

The Causes of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, a Probe into the Reality of the International Relations in Central Asia in the Second Half of the 19th Century¹

JIŘÍ KÁRNÍK

Institute of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague
Nám. J. Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha, Czech Republic
karnik.jiri@gmail.com

Central Asia has always been a very important region. Already in the time of Alexander the Great the most important trade routes between Europe and Asia run through this region. This importance kept strengthening with the development of the trade which was particularly connected with the famous Silk Road. Cities through which this trade artery runs through were experiencing a real boom in the late Middle Ages and in the Early modern period. Over the wealth of the business oases of Khiva and Bukhara rose Samarkand, the capital city of the empire of the last Great Mongol conqueror Timur Lenk (Tamerlane).²

The golden age of the Silk Road did not last forever. The overseas discoveries and the rapid development of the transoceanic sailing was gradually weakening the influence of this ancient trade route and thus lessening the importance and wealth of the cities and areas it run through. The profits of the East India companies were so huge that it paid off for them to protect their business territories. In the name of the trade protection began also the political penetration of the European powers into the overseas areas and empires began to emerge.

¹ This article was created under project *British-Afghan relations in 19th century* which is dealt with in 2014 at Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague with funds from Charles University Grant Agency.

² See B. F. MANZ, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, Cambridge 1989, p. 58.

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Britain gradually turned out to be the most successful power. It gained the crucial influence in the New World through the Seven Years' War and by the end of the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century it strengthened its position in India as well. The wealthy Indian subcontinent quickly became one of the jewels of the Empire. This fact logically led to the effort to protect this jewel as efficiently as possible. Britain's dominance over the seas of the world was in the 19th century very strong, a naval expansion to India was therefore very unlikely. After all, the Europeans were the first who invaded India from the sea. The Aryans around 1500 BC, Tamerlane at the end of the 14th century, the Mughals a century later and also the Afghans in the second half of the 18th century came to India from Central Asia.

The network of the passes intersecting the Solomon Mountains and the Hindu Kush allowed for these raids. In particular, the Khyber and the Bolan Pass were in this respect strategically very important, here we can also see the origins of the British interest in very poor but combative Afghanistan. Britain, however, was not the only one that saw Central Asia as an area of a great strategic importance. The Russians, since the age of Peter the Great, were making plans to take control over the rich oases of Central Asia. The expedition to Khiva in 1717,³ however, ended up as a disaster and other efforts had to be postponed for another 100 years.

Since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Russia gained such a strong position that it could begin to pursue the old dreams of its greatest Tsar. In the first half of the century Russia was still struggling with its own internal problems, but managed to expand its influence, especially into the steppes of contemporary Kazakhstan. Russia's advance to Central Asia became more powerful in the second half of the century. The Crimean War showed the Tsar how vulnerable is his empire in case of a maritime conflict. It was therefore necessary to find an area where the Western powers could not use their supremacy over the sea. Moreover, the Russians were aware of the importance

³ S. BECKER, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia, Bukhara and Khiva, 1866–1924*, New York 2004, p. 9.

of India for Britain since India was the pearl of the British Empire; therefore it was quite logical that the Russians turned their attention there. As it was shown already in the first half of the century, the Indus River is not very easily navigable for the merchant vessels, let alone the naval fleet, therefore every military conflict in Central Asia was purely inland.

Already by the end of the 1830s and at the beginning of the 1840s, Russia ascertained that the British are willing to wage war in Central Asia for their interests, and that it is definitely not an easy thing for them. The First Anglo-Afghan War between 1839 and 1842 ended as a complete disaster.⁴ The British tried to appoint to the Afghan throne a ruler who would be willing to serve their interests. Despite the fact that he was a man seemingly perfectly suited for such a task. He was from an ancient family whose founder won the independence for the country. Nevertheless, he was unable to keep the throne without the British help. The support from the insular empire lasted only for two years, the financial problems of India and a large uprising in November 1841 caused one of the biggest disasters in the British imperial history. During the attempt of the British troops to retreat to India, over 6,000 soldiers and 10,000 civilians were killed. Just a few hostages and one doctor arrived from Kabul to their destination, the city of Jalalabad.⁵

