

The Causes of the First Anglo-Afghan War

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Afghanistan is a beautiful, but savage and hostile country. There are no resources, no huge market for selling goods and the inhabitants are poor. So the obvious question is: Why did this country become a target of aggression of the biggest powers in the world? I would like to answer this question at least in the first case, when Great Britain invaded Afghanistan in 1839. This year is important; it started the line of conflicts, which affected Afghanistan in the 19th and 20th century and as we can see now, American soldiers are still in Afghanistan, the conflicts have not yet ended.

The history of Afghanistan as an independent country starts in the middle of the 18th century. The first and for a long time the last man, who united the biggest centres of power in Afghanistan (Kandahar, Herat and Kabul) was the commander of Afghan cavalrymen in the Persian Army, Ahmad Shah Durrani. He took advantage of the struggle of succession after the death of Nāder Shāh Afshār, and until 1750, he ruled over all of Afghanistan.¹ His power depended on the money he could give to not so loyal chieftains of many Afghan tribes, which he gained through aggression toward India and Persia. After his death, the power of the house of Durrani started to decrease. His heirs were not able to keep the power without raids into other countries. In addition the ruler usually had wives from all of the important tribes, so after the death of the Shah, there were always bloody fights of succession. There is actually one important descendant of Ahmad Khan: Shah Shuja Durrani. He was the first Afghan Shah, who accepted the British mission into his country. The British envoy, Montstuart Elphinstone, came to Peshawar in 1809.² The good results of their negotiations were destroyed due to the removal of Shah Shuja from the Afghan throne by his brother, Mahmud Shah Durrani. However there was one important result. Shah Shuja was rather untypically taken under the wings of the East India Company and given a residential house in Ludhiana. He played a huge role in future events.

The reason why Great Britain started to be concerned about affairs in Central Asia was the Napoleonic wars.³ Britain saw the Treaties

¹ See more P. ZADEH-MOJTAHED, *Small Players of the Great Game. The Settlements of Iran's Eastern Borderlands and the Creation of Afghanistan*, London 2004.

² L. M. RUNION, *The History of Afghanistan*, Westport 2007, p. 74.

³ See more C. FOWLER, *Chasing Tales. Travel Writing, Journalism and the History of British Ideas about Afghanistan*, New York 2007.

of Tilsit as a threat to the security of India and started to negotiate treaties with all their neighbours. Instead of the already mentioned discussion with the Afghan Shah, British also came to Sindh, Persia and Sikh Empire. Negotiation with Sindh took place in 1808; the first negotiation broke down, but second expedition returned with a clause of eternal friendship and a promise of emirs: that no French will be let into their country. Negotiations were also in motion in Persia. The first envoy, Sir John Malcolm, did not succeed, but the second one, Sir Hartford Jones, negotiated the British-Persian Treaty on 12th March. The Treaty contained several articles, but the most important for our subject were those about Afghanistan and foreign policy. Persia undertook to not let any foreign army go into their territory and to help India in case of any threat. Britain promised material and financial help in case of a defensive war, and in the 9th article to not interfere with the conflict between Afghanistan and Persia. This promise was especially important, because for almost the whole first half of the 19th century, Britain tried to omit it from the treaty. The last treaty was signed in Lahore, the capital city of the Sikh Empire. The British envoy, Charles Metcalfe, met here with the Sikh Maharajah, Ranjit Singh, and they signed an allied treaty, which set the border between India and the Sikh Empire on the Sutlej River and was the base of long term friendship between those powers.

In 1813, British representatives mediated the Peace of Gulistan. The peace agreement ended nine years of war between Russia and Persia. Britain was in a tricky situation. Because of the Napoleonic wars, Britain financially supported Russia and because of the treaty of 1809, it had to support Persia too, so it was in their interest to end this war. Britain also wanted to prevent conflicts between Russia and Persia in the future. The instrument for this goal was the treaty of 25th December 1814.⁴ Britain had to keep some articles from the treaty of 1809 including the unwanted 9th article. London also promised £150,000 for equipment and training soldiers in case of proven aggression against Persia. The Persian Shah claimed to try to convince the other Central Asian countries to join their commitment of not letting foreign armies into their country.

The situation inside Afghanistan did not indicate any danger for India. After the dethroning of Shah, Shuja Durrani took over the initiative of a tribe called Barakzais. Mahmud Shah was forced to retreat to Herat. The main power was moved into the hands of Barakzai vizier Futeh Khan. Futeh was in charge of Kabul until 1818, when he was as-

⁴ See more E. INGRAM, *Britain's Persian Connection, 1798–1828: Prelude to the Great Game in Asia*, Clarendon Press 1992.

sassinated by Sadozais in revenge for a raid of his son, Dost Mohammad Khan, on Herat. This event started a civil war in Afghanistan. Ranjit Singh took advantage of it and from 1818 to 1819 he occupied the Multan province, containing Kashmir, Jammu, and most importantly, Peshawar. This town had huge economical and historical value for Afghan monarchs. The majority of inhabitants were Pakhtuns (ethnic “Afghans”). The civil war ended in the 1826, when the inner fight between the Barakzai chieftains was decidedly won by Dost Mohammad Chan. Victorian historians usually valued his moral character highly. But contemporary historians are not so positive about his character. He gained the power “*partly through his own powers of leadership, partly because he was even more successful at intrigue and treachery than his surviving brothers, partly because he had been Fateh Khan’s favourite, and partly because he was supported by the Qizilbash palace guard, his mother having belonged to one of the noble Qizilbash families which lived around Kabul.*”⁵

