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Under the Shadow of the Durand Line: British Armament Intelligence and Military Expeditions (1893-1913)



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Abstract

The Durand Line made the Indian subcontinent so delicate that it created the opportunity for British administrators to maintain the divide-and-rule policy. The critical examination of Intelligence and military strategies utilized by Britishers during the inception of Durand Line 1893 to 1913 lies in this paper. The endeavors of British Military strategists to obtain the Afghanistan combat techniques and the execution of a few military expeditions, considering restrictions of British control in the region is the epicenter of this paper. The 'Great Game' culminates the politics and circumstances of NWFP and the strategic concerns over Russian expansionism. Despite diverse military campaigns and the establishment of the Indian Intelligence Corps in 1905, the Britishers ease off to keep up a steady territorial administration, leading to long-term frailty and inevitably contributing to broader geopolitical shifts that wrapped up with Afghanistan's independence in 1919.

Keywords: Durand Line, North-West Frontier, Intelligence Gathering, British Expeditions, Tribal Uprisings

1. Introduction

According to Tod, "Throughout that brilliant and eventful period in the history of British India, when every province from the Ganges to the ocean was by agitated by warlike demonstrations, the camp of the regent was the pivot of the operations and the focus of the intelligence". (Tod, 1920, p. 1578) Like these, the Durand Line also reflects any regent's camp strategy discussion to secure the British Imperial interest over India from Russia. The Durand Line, following an agreement between Sir Mortimer Durand of British India and the Afghan Emir, Abdur Rahman Khan, continues to have severe and profound consequences over the NWFP region. The line spans over 2640 kilometres specifically aimed to portray British India's frontier with Afghanistan. This segregation led to significant political, social, and ethnic tension which persists even in today's world.

To Peter Hopkirk, the formation of the Durand Line is a kind of rehearsal for the 'Great Game'. (Hopkirk, 1990) The Pashtun society has fundamental customs and ties to their lands, which have bifurcated themselves by an arbitrary line that pays little attention to ethnic, cultural, or geographical sentiments. About more than half of the Pashtun population wrapped up on the side ruled by the British under Punjabi-dominated rule, which came to be a significant rivalry between the Pashtuns and their new colonial rulers. This bifurcation became a major source of anarchy that has continued for over a century.

The British made the border to secure their imperial interest in India and intercept Russia over south Asia as part of the 'Great Game'. However, the absence of consideration of tribal arrangements and the adaptability of the region's ethnic composition caused immediate resistance. The Pashtuns prevented British control, and their loyalty to the Afghan state remained strong, with this Durand Line becoming an epicentre

of conflict.

Specifically for Pashtun tribes as they live around the border zone their livelihood got a devastating effect. Formerly Pashtun people moved freely across the region, engaging in trade and maintaining affinity but the closure of borders particularly in the meantime the political or military tension, has restricted this movement. The inability to cross the border has not only disrupted their economic activities but also strained familial relationships, creating long-term social and economic consequences for the communities affected. The Afghan rulers have 'historically refused' to recognise the Durand Line as an official boundary, seeing it as an artificial division imposed by the Britishers. This refusal has powered up diplomatic and military conflicts between the two countries. Furthermore, the border area has become vulnerable to insurgent activities, including Taliban operations, as the penetrable boundary allows for unrestricted movement between the two countries.

The Nationalistic interpretations of history have further complicated the issue of the Durand Line. The British, interested in securing a 'buffer zone', focused solely on imperial strategy without considering the long-term impact on local populations. In Afghanistan, the division of the Pashtuns has been a rallying point for Afghan nationalists who argue that the line was a colonial imposition designed to weaken Afghan sovereignty. Similarly, in Pakistan, the Pashtun population in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has sought greater autonomy, with some groups advocating for a separate Pashtun state, often referred to as "Pashtunistan." The persistence of these nationalistic aspirations makes compromise difficult, as both nations view the Durand Line through lenses shaped by historical grievances and ethnic divisions.

2. Imperial Efforts to Secure the North Western Frontier

The imperial efforts to secure the North Western Frontier can be categorized into four distinct stages, each marked by strategic shifts and evolving challenges.

