghan Amir had indeed been consulted but, according to Holdich:

We were however not greatly concerned with the Amir's views on the subject. For years the danger of Russian advance from this direction had been preached in the military councils of India, not only by theoretical strategists who did not know the country, but by men whose energy and enterprise had carried them up into the wilderness to see for themselves, but who had nevertheless to work under restrictions and difficulties which denied them anything like exhaustive enquiry. It was thus of special importance not only that we should lay down a fixed and definite line limiting Russian dominion and the unsettling process of Russian exploration amongst the border highlanders, but that we should acquire a complete survey of all the various hill tracks and mountain paths which intersect these rugged highlands, in order that we might better appreciate the relative value of the far northern lines of approach to Central Asia.⁷³

Thus, after several abortive attempts over the previous quarter of a century, the frontiers that hold today in the Pamirs were fixed: with the exception of a minor (but bloody) extension in Tibet a few years later in which Younghusband was involved, the Great Game was over. An Anglo-Russian Convention was signed in St. Petersburg on 31 August 1907, settling boundaries and reducing tensions in relation to Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. Despite some sabre-rattling on both sides, the Convention held until other priorities brought the parties even closer in 1914.⁷⁴ Here again, the Russians professed bewilderment that the British continued to accuse them of sinister designs on India: as late as 1913, the Russian Foreign Minister declared to the British Ambassador in Moscow that:

⁷² Singhal, p.147.

⁷³ Holdich, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

⁷⁴ See Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame - Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, I.B. Tauris, London 2002.

Whatever changes might take place it would never be in Russia's interest to embark on such a hazardous enterprise as an attack on India. She had to be on her guard on her western frontier both against Austria and Germany; she had to keep an eye on Turkey, and she had to safeguard her interests against China. Speaking entirely academically and unofficially, he thought that if Russia in twenty years' time adopted a forward policy it would not be in the direction of India but much further east.⁷⁵

A few practical matters remained to be settled between Britain and Russia. In a diplomatic note dated 25 January 1900, the Russian government notified the British of their intention to establish direct relations with the government of Afghanistan on some outstanding frontier and other non-political issues.

Les rapports de la Russie avec l'Afghanistan ont été définis par les arrangements intervenus en 1872 et 1873 entre les Cabinets de Saint-Petersbourg et de Londres. En vertu de ces arrangements qui sont encore en vigueur, la Russie reconnaît que l'Afghanistan est entièrement en dehors de sa sphère d'action. Bien qu'elle n'eût renoncé qu'à l'exercice d'une action politique dans l'Afghanistan, elle a consenti, guidée par un sentiment d'intérêt amical à l'égard de la Grande-Bretagne, à s'abstenir, dans des circonstances données, même de rapports non-politiques ainsi que de l'échange des manifestations de courtoisie qui sont généralement d'usage dans ces contrées. [The relations of Russia with Afghanistan are defined by the arrangements of 1873 and 1874 reached between the cabinets of St. Petersburg and London. By virtue of these arrangements, which are still in force, Russia recognises that Afghanistan is wholly outside its sphere of action Although she has only renounced the exercise of political activity in Afghanistan, she has, guided by a spirit of friendship towards Great Britain, agreed to abstain under the circumstances even from non-political relations and from the exchange of acts of courtesy such as are usual in these regions.]⁷⁶

In view of the independent action undertaken by Kaufmann and others a few years earlier, it is significant that Russia here reaffirmed her recognition of the exclusive British sphere of influence in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, it was a warning to the British that the Russians did not interpret their obligations as requiring them to request British approval for direct relations with Afghanistan on non-political questions. The British, still distrustful of the intentions of both the Russians and the Amir, expressed displeasure at the proposal. The Russians did not force the issue and it was only settled to Russian satisfaction in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

There was still some unfinished business. Although the frontiers between Afghanistan and Russia now appeared clear, as a result of an oversight no agreement was reached on exactly where on the Oxus (Panj) the border was to be fixed. The issue was finally resolved in 1946, when the border was fixed at the 'thalweg' line (the mid-point of the channel of the river). China did not formally accept the new boundary with Pakistan until 1963 and, according to the website of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, a "final and complete solution of the China-Tajikistan boundary question" was reached between China and Tajikistan on the Pamir boundary on 17 May 2002 – and even then, ominously, there were rumours that the Chinese had inserted in the agreement the words 'for the time being'. If the 2002 agreement was indeed "final and complete," it is nevertheless odd that eight years later, on 28 April 2010, the Chinese news agency Xinhua should have issued a press announcement that "China and Tajikistan have signed a border demarcation protocol, demonstrating the complete settlement of the border issue left over by history of the two countries."

