

British Intervention in Afghanistan and its Aftermath (1838-1842)

Mehdani Miloud * and Ghomri Tedj *
Tahri Mohamed University (Bechar)

Abstract

The balance of power that prompted the European powers to the political domination and economic exploitation of the Third World countries in the nineteenth century was primarily due to the industrialization requirements. In fact, these powers embarked on global expansion to the detriment of fragile states in Africa, South America and Asia, to secure markets to keep their machinery turning. In Central Asia, the competition for supremacy and influence involved Britain and Russia, then two hegemonic powers in the region. Russia's steady expansion southwards was to cause British mounting concern, for such a systematic enlargement would, in the long term, jeopardize British efforts to protect India, 'the Crown Jewel.' In their attempt to cope with such contingent circumstances, the British colonial administration believed that making of Afghanistan a buffer state between India and Russia, would halt Russian expansion. Because this latter policy did not deter the Russians' southwards extension, Britain sought to forge friendly relations with the Afghan Amir, Dost Mohammad. However, the Russians were to alter these amicable relations, through the frequent visits of their political agents to Kabul. This Russian attitude was to increase British anxiety to such a degree that it developed to some sort of paranoia, which ultimately led to British repeated armed interventions in Afghanistan.

Key Words: British, intervention, Afghanistan, Great Game

Introduction

The British loss of the thirteen colonies and the American independence in 1883 moved Britain to concentrate her efforts on India in which the East India Company had established its foothold from the beginning of the seventeenth century up to the Indian Mutiny (1857). Upon this latter historical event, the British Government took the overall control of India due to the dysfunction of the East India Company. However, the British direct rule of India was problematic, for it was challenged by the Russian southwards expansion, thus culminating in an Anglo-Russian rivalry for power and influence in the region. Historians named this type of Cold War

between the two empires, 'the Great Game.' Lying between both empires Afghanistan grew of utmost importance, for it constituted a gateway to India for the Russians. By the same token, the British wanted to make of Afghanistan a buffer state to ward off a Russian potential invasion of India.

Documents Relating to the First British Intervention in Afghanistan

Due to the considerable significance of this historical fact, some British, particularly, those from the theatre of war felt the need to keep records of their correspondences, recollections, and daily lives in Afghanistan, which records were digitized, and are therefore available in the net. Of the primary sources left by people who were either, active participants in the First Anglo-Afghan War, or simple witnesses of it, is a daily diary that Florentia Sale, the wife of Brigadier Robert Sale kept, which she entitled, *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan (1841-1842)*.¹

Equally momentous, is Lieutenant Vincent Eyre's diary that he entitled *the Military Operations at Cabul, which ended in the Destruction of the British Army*.² The diary is kept as a testimony of the regular occurrences of the First Anglo-Afghan War, during which he was appointed Commissary of Ordnance to the Kabul field force. Vincent Eyre was ultimately captured prisoner by Akbar Khan, Dost Mohammad's elder son, for nine months in which time he wrote his diary.³

There are also print recordings that both Houses of Parliament had presented to Queen Victoria during the Anglo-Afghan Wars. These recordings entitled *Papers relating to Military Operations in Afghanistan* contain correspondences between political and military chiefs in Afghanistan, and between these chiefs and those in India. The scrutiny and analysis of these sources, among others, help the reader forge an idea about the circumstances that were behind the British failure to implement their policy in Afghanistan.

The war that the British were to wage against the Afghans was directed by the British government in India, and encouraged by that in London headed by the Whig Party, under the premiership of Lord Melbourne (1835-1841). Then, George Eden, known as Lord Auckland was appointed, Governor General to India. Lord Melbourne, being supportive of the use of military force to depose the Emir of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammad, and enthrone Shah Shuja, was to contribute to the invading forces' disaster.⁴ This was due to the hawkishness of both governments in India and Britain,⁵

combined with the arrogance and lack of serious preparations for the war. Being pugnacious, the Government of India determined to wage the war against Afghanistan, though one of the main factors that incited the British to launch the war was removed, namely the Persians' evacuation of Herat.⁶ Therefore, Lord Auckland, the British Governor of India ignored the Simla Manifesto that held out that the invasion of Afghanistan would have no *raison-d'être* if Herat were freed.