In the first half of the 19th century, Central Asia was a target of two main powers: Russia and Great Britain.⁶ The war between Persia and Russia from 1826 to 1828 had a big impact on their relations. Russia took advantage of a doubtful article in the Treaty of Gulistan and annexed Gokcha. Persia took it as *cassus belli* and wanted to attack Russia. Persia wanted to use the Decembrist Revolt as an advantage. The British saw this conflict as Persian aggression and did not help, in accordance with the agreement of 1814. Persia lost the war, which resulted in a very catastrophic peace of Turkmenchay. The policy of foreign secretary Lord Canning in this case was a target of major criticism by the Duke of Wellington and Lord Ellenborough.⁷ Ellenborough warned the government that this treaty would cause an increase of Russian influence on Persia. Charles Metcalfe had similar thoughts: “*were we ever to expect any essential aid from Persia, in the time of our own need, we should most assuredly find ourselves miserably deceived and disappointed. If ever Russia be in the condition to set forth army against India, Persia most probably will be under her banners.*”⁸

Problems were also caused by the uncertain leadership in foreign policy of British India. There were two major institutions: The “East

⁵ T. A. HEATHCOTE, *Afghan Wars 1839–1919*, Spellmount 1980, p. 11.

⁶ See more P. HOPKIRK, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*, Oxford 1990.

⁷ C. W. CRAWLEY, *Anglo-Russian Relations 1815–40*, in: *Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1929, pp. 47–73.

⁸ J. A. NORRIS, *The First Afghan War 1838–1842*, Cambridge University Press 1967, pp. 23–42.

India Company” and the Foreign Office, and neither of them were clearly in the front. Both offices were sending their own envoys and in many cases enforced different policies. Russian expansion also did not threaten only Persia, but the Osman Empire was in danger, too. The Duke of Wellington even said: “*All parties in Europe must view this Treaty of Peace in the same light as we do. They may not have such reasons as we may have to look with jealousy and anxiety at its consequences; but they must all consider it in the same light as the death blow to the independence of the Ottoman Porte, and the forerunner of the dissolution and extinction of its power.*”⁹ Lord Ellenborough saw the problem similarly. The book by Colonel Lacy Evans *On the Practicability of an Invasion of British India*, which was describing the possibilities of Russian progress through Central Asia to India, had a big influence, too. He quotes many important men in his book, for example Sir John Malcolm: “*The frontier of the Indus is the most vulnerable part of our Eastern Empire.*”¹⁰ This danger was rather illusory and even British politicians were aware of it; but they were worried about the possible approach of foreign forces near Indian borders. According to Sir John Malcolm, this presence could lead to “*danger and incitement to riot*”¹¹ in British India. This reality would have had unwanted consequences, such as the necessity to increase the amount of soldiers allocated in British India for its potential defence. This would lead to the reduction of the profit that the East India Company received from India.

Wellington’s government tried to push Russia as far from India as possible. The main instrument for achieving this goal was the commercial influence. All diplomatic journeys in Central Asia were declared as trade opening. The primary aim of the policy of Lord Ellenborough during his two years in office at Board of Control was the expansion of British trade throughout Indus. After the fall of Wellington’s government, the new president of the Board of Control (Charles Grant) continued in this policy. It was even more peaceful; the new Governor-general of India Lord Bentinck was not to go into any military actions including cases, where negotiations broke down.

In 1830, a young British officer, Alexander Burnes, took off on an expedition. Burnes was not a very experienced diplomat, so the expedition was without much success, but it laid the bases for the next, more experienced, envoy of Henry Pottinger. Both diplomats were very im-

⁹ Ibidem, p. 27.

¹⁰ EVANS, De Lacy, *On the Practicability of an Invasion of British India*, London 1829.

¹¹ M. A. YAPP, *British Perception of Russian Threat to India*, in: *Modern Asia Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1987, p. 658.

portant in our story. Henry Pottinger succeeded, thanks to his decisive attitude and to stressing dangers like ambitions of Sikh Empire or Afghan ruler, Dost Mohammad Khan. Nevertheless, the first visit of Henry Pottinger did not bring any concrete result; however his second visit in January 1832 ended up in a commercial treaty. Emirs agreed not to interrupt British trade on Indus, with the exception of military material. Britain wanted to settle British resident into the biggest and capital-type city of Sindh, Hyderabad, but they did not succeed in this demand, due Emir's fear of losing independence.

In January 1832, Alexander Burnes started his second journey. His final destination was Bokhara, but his first stop was Kabul. He arrived at the biggest city of Afghanistan on 1st May 1832.¹² The behaviour of Dost Mohammad Khan was excellent and Alexander Burnes quickly started to feel sympathetic toward him. Burnes wrote later about their first dinner: "*The conversation of the evening was varied, and embraced such a number of topics, that I found it difficult to detail them; such was the knowledge, intelligence, and curiosity that the chief displayed.*"¹³ The opinion of Alexander Burnes is probably the main reason why Dost Mohammad Khan has such a big moral credit in the historical literature of the 19th century. It has to be said that the motivation for this behaviour was not without self-interest. Dost Mohammad Khan wanted to convince Britain to help him against the Sikh empire with his ambition to get Peshawar back. Burnes had visited the British candidate for the Afghan throne, Shuja Durrani, some months earlier and thought that Dost would be a much better ruler for British interests. His plan was simple. He proposed to wait for the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and then make an alliance with Dost Mohammad Khan, who he hoped would cooperate with the British in an expansion of trade along Indus and the pacification of frontier areas of British India. Burnes continued to Bokhara after his departure from Kabul. He arrived to Bokhara in June 1832. His main instruction was to discover the extent of Russian trade in Bokhara. Burnes tried to contact Emir of Bokhara, but the guards did not let him into the palace, because did not have a diplomatic status. His message for the Indian government about Russian trade involved describing certain spheres where Britain could succeed. The Russian position in metals was ironclad; Burnes saw the possibilities to get on in trade with manufactured goods and cotton. As a last part of his journey, Burnes visited Persia, where he met the crown-prince and Shah. On 18th January 1833, he headed back to India.