Although the revenge that followed according to the words of the Governor-General Lord Ellenborough Britain's "*military character war re-established*,"⁶ however not even the re-conquering of Afghanistan and the inferno of famous bazaar could in Kabul not erase the cruel defeat of the previous months. After the final departure of the British, the emir Dost Muhammad Khan returned to the throne; his removal was actually the main goal of the three years' war effort. The disaster of the First Anglo-Afghan War

⁴ See A. FORBES, *The Afghan Wars 1838–1842 and 1878–1880*, London 1892; J. W. KAYE, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, 2 Vols., London 1857; J. A. NORRIS, *The First Afghan War 1838–1842*, Cambridge 1967.

⁵ See V. EYRE, *The Military Operations at Cabul Which Ended in Retreat and Destruction of British Army*, London 1843.

⁶ NORRIS, p. 401.

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was for the next 30 years present in the minds of most men who were deciding about the direction of the British policy in India.

One of the causes of the first war in Afghanistan was also the concern of the Russian advance into Central Asia. In the 1860s and 1870s these concerns became a reality. Only nine years after the end of the Crimean War, the Russians appeared at the borders of the Khanate of Khiva and the Bukhara Emirate. In 1865 they took control over Shymkent, the following year of Samarkand and in 1873 they even gained control over the foreign policy of Bukhara and Khiva. In this way strictly speaking was created a direct border between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire.⁷

This fact concerned Britain very much. The Russian advance in Central Asia was making the authors of the British foreign policy worried for a longer time. Thus a very heated discussion over the way how India should be defended was taking place. Two blocs of different opinions were created: the Sindhi School and the Punjabi School. The Punjabi School included the Governors-General and the Viceroys of India Lord Lawrence, May or Northbrook and a large part of the Whig party; the Sindhi School included the expert on Central Asia, Henry Rawlinson, or the Governors of the British province of Sindh, James Jacob, James Green, and most of the Conservatives.

The Sindhi School promoted a more proactive approach, the so-called forward policy. According to its representatives it was necessary to move the border of India beyond the Indus River, control the entrance to the strategically important mountain passes, especially the Khyber, Bolan and Shutagardan passes. On that occasion, Afghanistan was to be politically controlled and its foreign policy should have remained under the control of Britain. There were also extreme opinions expressing the need to move the borders of India to the Amu Darya and thus control the whole Afghanistan.⁸

⁷ See BECKER, pp. 58–61.

⁸ Governor of Sindh John Jacob to Governor General of India Lord Canning, 1856. Parliamentary Papers (PP), C. 73: *Central Asia and Quetta: Copies of Despatches from the*

The Punjabi School was on the other hand trying to press a moderate approach. Managing good and peace relations with Afghanistan, interfering in its affairs as little as possible and using it as a kind of a buffer state whose stability and prosperity consequently ensure the safety of India.⁹

We may state that since 1855, when Britain re-established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and especially after the large Indian uprising during which Afghanistan remained neutral, the Governors-General stuck with the policy of the Punjabi school. The old-new emir Dost Muhammad Khan was never stubbornly anti-British, even when he was exiled from his own country, thus he did not become repulsive and through the alliance with the hitherto enemy he also gained a lot. Afghanistan was since the death of its founder in 1773 gradually weakened by its internal disputes. Dost Muhammad Khan was the first ruler since the death of the great Emir and unifier Ahmad Shah Durrani who again gained direct control over the three largest and most important cities of the country: Kabul, Herat and Kandahar. All this with the tacit support from Great Britain.

Dost Muhammad Khan already before his death in 1863 advised the Indian Governors-General and Viceroys to interfere in Afghan affairs as little as possible. The British followed his advice perhaps too much. Dost Muhammad Khan left behind a unified, but not very cohesive country. Moreover, as his heir he appointed a man who was only his third oldest son. The Civil War might have started anyway, but not even the personality profile of the new Emir of Afghanistan, Sher Ali, was convenient for a peace settlement. The Emir expected that the taking over the power would be smooth and that the British would support his claim to the throne. Both of these assumptions turned out to be wrong. Even though Sher Ali ruled for the first two years without bigger problems, however since 1864 his elder brothers began to claim their right to the throne.