The Anglo-Afghan armed confrontation, being asymmetric; the British forces were able to capture the Afghan main cities, namely, Kandahar, Ghazni and Kabul, the capital city. In doing so, they managed to topple Dost Mohammad and enthrone their favourite candidate, Shah Shuja.

King Shuja's Inability to Consolidate his Power

The British capitalization on King Shuja's ability to rule Afghanistan failed miserably. In order to exercise his authority effectively, the Afghan king would rely on the chiefs to assist him through their advisory council, and the levy of taxation that would enable him to set his machinery of government in motion.⁷ A like endeavour proved impossible, on account of the difficulty to rally every tribal chief for his support, when every one of them held his own political belief regarding the war and the enthroned Shah Shuja.

Added to this, the very fact that King Shuja entered Afghanistan with a foreign military force, holding different cultural, political and above all religious beliefs, made his subjects carry the firm conviction that the man who claimed to be their rightful king, had more beliefs to share with the invaders, than with them. As a consequence, neither Shah Shuja, nor the invaders were welcomed in Afghanistan. Additionally, instead of giving King Shuja a good reception, or greeting him warmly, as the British officers and himself expected, people gazed at the European strangers. In this respect the British historian, John William Kaye, argued that people's reception of the man that had been once their king "was more like a funeral procession than the entry of a King into the capital of his restored dominions."⁸ Reverend, Gleig, shared a similar conviction with John William Kaye. The reverend expressed the idea in the following words:

There was no increase of good feeling on the part of the inhabitants towards the invaders. The province submitted, or appeared to submit, to the rule of Shah Shuja, but of enthusiasm in his cause no class of society exhibited as sign; while the bearing of all in their intercourse with the English was as hostile as ever.⁹

Sir John William Kaye (1814-1876), the British military historian, civil servant and army officer held the same view. The latter asserted that, "the Shah had no hold of the affections of his people. He might sit in the Bala Hissar, but he could not govern the Afghans."¹⁰ Therefore, one can imagine the type of government Shah Shuja would erect in the face of his subjects' rancour and the aforementioned obstacles that he was to contend with to make the wheels of his government running. Equally, King Shah Shuja would need the support of the mosaic tribes, particularly for the collection of taxes to rule the country. Now what dwells at issue is how he could ally them to his government.

British Dilemma in Afghanistan

The British, too, were not in a firm position, in that maintaining Shah Shuja on the throne would require them finance and military in readiness to crush any potential rebellion,¹¹ both means the British were not ready to provide, for they would drain the government treasury coffers, which in the long run, would render the British colony of India rather treacherous.¹²

Upon the restoration of Shah Shuja to the throne, the British officers, at the head of troops, would resort to force to compel the local population to provide revenues for the maintenance of the latter's government. But this policy proved ineffective, for it usually brought both parties into direct confrontation. Worse still, the resort to force to collect revenues was counterproductive because such measure was to fuel hatred and antagonism towards the new government, and the British alike.¹³ Therefore, to guarantee Shah Shuja government against a potential breakdown, the British had to dip into the Indian Treasury.¹⁴

On the other hand, leaving King Shuja without the necessary military and financial assistance would hasten his fall. In consequence of a likelihood reality, all the enterprise that the British undertook to enthrone their friendly king to achieve their hopes, would end in a fiasco.¹⁵ What Macnaughten

ignored was that British occupation of Afghanistan had affected the financial resources of the Indian treasury.