2.1 Intelligence efforts regarding the armaments of Afghanistan

According to Peter Hopkirk, in January 1865, Yakub Beg and his ally, leading a small, armed group, crossed the mountains into Kashgar, where they found chaos as rival groups clashed for control of the throne and fought against Chinese forces. Within two years, Yakub Beg, leveraging both his charismatic leadership and European military tactics learned from the Russians, succeeded in seizing Kashgar and Yarkand from the Chinese and local rivals alike. Allegedly, the two Chinese governors chose to take their own lives rather than surrender to the Muslim forces. According to one vivid, though unverified, account, Kashgar's defenders resorted to eating their wives and children, after consuming all four-legged animals in the city, including cats and rats, rather than face defeat. So right after the Durand incident, the first aspect of British intelligence operations in the North Western Frontier was focused on gathering crucial information regarding the armaments and military capabilities of Afghanistan, a key concern in maintaining regional stability and countering external threats. The Foreign Department readily admitted that British knowledge of Military affairs in Afghanistan is lamentably deficient. One way in which Britishers can obtain reliable intelligence on the many military points cited by the Intelligence Branch is by sending smart men into Afghanistan. The risk to such men is very great. The Foreign Department addressed the Punjab government and agents to the Governor-General in Baluchistan explaining the points about which the Intelligence Branch wanted information and asked them to instruct their frontier officers to try and elicit facts from a person coming from Afghanistan. The British Intelligence Corps was keenly focused on identifying the specific areas of armaments where intelligence was most needed.

- i. Rifles: Number stored in magazines rounds in Kabul, their class and conditions.
- ii. Number manufactured yearly.

- iii. Number of Beech-loaders issued to regiments.
- iv. How far is the smokeless powder made by Martin at Kabul utilized for loading cartridges?
- v. Artillery: What is the number of guns manufactured annually at Kabul, and of what kind are they?
- vi. The number of 75 M.M.Q.F guns made in Kabul on the pattern of the one presented by the officers of the Durand Mission.
- vii. Classes of shell manufactured, whether shrapnel is used or only common shell?
- viii. How far have modern guns imported from Europe?
- ix. Drill, Discipline and Organization: - General Description of the state of the Army.
- x. Have any forces been so raised, and are they trained at all, or are they only to be called out when wanted?
- xi. Transport and Commissariat: - Whether any arrangements at all have been made in this respect?
- xii. What is the use of transport carts?
- xiii. Communications: A list of the routes on which information is required can be prepared by the Intelligence Branch.
- xiv. Garrisons: Details of all Garrisons of Afghanistan with their equipment and armaments. (Foreign Department, Frontier Branch, 1891–1903, File No. 8, p. 6).

The Intelligence Department are quite right in deploring the Britishers' present state of ignorance about military matters and preparations in Afghanistan they do not know how to extract the unearthly information which the department direly needs. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and later Viceroy Lord Curzon gives some hints about what are the leading factors in the case of extracting secret information. He points out that three major sources could be procured at Kabul. Those are: -

2.1.1 British Agents: Though Curzon was skeptical about this source still it would be top of the list. But he warned that not much is to be expected, the fine soldier who acts as an agent is entirely surrounded by spies. Every person who enters his house is marked down, and people are forbidden to converse with his men in the bazaars, a good deal of the information that is given to him, or that was given to his predecessors is connected to advance by the Amir and full of lies. The agent's only trustworthy sources of information are the few friends whom he may make among the Afghan officers or Sardars.

2.1.2 Corrupt 'native' officials: Curzon emphasizes that unscrupulous Native Officials could be one of the most information sources for that information. Curzon's system of espionage is so perfect that the results of detection are so appalling that venal as the Afghans are few, he had almost said nothing, would be found to run the risk. Possibly within a year couple of Afghan people were put to death with horrible torture on the suspicion of being British Spies. Curzon also mentioned that the information would have to be written down on paper or communicated by word of mouth. No opportunity ever presents itself of doing the latter.

2.1.3 European Employees in the Service of the Amir: This is the only practicable source as mentioned by Curzon. These employees are of two classes, - a) Mr. Frank Martin b) Artificers employed in the works. Mr. Martin's information would be invaluable as regards the works. He could give the department the daily, weekly, or monthly outturn of guns, rifles, ammunition, and cartridges. As regards the European employees lies the best chance of success. So, Curzon judged that the European employees were the only way to extract the information. (Ibid)

2.2 Strategic Armament and Military Prudence in the Buffer State:

The information extracted through espionage by various sources like British agents, corrupt Indian officials, European employees and the Foreign Office Cypher Code.

2.2.1 Armament of Afghan Troops: It was generally accepted that Afghan troops were equipped with

breech-loading rifles, and quick-firing guns were available in their arsenal by November 1894. These weapons were stored in the walls of numerous rooms, well-oiled and in good condition.

2.2.2 Disposition towards Armament: The Amir was asked why he did not issue superior arms to his troops more broadly, but he expressed concerns over potential mutinies, citing past experiences, specifically the mutiny of Ishak Khan.

2.2.3 Production of Artillery: During the visitor's review, the Afghan gun factory reportedly produced 48 field guns annually, including Hotchkiss, Gardner, Maxim, and English rifled 7-pounders.