Governor General of India in Council to the Secretary of State, Dated 23 January 1867, no. 15; 8 February 1867, No. 28; 23 February 1867, No. 42; and 23 October 1867, No. 162, with Minutes Enclosed, on Central Asia and Quetta; and, of the Reply of the Secretary of State, Dated 26 December 1867, London 1879, Encl. 3, No. 1, p. 7.

⁹B. SMITH, *Life of Lord Lawrence*, Vol. 1, London 1883, pp. 504–507.

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These were Muhammad Afzal Khan, the Governor of the Afghan Turkestan, and Muhammad Amin Khan, the Governor of the Kandahar region. Sher Ali and his army fought with his brothers and even though he managed to defeat them, in one of the battles he lost his eldest son and heir. Sher Ali this was very affected by this and for several months he lost interest in any political activity and began to drown in depression. Muhammad Afzal Khan took advantage of this situation and occupied Kabul. Afzal, however, shortly after that died and his son ascended the throne. Sher Ali, in the meantime, recovered and with the help of his sons and the general uprising in Kabul in autumn 1868 he again took over the city and returned to the throne.¹⁰

Great Britain kept aloof during the civil war in Afghanistan. At that time Lord Lawrence was the Governor-General of India and he was the biggest supporter of the approach of Punjabi school, i.e. of the policy of masterly inactivity. Lawrence was convinced that by this approach he followed the instructions given to him by Dost Muhammad Khan before he died,¹¹ however, Sher Ali, had a different opinion. He repeatedly asked Britain for the support of his indisputable claims as the heir of their ally Dost Muhammad Khan. Lord Lawrence's acts were quite puzzling.

When Afzal Khan ascended to the throne, he immediately sent him a congratulatory letter, this led to conviction of Sher Ali that the British stand against him and his interests. He apparently had this feeling for the rest of his reign in Afghanistan and it may be regarded as one of the main causes of the later conflict. For a person who is less emotional and thinks more rationally this fact may not play such a role, but as it was proved many times, Sher Ali never again trusted the British and he showed that to them at maybe the least appropriate time.

¹⁰ See M. S. KHAN, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, Vol. 1, London 1900, pp. 62–144.

¹¹ H. B. HANNA, *The Second Afghan War; Its Causes, Its conduct and Its Consequences*, Westminster 1899, Vol. 1, p. 8.

In spite of it, the British at the beginning of the 1870s were trying to improve the relations with Afghanistan, especially with respect to the Russian threat coming from the North, they could not hesitate. After Lord Lawrence, Lord Mayo succeeded to the office of the Governor-General and the Viceroy of India. Immediately after his arrival in Calcutta he suggested to Sher Ali a meeting in Ambala in Punjabi. The meeting of the two men took place on March 27, 1869. The result of it was a vague declaration stating that “British Government has no desire of aggrandisement and extension of territory, it will still use its influence to support neighbouring princes and rulers who are earnestly endeavouring to create by their own exertions strong, independent and friendly government.”¹² Lord Mayo showed throughout the whole negotiation that Britain is willing to cooperate with Afghanistan, but taking into consideration his instructions from London, he could not offer to the Emir any form of a long-term and official cooperation.

In a letter dated on March 30, 1869, he wrote that Britain “*will view with severe displeasure any attempts on the part of your rivals to disturb position as Ruler of Cabool and rekindle civil war; and it will further endeavour, from time to time, by such means as circumstances may require to strengthen the Government of Your Highness*”.¹³ Although in London this formulation was considered as too bold, Mayo defended it in several extensive letters arguing that the Emir clearly recognized the limits of the help Britain is willing to provide and if Britain wanted to keep him as an ally; it had to somehow show that the alliance with Afghanistan is important for Britain.