Due to the financial instability that the colonization of Afghanistan had aroused, Governor-General Lord Auckland notified Macnaughten to consider his administration expenditures, for such a military occupation of Afghanistan cost the Indian treasury a million and a quarter sterling a year, which had contributed to the Indian coffers leakage.¹⁶ The Anglo-Indian Government thought of abandoning such an enterprise given its high cost and ignominious failure. Macnaughten first objected to reducing the Ghilzai payment justifying his position on the ground that such money pacified the Ghilzai tribesmen whose job was to ensure the safety carriage and communication with India. However, faced with Lord Auckland's pressure, he ultimately yielded.¹⁷

If the Afghans, with their heterogeneous ethnic groups, showed some sort of apathy towards the cause of their Amir who was exiled in India, they were to join forces to rise in rebellion against the British and their candidate, Shah Shuja.¹⁸

The Outbreak of the Afghan Insurgency

In April, 1841, Lord Auckland was compelled to make a substitution at the head of the military leadership in Afghanistan, because of Sir Willoughby Cotton's poor physical condition. General William Elphinstone, who was to replace him, was then aged 62 and himself suffered from rheumatism.¹⁹ In addition to his illness, General William Elphinstone was an irresolute person lacking firmness of purpose.²⁰ The man was to be assisted by Brigadier Shelton. Yet, these two men did not make a perfect match, for Brigadier Shelton displayed brutal conduct and showed some disdain for his senior officer.²¹ It was these two men who were to deal with the Afghan rebels. Six events underlay the Afghan insurgency. Sir William Macnaughten's decision to bring down the Ghilzai chiefs' stipend that the latter had been accustomed to receiving for their surveillance of the British goods from plunder, and their keeping of the communication channels with India safe was to antagonize these Ghilzai chiefs.²² Moreover, the invaders' long stay on the Afghan land was incomprehensible to the local population. Additionally, the arrival of European women and the birth of children were to confirm the Afghans' suspicions that the invaders were there to stay.²³

Furthermore, the use of force to collect the revenues for King Shuja was to antagonize the Ghilzais and the Durranis, the most untameable tribes in Afghanistan. The British interference with the Afghans' customs and traditions was to shake the cohesion within the Afghan social groups and subsequently antagonized them. This policy also proved counterproductive for the British. Such hostility led to open confrontations between these tribes and the British under Colonel Nott, culminating in the defeat of both tribes in August 1841.²⁴

However, the invading armies' meddling with the Afghan women was the last straw, for in so doing, in a society highly conservative, the British aroused the men's rancor that revenge alone could alleviate.²⁵ Still, the invading armies did not know that a mere question to ask about the health of someone's wife is comparable to an affront, let alone making advances to her.²⁶

In her diary *Journal of Disasters in Afghanistan*, Lady Sale noted that before the British and their allies arrived in Afghanistan, the political relationships between the Afghan king and the tribal chiefs had been consensual, and in times of war the latter provided the Amir with their retainers, and in exchange they received money. However, during the occupation the tribal chiefs were forced to supply the invading armies with their retainers, who bore the British bitter resentment, without receiving any money in return.²⁷

The change of the British Government and the rise of the Tory Party to power in 1841, under Sir Robert Peel, did not change the course of events in Afghanistan, either.²⁸ Though William Macnaghten attempted to justify to his superiors his stipend reduction measure, on the ground of the financial constraints that the occupation of Afghanistan was to incur for both British governments in India and London, he was ultimately made responsible for the widespread of unrest.²⁹

In fact, the events that followed were catastrophic for the British. The Afghans' rise into rebellion encouraged Dost Mohammad's elder son, Akbar Khan to enter Kabul and lead the revolt. During the turmoil, the British suffered serious setbacks. In fact, several events tested the British strength and boldness, and proved that the Afghans had carefully prepared their actions against the British.