Conclusion

As abundantly noted, both Empires exercised considerable restraint in their relations during the period 1828-1907, when their rivalry was at its height. In the end, "the claims of Afghanistan and Badakhshan ... reflected, in reality, the interests of Calcutta and Tashkent,

⁷⁵ Dispatch from Sir George Buchanan to Sir Edward Grey, 15 May 1913, quoted in Siegel, *op. cit.* p. 163.

⁷⁶ Reproduced in Gooch and Temperley, eds. *British documents on the origins of the war, 1898-1914*, London HMSO, 1927-29, pp. 306-7. See <http://victoria.tc.ca/history/etext/afghan.anglo.russian.html>.

tempered only by the expediency of getting their respective protégés reconciled to the bargain that would be struck.”⁷⁷ Both managed generally to keep their primary objectives clearly in view, although, on balance, the Russians were more consistent in their policies. That the results of their joint negotiations, the Pamir frontiers, stand today is a tribute to the wise counsels that prevailed in their mutual relations.

If there was a ‘game’, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Russians played it rather better than their competitor. In logistics they were far ahead of the British: by 1898, the Russians had already completed a railway line from the Caspian to Tashkent and Andijan, with a southern branch to Ashgabad (“at the rate of from a mile to a mile and a half in a day”⁷⁸), while the India Council was still arguing about an extension of the railway to the Afghan frontier; it was not until the British realised that Hunza and Chitral were threatened that they started planning improved communications with these distant regions.⁷⁹



Map of the Transcaspian Railway (Evarnitskij 1893)

The Russians were more successful (and ruthless) in subduing the native population and better able to consolidate their territorial gains than the British with their hybrid system of alliances, financial inducements, threats, arms supply and shows of pageantry. Despite the ruthlessness with which the peoples of Central Asia were subdued by the Russians, even Rawlinson had to admit that

the extension of Russian arms to the east of the Caspian has been of immense benefit to the country. The substitution, indeed, of Russian rule for that of the Kirghiz, Uzbegs and Turkomans throughout a large portion of Central Asia has been an unmingled blessing to humanity. The execrable slave trade, with its concomitant horrors, has been abolished, brigandage has been suppressed, and Mahommedan fanaticism and cruelty have been generally mitigated and controlled. Commerce at the same time has been rendered more secure, local arts and manufactures have been encouraged, and the wants of the inhabitants have been everywhere more seriously regarded than is usual under Asiatic rulers.⁸⁰

Francis Henry Skrine felt that his countrymen had much to learn from the Russians in this respect:

The Englishmen [on the Pamirs Boundary Commission] were particularly struck by the eagerness shown by their rivals to support the national sports of the nomads, the liberal prizes awarded and the careful observance of ceremony in their official intercourse with Asiatics, — a

⁷⁷ Chakravarty, pp. 69-70.

⁷⁸ Curzon, *op. cit.*, p. 45. Curzon also suggests that “the employment of the natives in the construction of the line, and the security they thereby enjoyed of fair and regular pay, has had a great deal to do with the rapid pacification of the country” (p. 50). The extension to Andijan was completed in 1899.

⁷⁹ For a detailed history of the construction of the Russian railway system in Central Asia, see Skrine, pp. 305-319.

⁸⁰ Speech to the RGS in 1882, quoted by Curzon, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

policy which inspired the latter with a sense of their liberality and power. This is an attitude which would do much to consolidate our own power in India.⁸¹

In 1892, W. Barnes Stevani, a correspondent for the London *Daily Chronicle* quoted approvingly the opinion of a German newspaper article:

It is not by might alone that Russia impresses the peoples of the East. Remembering the wise maxim of Skobelev, she takes care to 'smooth over, with love and attention, the sharp strokes of the sword' – a policy somewhat more effective than the wavering and partisan policy of the rulers of the British Empire.⁸²

In the account of his ride across the Pamirs in 1900, Filchner made a similar comment:

In these regions, as well as in Chinese Turkestan, the Afghans show more respect for the Russians than the English. I attribute this to the deliberate and firm policy of Russia in Central Asia. ... And yet the Russians manage, in their dealings with Asiatic peoples, to reach out to their hearts, whereas the English, in their relations with natives, make a show of their cultural superiority. And it is this ability of the Russians to recognise even the wildest native as a fellow human being that gives them their strength in Asia⁸³

Curzon too pointed out that

Russia unquestionably possess a remarkable gift for enlisting the allegiance and attracting even the friendship of those whom she has subdued by force of arms ... The Russian fraternises in the true sense of the word ... and he does not shrink from entering into social and domestic relations with alien or inferior races. ... A remarkable feature of the Russification of Central Asia is the employment given by the conqueror to her former opponents on the field of battle. ... I was a witness at Baku, where the four Khans of Merv were assembled in Russian uniform to greet the Czar.⁸⁴

It is hard to imagine that a British general would have dreamt of calling on a local religious leader to pay his respects just after conquering his country, yet this is what Chernyaev did after taking Tashkent in 1865. Indeed, in many of the pronouncements by the British on relations with the Afghans, perceived insults to Britain and affronts to the dignity of her representatives are often mentioned as justification for military retribution. We may also note Curzon's slighting reference to 'inferior races' and similar remarks by others such as Francis Younghusband (see Chapter 6.2), suggesting that several of the British in India found it difficult to accept the native peoples as equals - a latent racism on the part of some of the British in Central Asia that must have made it hard for the British to gain the full confidence of the peoples with whom they came into contact.

The Russians' policy was opportunistic, pushing their advantage as far as it would go without actually becoming embroiled in major military confrontation and knowing just when to hold back. Accusations of bad faith have to be measured against the fact that Russia honoured her undertaking to return Dzungaria (in 1877) and Kuldja (in 1881) to the Chinese once the latter had shown that they were able to maintain order in these regions after the death of Yakub Khan – albeit subject to "a substantial *quid pro quo*, the extortion of which all but led to war."⁸⁵

Russia played the game of bluff with great skill, leaving the British continually guessing what her real intentions were. As Hopkirk suggests:

One cannot but be struck by the number of these [Russian] invasion plans which somehow reached British ears over the years. It could well have occurred to the Russian military that there was profit to be gained from such leaks, since they obliged the British to garrison more troops in

⁸¹ Skrine, p. 305.

⁸² Article on Grombchevsky's travels in *The Asiatic Quarterly Review*, January-April 1892.

⁸³ Wilhelm Filchner, *Ein Ritt über den Pamir*, Berlin 1903, pp. 75-78

⁸⁴ *Russia in Central Asia*, pp. 388-389.

⁸⁵ Curzon, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

India than would otherwise have been necessary. After all, it was not only the British who were playing the Bolshaya Igra, the Great Game.

Moreover, as Hopkirk concludes, “Russian officers serving on the frontier had long been given to such bellicose talk ... Its encouragement was one way of keeping up morale ...”⁸⁶

Despite the courage and daring of the individuals involved, British military intelligence, as Hopkirk points out, “had been extremely haphazard, and compared badly with the well-organised and efficient Russian system ... Contrary to the impression given by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*, there was no overall intelligence-gathering or co-ordinating body in India at that time.”⁸⁷ Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, who was in the military intelligence service in India from 1893-4, commented tartly

Although much had been done by the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts, to ensure that priority for staff employment should be governed by professional capacity, favouritism and social influence were not yet deemed by the outsider to be extinct. It was alleged that staff officers were still too often selected from amongst those who were likely to be successful performers in amateur theatricals, or be useful in some other way at the various entertainments provided for the amusement of Simla society. I was frequently asked on my first arrival at this smart hill-station what my special accomplishment was – acting, singing, or whistling – and what my contribution to the amenities of the season would be. It was taken for granted that I could do something of this nature, and do it well, and my interrogators were surprised to learn that I could contribute nothing.⁸⁸

Moreover, there was at least one extraordinary breach of security. Petrovsky, the Russian Consul-General in Kashgar expressed to one British visitor his astonishment at the “shortsightedness of the British Government in permitting the publication of MacGregor’s book on the Russian advance towards India [*The Defence of India*, Simla, 1884], and asked me how it was that a staff officer had been permitted to make public the secret dispositions of the British forces in case of war. The book, he added, had been read by the Russian officials, and had created a great sensation.”⁸⁹

After the Russians had consolidated their gains, they facilitated travel by distinguished British visitors, such as Curzon and Dunmore, whom they certainly knew to be spies but ostentatiously feted: they had everything to gain by exhibiting the extent of their control over the conquered territory. The British were not so imaginative – and were perhaps less confident of what they had to show.