It can be said that in the following years, the relations between Britain and Afghanistan became very complicated. In 1873 organized the new Governor-General and Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrook, a negotiation at the summer residence of the British government in India, in Simla. Problems appeared

¹² Indian Government to Lord Argyll, 3rd April 1869. PP, C. 2190: *Afghanistan: Correspondence Respecting the Relations between the British Government and that of Afghanistan since the Accession of the Amir Shere Ali Khan*, London 1879, No. 17, No. A1, p. 89.

¹³ Lord Mayo to Sher Ali, 31st March 1869. Ibidem, No. 17, Encl. 3, p. 90.

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already before the meeting took place. Lord Northbrook actually planned to send his envoys to Kabul and negotiate there, but the Emir refused and sent his representative, Noor Muhammad Khan, to negotiate with the British on the Indian ground. The Emir had further objections against the British policy. In the previous years the Russian-British negotiations on the northern border of Afghanistan took place and the Emir was very offended by the fact that he could not attend these negotiations. Likewise, he was not very pleased with the British decision regarding the Afghan-Persian dispute over a part of the Seistan province which took place at the end of 1872.

Therefore it is not surprising that the negotiations did not proceed smoothly at all. Noor Muhammad Khan was requesting from the British a stronger guarantee of not violating the northern border, which was agreed on with Russia, or possibly a promise of military aid in case that Russia would want to jeopardize its independence. Lord Northbrook of course could not offer any of it, he had to resign himself to the diplomatic and limited material help and an assurance that Russia plans no expansion southward into Central Asia since Afghanistan is completely outside of its sphere of influence.

Despite these disagreements the negotiations still proceeded in a relatively friendly spirit. That was about to change soon. In 1874, Benjamin Disraeli's Conservative government acceded to power. Lord Salisbury, later the prime minister, became the Minister for India. His approach to the foreign policy in "the jewel of the Empire" was diametrically different from the direction that the Whig governments followed. Salisbury was an avowed supporter of the so-called Sindhi School's approach to the defence of India. As for opinions, he chimed in with the former Governor of Bombay and influential theorist of the Sindhi School, Bartle Frere. From his point of view, for the defence were strategically especially important the area of the Bolan Pass and the city of Quetta. They should become some sort of an advanced point that would allow Britain to respond quickly to any development in Afghanistan and quickly prepare for the possible threat that could come from Kabul or the Khyber

Pass. For this purpose Frere championed the placement of the British envoys in Herat, Kandahar and Kabul.¹⁴

However, it was a Whig, Lord Northbrook, who remained the Governor-General and Viceroy of India for the following two years after the new Conservative government came into power. These years were thus in the spirit of the long correspondence discussions between the Governor-General and the Secretary of State for India. Lord Salisbury, for example, instructed the Government of India to send a short-term diplomatic mission to Kabul, in case of a refusal a pressure should be exerted on the Emir to admit the mission. Lord Northbrook opposed this act, objected it very much and considered the pressure on the Emir as a “*fatal error*”.¹⁵ In 1875 Northbrook turned his disapproval into action and resigned his post.¹⁶ He was succeeded by a diplomat who had experience from major European courts but no knowledge of the Indian environment. This fact was not unusual, most of the Governors-General were chosen among the men who had no previous experience with the Indian government. His name was Robert Buller-Lytton, the first Earl of Lytton.¹⁷

The new Viceroy received the instructions from the Government in London before the long journey to India. Lytton should have started to fully tackle the task Northbrook was so reluctant to fulfil: sending a temporary diplomatic mission to Kabul and convince the Emir here to let Britain establish a permanent envoy in Kabul. Until then there was only a *vakil*, a native who carried out some of the envoy’s duties. Salisbury however did not trust this model and immediately after taking the place of the Secretary of State for India he wanted to replace the current *vakil* and establish any form of a permanent representation in Afghanistan as soon as possible.¹⁸

¹⁴ K. D. GHOSE, *England and Afghanistan, a Phase in Their Relations*, Calcutta 1960, p. 12.

¹⁵ Northbrook to Salisbury 28th January 1876. PP, C. 2190, No. 34, pp. 149–155.