In late October 1841, the Afghans attacked a British outpost in Northern Kabul, grabbing the ammunitions, which helped them carry on their insurgency. In November, they murdered Alexander Burnes, the British spy, the latter's brother, and Lieutenant Broadfoot.³⁰ Yet, the British were incapable of taking actions against the Afghans. Upon Burnes's death, the rioters managed to deprive their enemies of their reserves of medicines and grains, already dwindling.³¹

The British weakness encouraged other tribesmen to enter Kabul, to help the ones who were already sniping at the British and Indian soldiers. The rebels took the heights, an advantage that they had over their enemies, for the British cantonment grew exposed to the rebels' fire. Efficient too, was the Afghan Jezail³² which was more precise and had a longer range than the British gun, and thus outweighing it.³³

In the same month, the insurgents succeeded in laying a siege to the British barracks in Kabul, making the British unable to get assistance from the neighbouring areas. Furthermore, counting upon Colonel Nott's force in Kandahar would take about five weeks' march. In addition, the snow would hamper the Indian soldiers' advance because the latter were not accustomed to the snowy weather.

What made the British condition worse was the cases of insubordination.³⁴ An illustration of this was the 44th foot's refusal of Elphinstone's orders, as he appeared to them weak and incapable.³⁵ A similar case of insubordination was Robert Sale's. In fact, confronted with the Ghilzais' unrest, the only resort left for the British was to count upon Robert Sale's brigade to reestablish communication channels with India, which channels the Ghilzai malcontents had closed. However, believing that William Macnaghten was then the source of the problem, due to his policy of reducing the tribal chiefs' stipend, Robert Sale ignored his orders.³⁶ By mid November, 1841, the British plight became tragic. They suffered from want in supplies of men, soldiers and ammunitions. To alleviate such straits, the British would be required to control the passes, mainly the Khyber Pass, being a portal to India. Moreover, the Afghans' repeated snipe fires at them were to add to their psychological well-being, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the British reliance on offering the Afghans bribes, whenever they wanted to reestablish communications between them, was not on all occasions productive. Below is Sir William Macnaghten's correspondence

with Captain Macgregor, the political agent at Gandamuck, in which he gives us an insight about the dire straits which the British were going through.

Sir W. II. Macnaghten to Captain Macgregor.

Sir, Cabool, November 18, 1841.

I HAVE received your letters of the 13th instant. The cossid gave us an account of your action of the 14th instant, which, if he speaks truth, must have been a very successful one; we are in statu quo. Our chief want is supplies. I perceive now, that you could not well have joined us. I hope you have written to Mackeson, asking aid from the Sikhs under the treaty. If there is any difficulty about the Sikhs getting through the pass, Markesan should offer a bribe to the Khybers, of a lac of rupees or more, to insure their safe passage. These are not times to stick at trifles.

Your's, &c.,

W.II. MACNAGHTEN

Faced with such unfavourable plight, Sir William Macnaghten opted for negotiating a surrender agreement with Akbar Khan. The negotiations started on December 11, 1841, on the banks on Kabul River. The terms of the agreement were arguably humiliating, for they stipulated that the British should leave their weapons and promise, not to venture again invading Afghanistan. Additionally, the British were required to deliver British hostages to the Afghans; which, they believed, would guarantee the safety return of Dost Mohammad to his throne.

As agreed, five days following the agreement, the British soldiers freed the Bala Hissar, King Shuja's dwelling, leaving the latter to his sad fate. In fact, on January 8, 1842, four hundred cavalymen, on whom King Shuja counted, abandoned him, precipitating his assassination.

The retreating armies from Kabul had been utterly destroyed, save Doctor William Brydon (1811-1873) who painfully managed to reach Jalalabad on January 13, 1842.³⁷ In Kandahar, Ghuznee and Jalalabad, the fighting was still underway. In fact, in Ghazni the invading armies were driven to surrender because of their want of water supply, medical stores and military ammunition, due to the failure of communication with Kabul. Colonel Nott, to whom the security of Kandahar had been entrusted, managed with great difficulty to defeat his enemies. Similarly, Major-

General Robert Sale cavalry was able to put Akbar Khan's force to rout, on two occasions, forcing Akbar Khan to abandon his siege of Jalalabad

The British army defeat in Afghanistan was hard, for it was both material and psychological. Lady Sale's journal that was published in London a year following the disaster was to move the British, as the journal described the horror that the British and the Indian soldiers suffered from while retreating from Kabul to India. Lady Sale described their ordeal in her diary in the following paragraph.