¹² A. BURNES, *Travels into Bokhara*, London 1834, p. 130.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja Durrani started to draw outlines of their future alliance in March 1833. Negotiations were not difficult; their interests were very similar. They signed the treaty on 12th March 1833. Ranjit promised to help Shuja with restoration, and on the other hand Shuja promised to officially admit Sikh sovereignty over the already occupied lands of Punjab (Peshawar, Kashmir etc.). Shuja wanted to gain British support, but because of instructions from London, Governor-General Lord Bentinck could not intervene.

Another power invaded Afghanistan before Shuja, along with Ranjit, could even start. Persian Shah, Mohammad Mirza, tried to fulfil his ambition to take control of Herat. Britain was not very pleased, but could not do anything because of the 9th article of the treaty of 1814. Britain wanted to come to an understanding with Russia. Foreign secretary Lord Palmerston made an arrangement with Russian Foreign Minister, Count Nesselrode, in which they agreed to try to end the conflict with diplomatic negotiations. In the end, it was not necessary. Mohammad Mirza had to return to Teheran because of the death of his father, Abbas Mirza, and because of a fight of succession that was beginning.

In the beginning of the year 1834, the plans of Ranjit and Shuja finally came to be. The army of the ex-emir started its march into the depths of Afghan country in January; a force of approximately 22,000 men.¹⁴ After a slight complication with the wild tribes of Sindh, the army fought a battle near Rohri on 9th January 1834. Shuja won and could march towards Kandahar. Fights continued for several months; the decisive battle took place on 2nd July 1834, near Kandahar. Shuja stood against the Barakzai brothers, who ruled Kandahar (the most important of them was Kohaldir Khan). Dost Mohammad Khan was also present; it was quite surprising because the Barakzai brothers had not had very harmonic relations so far. For the moment their alliance celebrated victory, but conflicts inside the family were imminent after the battle, when Kohaldir denied Dost access to the city. Nevertheless, Dost gained even more influence in Kabul. Local religious leaders awarded his efforts with new titles: “*Commander of the Faithful*” or “*Commander of the Champions of the Islam*”.¹⁵ Not everything was good for the Afghan ruler at the moment. Ranjit didn’t want to give up his promised gains and sent his best general, Hari Singh, to conquer Peshawar. He had had a huge influence on city’s inner politics since 1819, but the formal ruler was still member of the Barakzai family, Sultan Mohammad Khan. Hari Singh drove him out of the city.

¹⁴ A. MOHAMMED, *The Mohamedzai Dynasty*, Kabul 1959, p. 12.

¹⁵ M. LAL, *Life of the Ameer Dost Mahomed Khan*, London 1846, p. 169.

Dost Mohammad Khan wanted to use this as *cassus belli* and allied with Sultan Mohammad Khan with the goal of re-conquering Peshawar. This alliance was even more surprising than the one with Kohaldir Mohammad Khan, because the relationship between Dost Mohammad Khan and Sultan Mohammad Khan was very unfriendly. However this time they had common interests. In the beginning of the year 1835 they tried to march towards Peshawar. Unfortunately for Dost Mohammad Khan, the Sikhs managed to convince Sultan Mohammad Khan to give up his plans and betray the ruler of Kabul. They promised him his possessions in Punjab and a safe place to live. The plans of Dost Mohammad Khan failed, so he had to find another way to fulfil the ultimate goal of his foreign policy: Peshawar.

On the 29th of April the government changed again in Great Britain. Whigs won the election and their leader, Lord Melbourne, became Prime Minister. Lord Palmerston maintained the Foreign Office despite a slight resistance from the Prime Minister. Lord Hobhouse took charge of the Board of Control. He had to decide who would be the next Governor-General. Before the final election Charles Metcalfe took over the office as temporary governor. The exiting Governor Lord Bentinck wrote a very long memorandum about the situation in India. He was aware of a possible attack of Russian-Persian alliance; he was not concerned about direct a Russian attack, but saw the danger in Persian ambitions towards Herat. He also predicted possible problems with the Sikhs in case of the death of Ranjit Singh.

The Primary goal of the new government was a reduction of Russian influence in Persia. The newly appointed British envoy in Teheran, Henry Ellis, was told by Palmerston to warn the Shah about any attempts to take control of Herat. Palmerston was sure that a Persian attack would have negative consequences for Britain: "*Whether Persia is successful or not, her resources will be wasted in these wars, and her future means of defence against the attacks of Russia must be diminished.*"¹⁶ Losing the war could result in Persia's political dependence on Russia.

In July 1835, the office of Governor-General of India was offered to former First Lord of Admiralty, Lord Auckland. He had many experiences with politics; he was the President of the Board of Trade or "Master of the Mint". However colonial administration was new to him. His appointment probably had its roots in the fact that "*Melbourne, Palmerston, Auckland and Hobhouse formed a very tight little group within the Whig party.*"¹⁷ Auckland accepted the offer and set out to India in Sep-

¹⁶ NORRIS, p. 77.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 78.

tember. His farewell speech was quite promising. He said that he “looked with exultation to the new prospects opening before him, affording him an opportunity of doing good to his fellow-creatures—of promoting education and knowledge – of improving the administration of justice in India – of extending the blessing of good government and happiness to millions in India.”¹⁸

After his arrival to India, Auckland was a little confused so he needed the help from the exiting Governor Charles Metcalfe very much. Metcalfe’s influence on Auckland’s decisions was big. The negotiations run by Henry Ellis and John McNeill continued in Teheran.¹⁹ Both tried to convince the Shah not to attack Teheran, but their effort was constantly thwarted by the activity of Count Simonich, the unofficial Russian envoy in Teheran.