¹⁶ A. H. BILGRAMI, *Afghanistan and British India 1793–1907*, New Delhi 1973, p. 168.

¹⁷ See B. BALFOUR, *The History of Lord Lytton’s Indian Administration, 1876 to 1880: Compiled from Letters and Official Papers*, London 1899, pp. 1–4.

¹⁸ Lord Salisbury to Lord Lytton, 28th February 1876. PP, C. 2190, No. 35, Encl. 1, p. 156.

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The vision of the Conservative Government was to strengthen Afghanistan's power and use its mountainous surface as natural barrier against any military action against India. The Conservatives were willing to offer Afghanistan much more than the previous Whig government, but it demanded bigger concessions from Afghanistan for these services. They wanted to have a significant influence on its foreign policy and a good overview of its domestic policy.¹⁹

The first cracks in the Conservatives' plan began to appear almost immediately. The Afghan Emir, Sher Ali, refused the proposed meeting. He explained his attitude by three facts: 1) he cannot guarantee the safety of the envoys; 2) he is afraid that the mission could raise demands that he could not meet and this would worsen the relations between Britain and Afghanistan, and 3) that the admission of the British mission would force the Emir to admit the Russian mission as well.²⁰ Lord Lytton was very displeased with the Emir's answers and responded to it with expressing an opinion that if the Emir refuses a "*hand of friendship*" it will compel him to "*regard Afghanistan as a State which has voluntarily isolated itself from the alliance and support of British Government*".²¹ The sting of a threat is quite obvious here.

Nonetheless, we cannot say that there was no possible chance of mending the good relations. Neither Sher Ali nor Lord Lytton for now openly thought about anything else than the friendly coexistence of both countries. Eventually a meeting was arranged in Peshawar where the representatives of both countries arrived. Afghanistan's negotiator's role was carried out by a long-time mentor and to the British very well-known negotiator, Noor Muhammad Khan. The Indian Governor General and Viceroy was represented by Lewis Pelly. The negotiations were, however, since the beginning affected by the misunderstandings that preceded their call. The British side had misinterpreted the acceptance of the offer to meet as consent to send a diplomatic mission of

¹⁹ BALFOUR, pp. 29–30.

²⁰ Atta Muhammad to Sir Richard Pollock, 21st December 1876. PP, C. 2190, No. 36, Encl. 32, p. 194.

²¹ Commissioner of Peshawar to the Emir of Cabul, 8th July 1876. Ibidem, No. 36, Encl. 9, p. 177.

the insular empire to Kabul. At the beginning of the negotiations they were thus very unpleasantly surprised that Noor Muhammad Khan not only did not take this thing as an already decided one, but that he did not even want to negotiate about it.²² The British throughout whole the negotiation unsuccessfully tried to convince the Afghans that without this concession it was not possible to reach any consensus on other points.

When later on during the conference in Peshawar Noor Muhammad Khan died,²³ the British decided to close the meeting and Lord Lytton began to look more intensively for other than diplomatic solutions. At that point also another important player of the Great Game, the Tsarist Russia asked to speak. Since the beginning of the 1870s, a correspondence took place between the Russian Governor of the Orenburg region and the Afghan Emir. Most of the time it was consulted with the British wakil and thus did not pose any huge danger to the insular empire. The Russian-British relations, however, during that time significantly worsened. Especially with respect to the Russian expansion into the Ottoman Empire, the Tsar decided to take advantage of the disagreements between Britain and Afghanistan in Central Asia and the Russian authorities in the region increased their activity.

In reality this resulted in sending general Stoletov's diplomatic mission to Kabul.²⁴ The Russians proceeded significantly more resolutely. The mission was sent without any negotiation and the Emir was presented with a *fait accompli*. The British responded to the reports about Stoletov's action in the Afghan capital city almost immediately by setting up their own mission.²⁵ At the same time a new *wakil* was sent to Kabul to inform the Emir about

²² Report from the first meeting between Sir Lewis Pelly and Noor Muhammad Khan, 30th January 1877. PP, C. 2190, No. 36, Encl. 35, p. 196.