At the commencement of the defile, and for some considerable distance, we passed 200 or 300 of our miserable Hindostanees, who had escaped up the unfrequented road from the massacre of the 12th. They were all naked, and more or less frostbitten: wounded, and starving, they had set fire to the bushes and grass, and huddled all together to impart warmth to each other. Subsequently, we heard that scarcely any of these poor wretches escaped from the defile : and that driven to the extreme of hunger they had sustained life by feeding on their dead comrades.³⁸

The utter destruction of the British army aroused the British public opinion wrath. To appease their ire, the British invaded Afghanistan again in retribution. Though Ellenborough, the new Governor to India, was at first in favour of the British withdrawal from Afghanistan, the pressure for retaliation in London was unrelenting. Therefore, Lord Auckland, commissioned Major-General Pollock to launch a punitive expedition into Afghanistan for revenge.³⁹ The latter had three missions. First, he had to lift the siege of Jalalabad, where major Sale was faced with Akbar Khan's repeated attacks. His second mission was to release the hostages in Bamian, Ghuznee and the Bala Hissar. His third mission was to carry out the retaliation against the Afghans .

British Retribution

As part of their retribution plan, the British focused their reprisal measure on Kohistan which, they believed, provided a home for indomitable warriors. There, they razed Charikar , the Kuhistanee capital which a few months before , witnessed the complete destruction of Nepalese recruits

commanded by Major-General Codrington.⁴⁰ The retribution army also set fire on a village named Istalif, after they had routed an Afghan force.⁴¹

Out of vindictive motives, the British destroyed the Kabul Bazaar, the place where the heads of Alexander Burnes, and Macnaghten had been displayed in 1841. In the same day, Major General Pollock dispatched mounted soldiers to liberate Akbar Khan's hostages, among whom there were Lady Sale, Lieutenant Eyre and Captain Lawrence. Shaista Wahab, the Afghan historian and native of Kabul wrote that there were also scenes of pillage and cases of rape, as part of the British army's retribution.⁴² Additionally, H. W. Bellow, a medical officer reckoned in his journal entitled a *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan* that within the framework of their retribution measures, the British profaned Sultan Mahmud's tomb in Ghazni. The Sultan was known to be the founder of Ghazni, where Afghans came to show their regard for the defunct.

Now whether British intervention in Afghanistan was founded or not, this remains at issue. In fact, while the 19th century political elite argued that the Russian expansion southwards was a real threat to India, the Russians held that they had no intention of invading it. In this respect, Tatiana Zagarodnikova, a Russian historian asserted that the British claim that Russia intended to invade India was a British military subterfuge to compel British Parliament their military scheme. Tatiana Zagarodnikova expresses this idea in the following words:

“Well it was just, to my mind, it was a game, kind of making face, towards audience, towards public opinion. Another thing is that that was a wonderful pretext in the parliament to demand more money for military purposes, for keeping big armies in India and so on.”⁴³

William Dalrymple, the British historian believes that the nineteenth British military elites exaggerated the Russian threat and were therefore at all costs willing to dethrone the Afghan Amir and enthrone Shah Shuja. In the words of William Dalrymple:

“As we know in our own time, if you create a phantasm, a horror figure of your own imaginings, that figure can actually come into being. You can imagine a threat into life. Just like the neo-cons had wanted to topple Saddam Hussein long before 9/11, and 9/11 gave the neo-cons the excuse they were looking for. In the same way the Hawks, the Russophobes, in the British

establishment in Simla and in Calcutta, had wanted to pre-empt the Russians in Central Asia.”⁴⁴