At the end of May 1836, Palmerston received alarming messages from Teheran. Within the messages, Henry Ellis announced the arrival of Afghan envoys from Dost Mohammad Khan.²⁰ This diplomatic expedition had a simple goal: to get Persian support against the Sikh Empire in exchange for support of Kabul against Herat. Fortunately for Britain Ellis was able to convince the envoys to go back to Kabul without any contracts; but within the following month the next diplomatic expedition arrived from Kandahar. The result was the same. If Henry Ellis were to be ignored, the Afghan envoys were afraid of British aggression in response. Henry Ellis ended his service in Teheran in the summer of 1836 and was replaced by John McNeill. McNeill had special competences; unlike Ellis, he was not under the authority of the Indian Governor-General, but reported directly to Foreign Office in London. His main goal was to erase Article 9 in the British-Persian Treaty of 1809 or 1814.

Negotiations were going on in India, as well. Auckland was trying to endure the long-term concept “Balance of Power”. He warned the Sikh Empire not to adopt an aggressive foreign policy, particularly against Sindh. In correspondence with Dost Mohammad Khan, Auckland adopted tactics of no promises and remained strict on the policy of only business treaties. Three missions to neighbouring countries would resolve this complicated situation.

The first mission was directed at the lands behind Indus and was led by Alexander Burnes. The second one had its goal in Sindh, where experienced diplomat Henry Pottinger would achieve some good results.

¹⁸ W. KAYE, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. 1, London 1857, p. 162.

¹⁹ See more E. INGRAM, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775–1842*, London 1984.

²⁰ HEATHCOTE, p. 18.

Last one was led by Claude Wade and would ensure the continued alliance with Ranjit Singh.

The mission to Sindh had one primary goal: enforce the foundation of British residence in Hyderabad. Henry Pottinger was instructed to use the intervention in favour of Sindh which Auckland made in Lahore. The secondary goal was the expansion of British trade along the Indus. A big opponent of this policy was Charles Metcalfe: *“I lament the course which you have determined to pursue, for what is now done is but a beginning. We are, I fear, about to plunge into a labyrinth of intervenes from which I fear we shall never be able to extricate ourselves. I cannot perceive any object worth the risk of the possible consequences of this change in our policy, and this departure from that pacific system which was essential for the establishment of our political strength and financial prosperity.”*²¹ Metcalfe was convinced that Auckland should have left the Sindh to Sikh empire and with this decision he had shown his gratitude for a smooth alliance with Ranjit. Auckland answer was very complex: *“You almost frighten me with your black prognosis. I am far from enthusiast upon the subject of the Indus, nor do I dream golden dreams of it, or think it the factorum of India as some in England do. But it may grow into Commercial importance. Its navigation is an avowed British project. I have been moved to secure it and money and pains are spending and have been spent for it. It is true that this one may lead us further than we either wish or foresee, but the most passive policy is not always the most pacific; and another course might have led to evils even more formidable. In all this you will differ from me and I deeply lament it, and whenever you do so I must doubt whether I am in the right. But whether I am in the right or wrong it is little good in politics to be long looking back on footsteps that are passed. Our thoughts must be given to where we may step in advance with most firmness and prudence, and a very few days will enable me to see our way more clearly.”*²² The letter shows without any doubts that Auckland hived off Metcalfe in this time.

On 17th November 1836, Ranjit Singh finally yielded and definitively gave up the idea of military progress to Sindh. The main cause of this action was, without a doubt, British pressure. It should be said that this pressure was in a friendly atmosphere and did not harm the relationship between the countries. The problem was that Ranjit’s withdrawal bound Britain to orientate her politics to the Sikh Empire and against Afghanistan.

²¹ NORRIS, pp. 96–97.

²² Ibidem, p. 98.

Negotiations on Persia were not so successful. Persians did not want to give up expansion to Herat and for British diplomacy it was still harder and harder to discourage Shah from his expansion. McNeill did everything he could and was instructed to leave Teheran in case of Persian attack on Herat.

Meanwhile, Alexander Burnes started his journey to Kabul. By his own words: “*On the 26th of November we sailed from Bombay, and sighting the fine palace at Mándivee, on the 6th of December, we finally landed in Sindh on 13th of the month.*”²³

The activities of Count Simonich became even more dangerous for British interests in the beginning of 1837. In January, Palmerston wrote the letter to the British envoy in St. Petersburg Earl Dunham: “*I have to instruct your Excellency to ask Count Nesselrode whether Count Simonich is acting according to his instructions in thus urging the shah to pursue a line of conduct so diametrically opposed to His Persian Majesty’s real interests.*”²⁴ Nesselrode replied that the British did not have the right information because Count Simonich certainly did not undertake these steps. By the end of February 1837, Durham was assured that Simonich would be called away. From our perspective it is quite sure that this move was a cloaking manoeuvre. Nesselrode printed a transcription of his discussions with the Shah, where Simonich spoke against plans to conquer Herat; however after three months Count Simonich was one of the Russian officers who accompanied the Shah’s army to Herat.

Meanwhile, McNeill sent a memorandum which arrived in Calcutta at the end of March and to London at the end of April. He wrote that the main problem was the decision between two main tribes (Sadozais and Barakzais) of Afghanistan, but he saw the main goal as the unification of Afghanistan.²⁵ McNeill’s opinions were very important for his officials both in India and London, but in London his influence was more visible. Auckland hoped that after possibly helping Afghanistan against Persia, there would be an option to fix relations between Afghanistan and the Sikh Empire. Auckland also had a long-term plan to build a dike of prosperous states along Indus which would, in times of danger, protect the Indian border as British allies.

Letters written in November 1836 by Auckland arrived in February 1837 which, in case negotiations failed with Persia, ordered McNeill to fall back from Teheran. McNeill wrote immediately to Palmerston

²³ A. BURNES, *Cabool: Personal Narrative of a Journey to, and Residence in that City*, London 1842, p. 1.

²⁴ NORRIS, p. 103.