The Marquis of Ripon, probably the wisest of the Viceroys of the period, whose cool political judgement was the opposite of Lytton’s rashness, expressed well the realities of territorial expansion in Central Asia in 1881:

I have always thought that it was altogether unnecessary to seek for an explanation of Russia’s advance in Central Asia in any far-reaching scheme of India conquest; the circumstances in which she has been placed seem to me quite sufficient to account for that advance without supposing her to be animated by any special hostility to England, or by any deep designs against our power in the East. I can scarcely conceive it possible that any Russian Government can seriously desire to acquire the possession of a vast territory like India lying at an enormous distance from their own country⁹⁰, and I have the fullest confidence that England could successfully defend herself against any attack which Russia could make against her Indian dominions. But I hold that Russian interference in Afghanistan is to be deprecated in the interest of England and Russia alike.⁹¹

Francis Henry Skrine agreed:

⁸⁶ Hopkirk, p. 285 and 501.

⁸⁷ Hopkirk, p. 422-3.

⁸⁸ Robertson, pp. 51-52.

⁸⁹ Ralph P. Cobbold, *Innermost Asia*, London 1900, pp. 66-67.

⁹⁰ The inconsistency of this conclusion, in the light of the similar distance between London and Delhi, seems to have escaped Ripon.

⁹¹ Quoted in Singhal, p. 95.

The Russian advance in Asia, which we have described as a movement automatic and uncontrollable, has been interpreted by an influential school of writers as a menace to our position in India. Twice of late years have we been landed on the very brink of war by a public opinion goaded to frenzy by such baseless fears. For it may be affirmed with perfect truth that the absorption of India is a dream too wild for the most aggressive adviser of the Tsar. Such is the geographical position of the peninsula, that it can be held by no European Power which is not Mistress of the Seas.⁹²

The Russians had the advantage of an autocratic centralised administration and a clear military policy of subjugation. Officers, if not encouraged to take rash initiatives, were at least rewarded for success – and they achieved it. The British were handicapped by a lack of consistency in their strategy in Afghanistan and were constrained by public opinion from exercising the ruthlessness shown by Kaufmann in suppressing local dissension. Lord Salisbury, who served in or led several administrations during the period, was well aware of the limits of action in a Parliamentary democracy: “You would not venture to ask Parliament for two extra regiments on account of a movement in some unknown sandhills which is supposed to be a menace to Merv. That being the case, no despatches from this office ... would in the least degree disturb P. Gortchakoff or provoke a single telegraphic order to Turkistan.”⁹³ As Hopkirk points out, in commenting on Cherniaev’s disobedience that led to the capture of Tashkent by the Russians: “Such an action by a British general would have brought the wrath of Parliament and press down upon his head, not to mention that of the cabinet and his own superiors. In Russia there was only one man ultimately to please or displease – the Tsar himself.”⁹⁴

Skobelev described his military policy as follows:

I hold it as a principle that in Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them the longer they will be quiet afterwards. My system is this: To strike hard, and keep on hitting till resistance is completely over; then at once to form ranks, cease slaughter and be kind and humane to the prostrate enemy.⁹⁵

Curzon commented approvingly:

A greater contrast than this can scarcely be imagined to the British method, which is to strike gingerly a series of taps, rather than a downright blow; rigidly to prohibit all pillage or slaughter, and to abstain not less wholly from subsequent fraternisation. But there can be no doubt that the Russian tactics, however deficient they may be from the moral, are exceedingly effective from the practical point of view ...



Mikhail Dmitriyevich Skobelev (1843-1882)

⁹² Skrine p. 407.

⁹³ Chakravarty, p. 221.

⁹⁴ Hopkirk, p.307.

⁹⁵ Quoted by Curzon, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

In 1894 an "Indian Officer" published anonymously in London an extraordinarily well-informed book entitled *Russia's March Towards India* that describes the manner in which, under the leadership of Skobelev, the Russians established their authority in Kokand and found themselves at the foot of the Pamirs.