2.2.4 Operational Capability: There were doubts about whether the Afghan artillery could effectively operate these guns. There were occasions when guns were tested, and some even exploded, raising questions about the reliability and training associated with these artillery pieces.

2.2.5 Rifle Factory Output: In 1894, the rifle factory in Kabul was producing about 10 completed rifles daily and between 6,000 to 7,000 solid-drawn Martini cartridges.

2.2.6 Importation of Arms: It was noted that since Amir's reign, Afghanistan had imported large quantities of magazine rifles and ammunition, including Lee-Enfield and items from Boxer Siders. However, it was mentioned that these advanced weapons were seldom distributed to the troops, possibly to avoid chaos in case of rapid mobilization against either the Russians or the British. (Ibid)

2.3 British Expeditions in the North Western Frontier

Based on the intelligence information regarding Afghanistan's armament and strategic practices, several British expeditions were planned and executed to the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) region right after the Durand incident to the eve of the Great War. These missions aimed to assess and counter the evolving military capabilities and potential threats posed by Afghan forces in this strategically critical area.

2.3.1 Chitral Expedition (1895): The Chitral Expedition was a para-military expedition in 1895 sent by the British authorities to allay the fort at Chitral, which was under siege after a local victory following the death of the old ruler. An intervening British force of about 400-500 men was besieged in the fort until it was alleviated by two expeditions, a small one from Gilgit and a massive one from Peshawar. (Hopkirk, 1990)

2.3.2 Tochi Valley Expedition (1897): The Tochi Expedition was a retributive expedition by Anglo-Indian troops to the Tochi Valley, Waziristan in 1897 to suppress a rebellion there. The rebellion was initiated with an attack by the 'Madda Khel' section of the Waziris in 1897. The Tochi Valley troops were assembled in response commanded by General Corrie Bird and the 1st Brigade under the command of Brigadier-General Charles Egerton. The rebellion was finally suppressed in late 1897. (*The Tochi trouble*, 1897).

2.3.3 Siege Of Malakand (1897): The blockade of the British garrison in the North West Frontier Province of colonial British India's Malakand region from July 26 to August 2, 1897, was known as the Siege of Malakand. The Durand Line, the 1,519-mile (2,445-kilometer) border between Afghanistan and British India that was established after the Anglo-Afghan wars to help prevent what the British always feared was the Russian Empire's expansion of influence towards the Indian subcontinent, presented the British with a force of Pashtun tribesmen whose tribal lands had been cut off. Saidullah, a Pashtun commander, rose to prominence as a result of the turmoil brought about by this split of Pashtun territory in Afghanistan. He commanded an army of at least 10,000 tribesmen from the regional Yusufzai, Mohmand, Uthmankhel, Bunerwal, and Swati tribes, among others, against the British forces in Malakand. Both the small garrison at the camp of Malakand South and the small fort at Chakdara managed to hold out against the considerably

larger Pashtun army for six days, despite the British men being spread across several poorly defended sites. When General William Hope Meiklejohn, commander of the British forces at Malakand South, received assistance from a relieving column sent from British positions to the south, the blockade was lifted. Accompanying this relief force was Second Lieutenant and later PM of Britain Winston Churchill, who published his account as '*The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*'. (Beattie, 2002)

2.3.4 Operations of the Buner Field Force (1897–1898): The operations of the British Buner Field Force in the North-West Frontier Province from 1897-1898 were a repressive response from the British authorities to the rebellion of the Bunerwal tribe, Swati tribe, the Afridi tribe, the Jadoon, the Yusufzai additionally residue of the Hindustanis. The "God-intoxicated" Sartor Faqir also joined the Buner District uprising. (India. Foreign and Political Department, 1909).

2.3.5 Tirah Campaign (1897-1898): The Tirah campaign, frequently referred to in contemporary British accounts as the Tirah expedition, was a British-Indian frontier expedition from late 1897 to 1898. Tirah is a mountainous zone of the country in what was earlier known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. (Churchill & Gilbert, 1967)

2.3.6 Mahsud Waziri Blockade (1900): A British effort against the Mahsud under the British Raj was known as the Mahsud Waziri Blockade. On December 1, 1900, there was a passive siege. Major General Charles Egerton commanded the British soldiers. On November 23, 1901, the "most intense" phase of warfare started. Every several weeks, mobile columns based in Datta Khel, Jandola, Sarwakai, and Wana stormed the Mahsud area, capturing livestock, capturing Mahsud members, and slaughtering a lot of people. In the end, the Mahsud gave up on March 10, 1902. (Alikuzai, 2013)