Equally, Francis Henry Skrine and Edward Denison Ross argued that the Russian threat to India was a British pure conjecture.⁴⁵ They accounted for the British Public’s increasing fear by stressing the role that the media then played to shape public opinion that the Russian threat was real and that Britain should wage war against Russia. One such open military confrontation was the Crimean war (1853-56). Skrine and Ross also argued that the Russians’ invasion of India required the latter to possess a formidable naval power capable of outweighing that of Britain, which power the Russians lacked.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In brief, the British debacle, commonly known as ‘Auckland’s folly’ and tragedy that the British experienced in Afghanistan originated in the following factors. One of these factors is arguably imputable to their failure to understand the relationships between these diverse tribal groups, the clergy and the central government in Kabul.⁴⁷ History shows that these tribal groups had always been inclined to some independence vis- à- vis the central government, whose authority, they had repeatedly challenged, which partly accounted for Akbar Khan’s inability to bring the Ghilzai tribesmen into submission, during the British retreat from Kabul in January 1841. Akbar Khan’s inability to deal with the Ghilzais was coupled by General Elphinstone’s credulity, as he failed to sense the Afghans’ disingenuousness. Additionally, the British failed to know that the women, gold and land constituted the Afghan’s valuables for which he fights by all means.⁴⁸

Equally, the British made no effort to set up an effective reconnaissance or intelligence apparatuses that would save their lives, time and energy, particularly at the outset of their enterprise. Instances of this were the tribesmen’s attacks and plunder the invading armies were subject to, before they reached Kandahar.

In the absence of military reconnaissance, the invading armies marched blindly with no idea about the location of water points, and the whereabouts of their enemy whose repeated plunder caused them to lose camp followers, horses and camels.

Additionally, the number of camp followers, initially 38,000 people, and the inessential baggage were to hamper the swift advance of the invading armies.

What is more, the British military elites in Afghanistan were frequently indecisive in taking actions to face the rebels. In some situations, an officer issued an order that he would subsequently countermand or another officer ignore. An instance of this was Robert Sale's refusal to carry out Sir William Macnaghten's order to contend with the Ghilzai tribesmen and reestablish communication channels with India.

Equally essential to note was the case of insubordination, which revealed not only the nature of relationships that British gradually developed in the face of the Afghans repeated attacks, but also the psychological tension they were subject to.

In addition to the aforementioned invaders' defects, Sir William Macnaghten and Lord Elphinstone repeatedly showed some lack of resolution, when dealing with a matter that needed immediate settlement. An instance of this was the latter's delay to respond to Alexander Burnes, who apprised both men of the necessity to dispatch additional soldiers to cope with the rebellion.

Unlike the British, the Afghans knew the terrain, passes, valleys, and routes that the invaders or their supplies had to take, which was a great advantage to them. Given this fact, the Afghans could effortlessly charge their enemies' isolated posts and convoys that brought supplies from India. Additionally, knowing that the invading armies could not operate without communication channels with India, the Afghans controlled the passes; which course of action the British failed to accomplish, particularly when they had been in full strength, before the Bombay contingent headed for India in late September 1841.

Of the retaliation measures that Ellenborough took upon Major-General Lord Auckland's departure from India, was the reestablishment of the British army reputation; then the question that begs an answer is 'did the British army of retribution really reestablish that reputation?'

The First Anglo-Afghan war was, particularly, important for Afghanistan, for it made of it a nation state, as it contributed to the unification of the ethnically diverse tribes around one single chief, the Amir of Afghanistan. The First Anglo-Afghan war was significant for Britain too,

for it taught the British that the knowledge of people's cultures is of paramount importance, before the prospect of any invasion. The British overlook of these facts and their stubbornness to wage such a war were to lead to a debacle.

What is noteworthy is that the war that the East India Company waged against the Afghans in the first half of the nineteenth century falls within the framework of asymmetric wars, given that the invading force outweighed far more that of the Afghans in number as well as equipment and ammunition. Despite the Afghans defects they managed to notch up a notable victory over the invaders.

Equally, the Anglo-Afghan war falls within the framework of the nineteenth European imperialism because the British attempted to extend their authority over weaker states; a case in point, here, is Afghanistan. Furthermore, beside the British war effort to protect India against other powers, there was also the British will to find markets outlets.

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