²³ BILGRAMI, p. 184.

²⁴ Governor-General of Russian Turkestan General Kaufmann to Sher Ali, June 1878. *Memorandum on the Correspondence between General von Kaufmann and the Ameers Shere Ali and Yakub Khan of Kabul. From March 1870 to February 1879*, London 1880, No. 30, pp. 23–24.

²⁵ Lord Lytton to Viscount Cranbrook, 30th July. C. 2164: *Central Asia: No. 1 (1878): Correspondence Respecting Central Asia, London 1878*, No. 146, Encl. 1, pp. 143–144.

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the arrival of the British mission. The new *vakil* informed the Emir that the mission's objectives are of friendly nature, but its eventual rejection would be considered as an act of hostility.²⁶ The situation got more complicated due to the fact that the Emir's son and heir to the throne recently died, and therefore the Emir was still mourning and not want to deal with any state matters. His response to the British requests was thus very hostile. *"It is as if they were come by force. I do not agree to the Mission coming in this manner; and until my officers have received orders from me; how can the Mission come? It is as if they wish to disgrace me; it is not proper to use pressure in this way; it will tend a complete rupture and breach of friendship"*.²⁷

The mission of the Madras Army's General, Neville Chamberlain, nevertheless continued to move to the border. The British, despite their insistency, were not admitted to Afghanistan²⁸ to which they responded quickly and harshly. On October 30, 1878, the Emir received an ultimatum that demanded the admittance of the mission, and also demanded the answer by November 20. The Emir did not respond and on November 21, 1878, Great Britain declared war on Afghanistan.²⁹ It was the start of a conflict which lasted until the beginning of 1878. Today it is regarded, similarly as the First Anglo-Afghan War, as a great failure. An assessment of its consequences would take another very long lecture, but ultimately it met the British goal. The new Emir Abdur Rahman by recognizing the Treaty of Gandamak handed his foreign policy to the British; Afghanistan could not break free from this state until the successful war in 1919.

The conflicts between Great Britain and Afghanistan to a certain extent resonate in the Afghans' approach to the Western influences nowadays. Their

²⁶ Lord Lytton to Sher Ali Khan, 14th August 1878. PP, C. 2190, No. 49, Encl. 4, p. 232.

²⁷ Telegram from Sir N. Chamberlain to lord Lytton, 17th September 1878. PP, C. 2190, No. 59, Encl. 7, p. 241.

²⁸ Governor of Khyber province of Afghanistan Faiz Muhammad Khan to Neville Chamberlain, 16th September 1878, K. P. DEY, *The Life and Career of Major Sir Louis Cavagnari*, Calcutta 1881, pp. 34–35.

²⁹ Declaration of War, 21st November 1878. BILGRAMI, Appendix 19, pp. 323–327.

first experience with the Christian civilization sphere was characterized by a constant pressure, treachery and inability of understanding on both sides. This animosity is present up till now; the evidence can be seen in the Afghan Emirs' attempts to promote the Western influences at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s that fell through at the general animosity toward all Western things. The Soviet invasion in 1979 then allowed the rise of the groups that took an advantage of the hatred for the Western influences to strengthen their power and ruthlessly oppress the inhabitants who did not share their opinion. Also the current situation shows how deeply rooted are these attitudes in the minds of the Afghans. Taliban is gaining a strong position again, and its return to power might be possible immediately after the U.S. troops leave the Afghan land.

Abstract

This study deals with causes of Second British-Afghan War which took place in 1878–1881. Author will briefly explain the first 60 years of evolution in British-Afghan relations with consideration of their global context especially so called Great Game which is rivalry between Russian and British Empire in Central Asia. Subsequently, author presents analysis of main causes of the conflict and basic factual accounts of events which led to the war. Among other things, this study should also serve as a probe to the international relation in region of Central Asia which is not really well-known in Europe although it got significant importance for global politics in last few decades.

Keywords

Afghanistan; British India; North-Western Frontier; Lord Lytton; Sher Ali Khan; Second Anglo-Afghan War