By these movements the rising in the Namangan district was effectually suppressed; but the disorders in other parts of the Khanate still continued, and Kaufmann therefore ordered Skobelev to march through the country between the Naryn and Kara Daria, which was considered to be the centre from which the Kipchak malcontents carried out their hostile demonstrations. It was thought that this movement could be made with the most telling effect if it was carried out in the early winter, when the nomads had moved, with their families, into their winter settlements, as they could then be more easily got at, and their escape would be rendered difficult, if not altogether impossible, on account of the deep snow with which the surrounding mountains would then be covered.

Skobelev therefore left Namangan on January 6, 1876, with a force of 2,800 men, and, crossing the Naryn river, moved along the right bank of the Kara Daria, while a detachment was sent, under Baron Meller-Zakomelsky, to reconnoitre the country to the south of the river. The cold at this time was intense; but, in spite of the severe frost (15° B.), the force marched eastwards, ravaging the country, and burning all the settlements which were passed through. The important village of Paitok was completely destroyed, and, while a force was detached to operate against the Kipchak villages in the mountains, the main body continued its advance along the northern bank of the river to Yani-Sarkarba.

As the Kipchaks saw that their settlements were threatened with complete destruction they sent envoys asking for mercy; and these men were informed by the Russian general that the tribes would be spared if they proved their sincerity and complete submission by delivering up the heads of the rebellion and the parties who had incited the people to enter upon the Holy War against the Russians. As these terms were not complied with the advance was continued, and after some skirmishes on January 12 and 13 the Russians crossed the Kara Daria at Yani-Sarkarba on the following day, and established a fortified camp on the left bank of the stream. A halt was then made for several days while reconnaissances were pushed forward towards the city of Andijan, where Abdul Rahman was reported to have collected a force of 10,000 horsemen and 5,000 foot soldiers, independent of some 15,000 armed inhabitants who had expressed their determination to oppose the Russians to the death.

Two messages were then sent demanding the surrender of the city; but as these were not answered Skobelev determined to assault the place; and, advancing on January 20, he stormed the village of Iskylik, and then commenced the bombardment of Andijan. After the artillery had fired some 500 rounds, two storming columns advanced to the attack and soon penetrated to the centre of the town, where another battery was brought into action and continued the destruction of the place. By the next day all resistance had ceased: Andijan, which had inflicted such a serious reverse on Trotzky's column, was now subdued by the ever-victorious Skobelev; and the Russian troops occupied the remains of the sorely-punished city, Skobelev himself taking up his quarters in the Bek's palace, which Trotzky - in his anxiety to minimise his defeat - had reported to have been destroyed.

On January 30 news was received that the Khokandians who had fled from Andijan were again assembling near Asaki, and Skobelev therefore marched out and captured that town after severe fighting. This battle, following closely after the capture of Andijan, completely broke the power of the Khokandians. Margelan and Shahr-i-Khana tendered their submission once more; and on February 5 Abdul Rahman, Batyr Tiura, Isfend Yar, and other leaders of the insurrection surrendered themselves unconditionally to Skobelev and threw themselves on the mercy of the Emperor.

By this time also the inhabitants of the city of Khokand found that they were no better off under the leadership of Fulad Bek and Abdul Gaffar Bek than they had been under Khudayar's son, for these two chiefs, taking advantage of their accession to power, appeared determined to enrich themselves as much as possible at the expense of their adherents, while the former also committed the greatest atrocities and seemed to revel in bloodshed. The people, therefore, sent to Nasr-Eddin and begged him to return. The Khan was then at Makhram, and after some hesitation he set out for the Khokandian capital; but before he arrived there the Kipchak and Kirghiz adherents of Fulad Bek attacked him and forced him to return precipitately to the Russian frontier. Skobelev was then ordered to occupy the capital; and this he did on February 20, when sixty-two guns and a large supply of ammunition and provisions were captured. Fulad Bek in the meanwhile had taken refuge in the mountains to the north of Karategin, and when captured a short time afterwards he was justly hanged for his barbarous actions.