²⁵ F. MACALISTER, *Memoir of the Right Honourable Sir John McNeill and his Second Wife Elisabeth Wilson*, London 1910, pp. 200–203.

arrived to McNeill: *"I doubt whether these measures proposed by Indian Government would have desired effect. I am not quite satisfied with reference to the temper and feelings of the Shah of this Court, whether it would be advisable to produce the alienation which must result from the measures proposed by the Indian Government, unless we are prepared to go further and to insure success in the object for which we resort to threats, by convincing the Persian Government that we are prepared to act as well as threaten."*²⁶

In this perspective it is important to mention that British foreign policy was divided. McNeill reported directly to the Foreign Office, but he had to follow orders from the Indian government, too. So, he always could say that orders did not coincide and do the policy he wanted. London and Calcutta were also both dependent on his messages as sources of information. Palmerston sent McNeill to Teheran because of their shared opinions on policy. They were both slightly more aggressive in foreign policy than Auckland. McNeill's plan was quite simple: help Dost Mohammad Khan unify all of Afghanistan and use his state as a wall against Russian and Persian expansion into India. This was not acceptable for Auckland because he did not want to lose the alliance with the Sikh Empire, which was very important in the strategic plans of British India.

The situation was messed up even more when Dost Mohammad Khan tried to attack Peshawar, a long-term target of Dost's foreign policy. The attack failed. The commander of the army and Dost's son Akbar Mohammad Khan won the battle of Jamrud and almost took control over Peshawar. However lack of proper logistics prevented this achievement and the armies had to withdraw. This episode was very important. From then on, every contact with Kabul was quite risky in perspective of the relation between the British Empire and the Sikhs. And relations with Sikhs were crucial for the defence of India. Auckland had the same opinion as that which was articulated by the Commander in Chief of Indian Army, Henry Fane, almost a year before these events: *"A case could hardly occur which would render it wise for us to overturn the Sikh power, or to over-run the Punjab, or to extend ourselves to the Westward... Every advance you might make beyond Sutlej to the Westward, in my opinion adds to your military weakness. If you want your empire to expand, expand it over Oude or over Gwalior, and the remains of Maratha Empire. Make yourselves complete sovereigns of all within your bounds but let alone Far West."*

Meanwhile, Alexander Burnes got closer to Kabul and received complete instructions, from William Macnaghten. The mission was offi-

²⁶ NORRIS, p. 107.

cially declared to be strictly commercial.²⁷ However, Burnes was told not to give any direct answers to questions from the Emir. He also was instructed to try to conciliate relations between the Sikhs and Kabul and “*observe the general feelings towards the British and Russian Governments.*”²⁸ Before he had received these instructions, he had heard about the battle of Jamrud. It gave him the idea to suggest offering Peshawar to Dost in exchange for an increase of British influence in this area and military assistance against Persia. These ideas were very close to the thoughts of John McNeill but not to the thoughts of Burnes’s main superior, Lord Auckland. Auckland valued more highly the alliance with the Sikhs than a possible improvement of relations with Kabul.

In June 1837, Herat’s government sent an offer of very favourable peace to the Persian Shah, but he refused it. McNeill wrote immediately to Palmerston that diplomacy was failing and that it was inevitable that something more aggressive would need to be done. McNeill asked Auckland to submit a warning as the highest political authority in the area, but it was too late. On 23rd June 1837, the march of the Persian army in the direction of Herat started. The Russians officially dissociated from this move; Nesselrode sent Palmerston a dispatch from Simonich, where the Count apologized that he was not able to discourage the Shah from his expansion into Herat. It was a lie, but this correspondence between both ministers improved their relations concerning Afghanistan slightly.

Burnes’s mission was now, because of the Shah’s action in Herat, even more political. In another instruction there was more emphasis put on the improvement of Sikh-Afghan relations. He also proposed that the Peshawar could be given back to Sultan Mohammad Khan if the Emir gave up his negotiations with Persia. The Herat events could serve as a good catalyst for rapprochement. Unfortunately, the first meeting was undertaken before these instructions arrived in Kabul, so Burnes had to scrape by with the old ones.

Alexander Burnes arrived in Kabul on the 20th of September 1837. His first impression of Emir was very positive and the rest of the expedition saw him similarly. As he wrote later: “*we were received with great pomp and splendour by a fine body of Afghan Cavalry, led by Ameer’s son, Akbar Khan.*”²⁹ It is obvious now that Emir wanted to provide this impression, so he prepared very well, but the expedition did not see this reality. The negotiations were very difficult; Dost Mohammad

²⁷ KAYE, p. 174.

²⁸ NORRIS, p. 113.

²⁹ BURNES, p. 140.

Khan rejected the offer of Barakzai rule in Peshawar. He wanted another Barakzai than Sultan Mohammad Khan to rule in this city. Burnes sent this information to Calcutta.

New instructions finally arrived in October. Dost was very sorry for his contacts with Persia and criticized his brothers from Kandahar who had Persian envoys at their court. The neuralgic point of the negotiation had always been Peshawar. Dost Mohammad Khan did not want his cousin, Sultan Mohammad Khan, to rule there, so the proposition from Britain was nearly unacceptable. Because of the nature of his foreign policy and situation in Afghanistan, he could not give up the effort to take this city. His one and only strategy was to convince Britain that he was a much better ally than Ranjit Singh and then capture the city with their help. So, he cooperated with Alexander Burnes extensively, but the situation became even more complicated when Russia sent their own envoy.