2.3.7 Bazar Valley Campaign (1908): The Zakka Khel clan of the Afridi, a Pakhtun tribe that lives in the mountain regions on the Peshawar boundary of the North West Frontier province of British India, was the target of another repressive expedition in 1908, the Bazar Valley campaign. The Bazar Valley Field Force, commanded by General Sir James Willcocks, invaded it. The campaign started on February 12, 1908, and ended in March of the same year with a jirga and peace. The campaign was known as Willcocks' Weekend War by the magazine Punch, which was ironic. The 37th Lancers and the Seaforth Highlanders were the principal forces of the British Army. Sections of the 45th and 53rd Sikhs, the Madras Soldiers, and the 5 Gorkha Rifles were among the British Indian Army regiments. (Hewlett, 1908)

2.4. Establishment of the Indian Intelligence Corps core: The Durand demarcation made the situation so suspicious that the Foreign Department needed some institutionalized intelligence efforts to analyze and sabotage the threats. According to Lieutenant Colonel Malleson during his tour of Khyber Road, he noticed there were several arms trafficking among the tribesmen. He quotes;" I have myself seen specimens of the latest pattern short magazine rifles in the hands of the tribesman, which sold apparently around Nine Hundred rupees a piece". ((Foreign Department, Frontier Branch, Confidential B (1907), File No-8, Page-8-9)."One arms dealer also offers him some rifles and ammunition for only a few hundred rupees. This made it seem clear that the arms market in the Northwestern tribes was enormous. Apart from that the Russian aggression after the Durand Line was gradually Intriguing. The British administrators are so fearful that they want to secure N.W.F.P. anyhow. The Commander-In-Chief considered the existing system under which i) The collection of Intelligence is carried on in times of peace, and ii) The measures which ought to be adopted in order to amplify it in times of war. His Excellency would point out that for the purposes of a war with Russia, which is what all of the British administration's major preparations have in view, it is probable that the policy of leaving intelligence work so largely in local civilians' hands might very well prove disastrous. In the first place, the informers of the political service are entirely ignorant of military matters, their special function during peacetime being to bring in the news of purely political concern. To trust such men for useful information regarding roads, the number of enemy forces, supplies, and so on, for

all of which skilled and carefully trained observers are necessary. He would further point out that the peacetime personnel of political service merely exploit the fringe of the borderland. For example, In Afghanistan itself the sole agents of the foreign office are i) an envoy at Kabul, ii) a news-writer at Kandahar and iii) a news-writer at Herat. The first would be withdrawn if British hostilities were with the Amir and the other two are both very far from the all-important theatre of warfare. The Commander-In-Chief's view is in a war with Russia they should soon have marched beyond the narrow zone in which alone the political officers possess an organized system of intelligence and that once beyond that zone to depend on their organization for intelligence to the extent which has obtained in the past and which has up to now been apparently contemplated for the future might quite conceivably prove disastrous. To remedy this unsatisfactory state of affairs and to allow obtaining the trans-frontier information the Commander-In-Chief recommended a nucleus of an Intelligence Corps need to be consisting as a beginning off--

- British Officer
- Native Officer
- Native Non-Commissioned Officer

These would be attached to the guides, the officer commanding which corps would be not less than 30 trans-border races such as Ghilzais, Taziks, Persians, Turkomans, Uzbeks, and natives of Bokhara, Badakhshan, and Afghan-Turkestan. The fighting strength of the guides would not thus be reduced, since it is proposed always to keep them employed in collecting information and penetrating into little known district. The Adjunct General of India, Major A.A. Pearson put pressure on the foreign department as he realized that it was of vital importance because of the great preparations of Russia and formidable armaments of Afghanistan, to start without delay with some practical organization at that time not exist in the military sense. (Foreign Department, Frontier Branch, Confidential B (1905), File no-65/66, Page-17-18)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite British intelligence efforts and numerous military expeditions between 1893 and 1913, the North-Western Frontier remained a volatile and unstable region. The creation of the Durand Line, while aimed at securing a buffer zone against Russian expansion, increased tribal tensions and fragmented the Pashtun population, powering up resistance to British rule. The intelligence gathered on Afghanistan's armaments and military capabilities provided some strategic insights, but the British often failed to fully utilize this information due to operational challenges, limited trust in local informants, and the complex tribal dynamics of the region. The British Intelligence was not so prudent in this turbulent period to secure the NWFP zone.

The establishment of the Indian Intelligence Corps in 1905 marked an attempt to formalize intelligence efforts, yet these measures were insufficient to end unrest. The persistent threat of Russian influence, combined with internal tribal uprisings, eventually forced the British to recognize Afghanistan's autonomy through the 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi. The geopolitical tensions of the 'Great Game', alongside domestic unrest, signaled the decline of British influence in the region, marking a turning point in the history of British India's frontier policies.

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