By this time it had been decided that the whole of the Khanate should be annexed. General Kaufmann had left Tashkent in the previous December for the Russian capital, and on his arrival there had persuaded the Czar's Government that such a step was necessary for the security of the south-eastern frontier of the Turkestan province; and on March 2, 1876, the Emperor signed an order by which it was decreed that the whole of Khokand was incorporated in the Russian Empire under the name of the Province of Ferghana, and that this new province was to be under the direction of the Governor-General of Turkestan, who was to reorganise its administration by means of a provisional arrangement such as had been introduced in the Amu-Daria and Zarafshan districts. Immediately on receipt of this order General Kolpakoffsky, who had temporary command during Kaufmann's absence, set out for the city of Khokand, and there proclaimed to the still disquieted inhabitants that the White Czar had 'approved of their submission' and had decided to take them under his protection. Nasr-Eddin, Abdur Rahman, and other leaders of the insurrection were then deported to Tashkent, and General Skobeleff was placed in command of the new province.⁹⁶

The Russians were, indeed, fully occupied consolidating their territorial gains in Central Asia and it would have been folly for them to invade India. Their expansion into Central Asia was inevitable and foreseeable. Had there been less Russophobia among the British, it might have been possible to reach a final settlement with the Russians long before 1895 that would have given the British a completely free hand in northern India and Afghanistan. Salisbury had suggested in September 1878 that it might be more convenient simply to "seize the provinces which are financially and strategically the most desirable"⁹⁷ and Kaufmann never understood why the British had not simply taken over Afghanistan and applied tactics similar to his own to ensure their authority. In 1897, Petrovsky had expressed similar views to Ralph Cobbold.

The Tirah Expedition [against a Pathan uprising on the North-West Frontier in 1897] also afforded us much food for conversation. Petrovsky told me that he had taken in an English paper throughout the campaign in order to get full details, and adverted strongly on some of the action taken by the British Government in dealing with the Pathan. In his opinion the only satisfactory method to have adopted would have been to say to the general selected to command the expedition: "Take what troops you require, settle these troublesome people in the quickest manner possible. You have *carte blanche*, now go and do it." Instead of which the officer in charge was hampered in every way by orders from London and from Simla emanating from people, the majority of whom had never been near the scene of operations, and who possessed no personal knowledge of the *status quo*. It was a first principle of the Russian administrative method to trust the general in command of an expedition implicitly. He would not be hampered in any way. If he succeeded, he would be rewarded; if he failed, his career would be closed. In the result a successful issue was assured from the outset; the desired end was attained in the shortest possible time. The loss of life involved was greatly lessened by the brevity of the campaign, and the cost would probably be one-half that involved by the British method.⁹⁸

The British never defined a consistent policy towards Afghanistan. Curzon commented mercilessly:

We owe our record of Afghan failure and disaster, mingled indeed with some brilliant feats and redeemed by a few noble names, to the amazing political incompetence that has with fine continuity been brought to bear upon our relations with successive Afghan rulers. For fifty years there has not been an Afghan Amir whom we have not alternately fought against and caressed, now repudiating and now recognising his sovereignty, now appealing to his subjects as their saviours, now slaughtering them as our foes. It was so with Dost Mohammed, with Shir Ali, with Yakub, and it has been so with Abdurrahman Khan. Each one of these men has known the British both as enemies and as patrons, and has commonly only won the patronage by the demonstration of his power to command it. Small wonder that we have never been trusted by the Afghan rulers, or liked by the Afghan people! In the history of most conquering races is found some spot that has invariably exposed their weakness like the joints in armour of steel. Afghanistan has long been the Achilles' heel of Great Britain in the East. Impregnable elsewhere, she has shown herself uniformly vulnerable here.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *Russia's March Towards India*, by 'An Indian Officer', London, Sampson Low, Maeston & Company (Limited), 1894, Part II, Chapter 12.

⁹⁷ Chakravarty, p. 231.

⁹⁸ Cobbold, pp. 67-68.

⁹⁹ *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 356.

The legacy of this inconsistency was a weak and divided country, and the Afghans were never encouraged to develop strong native institutions or given the support or external stimulus that would have enabled them to do so. It is clear from the contemporary accounts of Wolff, Vambéry, and others – especially MacGahan – who travelled among them¹⁰⁰, that the Turkomans and other tribes subdued by the Russians were just as fierce, belligerent and unruly as the Afghans and it is arguable, although perhaps politically incorrect, that, had Afghanistan been subdued in the same way by the British in the 19th century, it might have emerged as a stronger state in the 20th and avoided the destiny with which we are today all too familiar in the 21st.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ See the splendid summary of their adventures in Fitzroy MacLean, *A Person from England and Other Travellers*, London 1958.

¹⁰¹ A similar conclusion is suggested by Meyer and Brysac in *Tournament of Shadows* in relation to Tibet (e.g. pp. 423 and 447).