Burnes's good relationship with Dost Mohammad Khan can be easily illustrated by quoting his letter to Macnaghten concerning this envoy: "*Dost Mohammad Khan said that he had come for my counsel on the occasion; that he wished to have nothing to do with any other power than the British; that he did not wish to receive any agent of any power whatever so long as he had a hope of sympathy from us.*"³⁰ Lieutenant Vitkevich arrived in Kabul on the 19th December 1837. Burnes described him as "*intelligent and well informed on the subject of Northern Russia.*"³¹ The main difference between Russian and British diplomacy was simple: the Russians promised everything. The first proposal was really tempting. Vitkevich offered Russian help against the Sikhs with annual subsidies and the only thing he asked as the reward for all this was an improvement in relations. Meanwhile, the Barakzai brothers in Kandahar continued with their contacts with Persia. They sent the son of one of the most prominent Barakzais in the city to negotiate in Teheran. Burnes panicked and sent an offer of money and personal assistance in case of an attack on Kandahar. In addition, he sent Lieutenant Leech to try to negotiate with local the Sirdars in ending their contacts with Persia. He probably knew that he was contravening his competences. His defence was easy, he argued that there was no time: "*In the critical position in which I was situated I saw no course left but that which I have followed. My belief is that Herat may withstand the attack of the Persian, but if not, and the Shah marches to Kandahar, our own position in the East becomes endangered, and the tranquillity of all the countries that border*

³⁰ KAYE, p. 188.

³¹ BURNES, p. 262.

on the Indus.”³² Burnes also openly protested against the direction of Auckland’s foreign policy and tried to convince the Governor-General to adopt policy against the Sikhs and in support of the Afghans. “*Though the messenger has arrived and delivered his letters, I trust that the friendly devotion of Dost Mohammad Khan is asking in my Advice and next handing to me all the letters brought by the emissary will remain in your Lordship’s mind, as proofs of sincerity and conciliation, highly to be appreciated, and the more so as the British have as yet made no avowal of support to his power, while he has received declarations from others, the sincerity of which can no longer be questioned.*” He further spoke against an alliance with the Sikhs: “*It is undoubtedly true that we have an old and faithful ally in Maharajah Runjeet Singh, but such an alliance will not keep these powers at a distance, or secure to us what is the end of all alliances, peace and prosperity, on our country and on our frontiers. I am yet ignorant of the light in which your Lordship or Maharajah Runjeet Singh have viewed the overtures of Dost Mohammad Khan regarding Peshawar.*”³³ The influence of Dost Mohammad Khan is very evident in these letters.

These letters had to go through the Sikh Empire. The British envoy in Lahore, Claude Wade, wrote down his own opinion in his accessory letter, where he argued the course of policy which Burnes had recommended. He inclined more toward Auckland’s policy to restore Shah Shuja. Negotiations with Dost Mohammad Khan also broke down due to his exaggerated demands. His ordinary demands were well known: protection against the Sikhs and the gain of Peshawar. But he also wanted British help to gain control of Kandahar and Herat. This condition went absolutely against British interests, as Auckland saw them.³⁴

At almost the same time, Macnaghten and Colvin sent letters to Burnes, in which they criticized his unauthorized promises to Dost Mohammad Khan in the matter of Kandahar. Burnes tried to work it out, but did not succeed. He tried to play his hand the best he could. Burnes told Dost every condition he had: Emir should stop contacts with Persia and Russia; he should also send away Vitkevich and give up all his claims of Peshawar. In addition, he should respect the independence of Kandahar and Herat and try to establish better relations with his brothers. Dost Mohammad Khan surprisingly accepted his conditions but also demanded withdraw all of the Sikh army from Peshawar. The first signal that something was wrong was the unexecuted departure of Lieutenant Vit-

³² NORRIS, p. 132.

³³ Ibidem, p. 133.

³⁴ G. FREMONT-BARNES, *The Anglo-Afghan Wars*, Oxford 2009, p. 14.

kevich. Burnes described this treaty as a huge success, but he was cheering too soon. The very influential group at Kabul's court, which argued in favour of an alliance with Russia and Persia, put huge pressure on Emir. It was obvious for him too that he could not fulfil his ambition for an alliance with Britain, but he was not sure if an alliance with Russia would do the trick. Despite his doubts Emir decided to try, and he answered the letters which Vitkevich had brought a few months earlier. This action exceedingly angered Burnes. He immediately wrote to India that he would like to depart from Kabul because of the obvious failure of negotiations. Dost Mohammad did not want to lose this option, so he tried to play for time, but he did not succeed, and after a few letters between Auckland and Emir, Alexander Burnes departed on 26th April 1838.³⁵

Henry Pottinger was more successful in Sindh. He was able to sign a treaty of British residence in Hyderabad with Nuseer Mohammad and Nur Mohammad, two of the most influential emirs of Sindh.

The siege of Herat had been the thorn in the eye of British policy in central Asia for the last several months. McNeill bombarded Auckland and Palmerston with demands in a condemnatory letter against Persian action. McNeill wrote Palmerston in February 1838 to: *"This on act of interference would doubtless cause some immediate irritation, but it would cause less than would be produced by our interfering to Kandahar after Herat shall have fallen, and if we must ultimately (incur the odium of) arrest(ing) the progress of Persia in Afghanistan, it appears to me that it can be most advantageously incurred for the preservation of the whole country, including so valuable a position as Herat."*³⁶ At this time McNeill did not have any specific orders concerning his behaviour towards the Persian Shah. McNeill saw it as freedom to act so he began the journey to Herat. In April, Palmerston received a message about a Russian expedition to Orenburg and Bukhara, so he immediately wrote to McNeill to gather some information about it.

McNeill arrived at the Persian encampment on 6th April 1838. The first thing what he had to do was to write to his superiors. He repeated his opinion that the only option to rescue the alliance with Persia was to prevent their armies from capturing Herat. He also declared that he could mediate a possible negotiation between the Persian Shah and the ruler of Herat, Shah Kamran. McNeill was convinced that the Russians did not see the Herat adventure as so important to risk open hostility against Great Britain.

³⁵ HEATHCOTE, p. 21.

³⁶ NORRIS, p. 155.

The May 1838 was a very important month. Palmerston approved McNeill's mission and told him to send an envoy to Bokhara to find out what the Russians were planning for this strategically very important city. Palmerston also received very disturbing messages from the British envoy in Odessa, which contained information about Russian plans to march through Bokhara to reach Afghanistan.

In May, Auckland also established the shape of his policy. From a very careful policy of a balance of power he turned to a policy of alliance with the Sikhs and turned away from Barakzais in Afghanistan. In a memorandum from 12th May he accurately described the causes of this change. Apart from the generally praised Persian move towards the Indian border, Auckland articulated the idea that interference was inevitable, because letting Afghanistan to his faith would be an admission of total defeat. He also thought that the aid from Sikhs would be impossible when Dost Mohammad Khan was still on the throne in Kabul. Auckland definitively decided to send William Macnaghten to Lahore to negotiate a treaty with Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja. On 22nd May Auckland officially announced to the East India Company that Burnes's mission had failed and that the Indian government had started to negotiate the treaty with Ranjit and Shuja. In this letter he also mentioned the last information from Burnes about Russian progress through central Asia and noted that they contained *“unequivocal demonstrations therein noted of the extent to which Russia is carrying her system of interference on the very threshold of the British India possessions. I need not repeat my anxiety, even though the rapid march of events may oblige me to act without your instructions, to be favoured with communication of your views upon present crisis at the earliest possible opportunity.”*³⁷

Meanwhile, McNeill was trying to impact the Persian Shah in his camp near Herat, but Count Simonich was jeopardising all his efforts. He was able to persuade the Shah with promises of land and power, which he could gain from a successful siege. This problem was solved very early. Palmerston decided to deal with it without any hesitation. On 19th June 1838 a small navy army occupied Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf. The Persian Shah reacted with a hasty offensive against the still-resisting Afghan fortress of Herat. The presence of the Russian deserters led by General Isidor Borowski is very important. He attacked on 24th June 1838, but the attack did not succeed. The Shah's army got through the walls of the fortress, but was not able to gain control of the city.

In June, the negotiations with the Sikhs were under way, as well. Britain needed their help and not only militarily, but also because they

³⁷ NORRIS, p. 170.

required free passage through Punjab in case of a military expedition to Afghanistan. In retrospect, another fact is quite surprising: almost all British officials felt sure, that installation of the Shah Shuja on the Afghan throne would be very easy. However, Auckland still hesitated and doubted.

The negotiations with Ranjit Singh were led by William Macnaghten and the envoy from Kabul, Alexander Burnes. British envoy to Lahore, Claude Wade, and Shah Shuja were present too. The negotiation was not easy, but on 26th June 1838 the so called “Tripartite Treaty” was signed. This alliance was very important because it was the basis of future conflict. We should therefore quote some of the most important articles of the treaty:

“1st. Shah Shoojah-ool-Moolk disclaims all title on the part of himself, his heirs, successors, and all the Suddozyes, to whatever territories lying on either bank of the river of Indus that may be possessed by Maharajah.

4th. Regarding Shikarpore and the Territory of Sindh the Shah will agree to abide by whatever may be settled as right and proper, in conformity with happy relations of friendship subsisting between the British Government and Maharajah.

15th. Shah Shoojah ool-Moolk agrees to relinquish for himself, his heirs and successors, all claims of supremacy and arrears of tribute over the country now held by Ameers of Sindh.

17th. Shah Shoojah-ool-Moolk shall not attack or molest his nephew, the ruler of Herat.

18th. Shah Shoojah-ool-Moolk binds himself, his heirs, and successors, to refrain from entering into negotiations with any foreign state without the knowledge and consent of the British and Sikh Governments.”³⁸

Auckland sent another message to the Secret Committee of the East India Company on 13th August 1838, where he explained the reasons for closing the Tripartite treaty: *“In almost every direction we seemed to be surrounded by undisguised foes or doubtful friends. It occurred to me that a more intimate alliance between Runjeet Singh and the British Government would damp the spirit of disaffection all over India, and I deem it fortunate that a combination to the westward afforded me the means of engaging that powerful chief in a design which, while it will frustrate the views of our enemies on the other side of the Indus, must dishearten those who might have entertained secret views of hostility towards us in other quarters.”³⁹* Auckland described unification with

³⁸ KAYE, pp. 321–323.

³⁹ NORRIS, p. 201.

Ranjit as the only one possibility. The analysis of Sir Henry Fane, Commander in Chief of Indian Army, which revealed that war with the Sikhs would be very difficult, had an influence on this policy, too. In the future it was shown that he was right.

When it started to become really clear that the Persians would not be able to conquer Herat, a discussion started about the necessity of a British invasion into Afghanistan in the case of an unsuccessful siege. Auckland, however, thought that he had no other option; he saw it as a choice between passivity and action and he saw no point in passivity.

In the meantime, John McNeill left Herat and sent his representative, Colonel Charles Stoddart. When John McNeill was still at the Shah's court he got the information about Russian progress through central Asia. McNeill wrote later: "*A Russian army of from 10,000 to 15,000 men, which had been collected at Orenburg under the command of General Perowski, in anticipation of the Shah's success at Herat actually invaded Khiva.*" He saw great danger in this situation: "*By the concerned action of Russia and Persia the sovereignty of the Shah would have been established in Kandahar and Cabool as well as at Herat under the guarantee of Russia; Khiva would have become a Russian province, extending along the course of the Oxus probably to the northern slopes of the Hindoo Koosh – the British and Russian empires would then been in contact.*"⁴⁰ It's important to note, that John McNeill was the only source of information for the majority of government in London.

During August several month old messages from India arrived in London. President of the Board of Control, Hobhouse, approved the occupation of Kharg; by this action he confirmed Palmerston's action in the name of East India Company and British-Indian Government. At the end of August, the Foreign Office received the messages about McNeill's departure from Herat, about Russian intrigues during the Siege, and about Auckland's negotiations with Ranjit. After these messages, Palmerston saw the situation as follows: "*The true Measure to take would be to make a great operation in Afghanistan; to push on Runjeet Singh, send an English Corps to act with his army; to drive the Persians out of Afghanistan and to reorganise that country under one Chief; and to pay Runjeet by giving him Peshawar and Cashmeer. A good Afghan state connection with British India would make a better Barrier than Persia had been, because it would be more under our control. We should have the same kind of geographical pull upon such a state that*

⁴⁰ J. MCNEILL, *The Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East*, London 1854, p. 126.

Russia has upon Persia."⁴¹ It is clear that Palmerston agreed with Auckland's policy, and so did the government; Lord Melbourne thought that passivity was more dangerous than action.

In October some good news finally arrived. McNeill wrote about the successful negotiations of Charles Stoddart in Herat. The Shah withdrew from Herat, but the main reason was the failed attack in June. McNeill, however, appealed the the British Government to still enforce the active policy and install a new Shah on the throne in Kabul.

Palmerston was also negotiating with the Russian envoy in London, Pozzo di Borgo. Nesselrode transmitted a letter through this envoy, in which it "*was distinctly denied that any project for disturbing the British possessions in India had ever presented itself to the mind of the emperor.*"⁴² This time, however, Nesselrode actually dismissed Count Simonich from the Persian court. The withdrawal of the Russians started a bigger discussion about Afghanistan in London, but the most important people in government did not stop supporting Auckland. The most articulated problem of financial demands was keeping the Shah on the throne in Kabul. Auckland did not consider this as crucial, and he was not alone; almost all of his colleagues had the same opinion. They all believed that Shuja would be popular and there would be no problem in installing him.

The most important and most quoted document of the British campaign in Afghanistan is "Simla Manifesto". It's the document that explains the causes of the British invasion to Afghanistan. It was written by William Macnaghten, but the text is from the mind of Lord Auckland. It explains the reasons why Lord Auckland decided to go to Afghanistan. The primary reason was the impossibility of an agreement between Dost Mohammad Khan and Ranjit Singh: "*It was evident that no further interference could be exercised by the British Government to bring about a good understanding between Sikh Ruler and Dost Mohammad Khan, and the hostile policy of latter chief showed plainly that, so long as Kabul remained under his Government, we could never hope that the tranquillity of our neighbourhood would be secured.*" The second important reason was the Persian siege of Herat: "*The attack upon this city was a most unjustifiable and cruel aggression, perpetrated and continued notwithstanding the solemn repeated remonstrances of the British Envoy at the court of Persia, and after every just and becoming offer of accommoda-*

⁴¹ NORRIS, p. 209.

⁴² J. E. RITCHIE, *The Life and Times of Viscount Palmerston*, Vol. 1, London 1866, p. 566.

tion had been mad and rejected.”⁴³ His last reason was the defence of the Indian border and the desire that India would be surrounded by friendly states with no offensive thoughts. This manifesto was written exactly how the London government wanted. So, the real main reason: the progress of Russia through central Asia, was withheld and the Persian threat was exaggerated. It is possible to say that the Palmerston agreement with the manifesto started the war.

The war itself went well for Britain in the beginning. Britain conquered all of Afghanistan in half a year, but then problems began. Installing a new Shah proved to be very difficult. He picked the wrong people for the government and his country never forgave him for letting the *infidels* into their country. The British managed to control Afghanistan for almost two years, but in November 1841 an uprising started,⁴⁴ which led to catastrophe. The mistakes of military and political officers led to the bloody march from Kabul to Jalalabad, where 16 000 people died and only around 20 survived from the entire Kabul garrison.⁴⁵ Not even children or women were spared. The British Army sought revenge for this massacre by burning the old Kabul Bazaar, but Dost Mohammad Khan returned to the throne a year later (1843) and pursued, not surprisingly, anti-British policy in central Asia for the next 10 years. The British did not achieve any of the goals they had established before the war and for which they even started the war.

The First Afghan war is also very interesting from a current perspective. Maybe the most powerful nations ended their campaign similarly here. The British had to lose for two more times to realize that Afghanistan is a country that can be conquered but cannot be controlled. The Soviet Union has made the same mistake and the USA is making it now.

Abstract

Afghanistan is a land where war seems to last forever. The goal of this article is to show how the first intervention of western power in Afghanistan started. The main conflict in Central Asia in the 19th century was a long-term struggle between Russia and the British Empire over the influ-

⁴³ J. H. STOCQUER, *Memorial of Afghanistan: State papers, official documents, dispatches etc...* Calcutta 1843, pp. 4–6.

⁴⁴ See more FREMONT-BARNES, pp. 25–27. M. A. YAPP, *The Revolutions of 1841–2 in Afghanistan*, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1964, pp. 333–381.

⁴⁵ See more P. MACRORY, *Retreat from Kabul: The Catastrophic British Defeat in Afghanistan, 1842*, London 2002; G. BRUCE, *Retreat from Kabul*, New York 1967.

ence in this part of the world, usually called, “The Great Game.” Russia started to march towards Khanates such as Bokhara or Khiva and strengthened its influence in Persia. Concerns about a Russian advance and the security of the Indian western border grew in London and British India at the same time. Afghanistan experienced a long and bloody fight of succession between two branches of the Durrani tribe, Sadozais and Barakzais, in the beginning of the 19th century. The Barakzais won this civil war and Dost Mohammad Khan became the Emir of Kabul. Nevertheless, Ranjit Singh, the ruler of the Sikh state, took control of Peshawar during the civil war and this created the chasm of interests between Afghanistan and the Sikh state, which could never be overcome. The article tries to explain how these aspects merged and led to the war, and attempts to clarify who holds the dominant part of responsibility in the final decision that resulted in a start of the armed conflict.

Keywords

India, Afghanistan, Russia, Central Asia, Colonial Policy, East India Company, Great Britain, Persia

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The Causes of the First Anglo-Afghan War