

Millstones, Buffers and Roundabouts

By Peter John Brobst

Afghanistan has long been an arena of global competition as well as localized conflict. With the current spotlight on regional counterinsurgency, a greater appreciation of Afghanistan's position in the balance of world power is critical.

Sir William Fraser-Tytler, Great Britain's minister in Kabul at the outset of World War II, [wrote](#) that the problem of what he called "tribal control" in Afghanistan was as "intolerable to endure as it was impossible to resolve." The sentiment of that assertion resonates in current debates over Afghan strategy, in which the focus on counterinsurgency, and the clear-eyed recognition of its limitations, has revived the old chestnut about Afghanistan being a "graveyard of empires." Such a view obscures much, not least the persistent importance of Afghanistan in relation to great power politics. Afghanistan has been a cradle of empire as much as a grave, and even more a crossroads and cockpit of it.

From the vantage of British grand strategy in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Afghanistan lay athwart a critical fault-line of world power, within the "Crush Zone," as the imperial geographer James Fairgrieve described it, between global sea power and Eurasian land power. [According to Cornelius Engert](#), Fraser-Tytler's American counterpart and contemporary, the ultimate question was whether Afghanistan might "exercise a stabilizing influence in Central Asia and on the northwest frontier of [the Indian subcontinent] provided only she can be reasonably certain that she will not be ground between the upper and nether millstones of rival powers striving for supremacy."

From British buffer...

A century earlier, the British launched their First Afghan War in what proved an abortive attempt to integrate Afghanistan directly into their burgeoning Raj in India as one of numerous subsidiary states. They aimed to build a hedge against the irredentism of Iran and the long-term expansion of Russia. Over the decades that followed, imperial strategists settled on a different approach to which they stuck through the demission of British rule on the subcontinent in 1947. They sought to define and maintain Afghanistan as an "interspace" between the tectonic forces of British and Russian imperialism. Afghanistan became the archetypal "buffer state." In fact, the term was reputedly coined by Alfred Lyall, the foreign secretary in the British government of India during the 1870s, who compared Afghanistan's function in the Anglo-Russian balance to the shock-absorbing springs on rail carriages. The idea was not so much to neutralize Afghanistan as to deny access to the enemies of the British Empire and to make

the country, in the telling phrase of a more recent observer, an “[anti-route](#)” to India. Britain’s buffer policy meant the enforced isolation of Afghanistan. The effort resulted in two war scares with Russia, the Penjdeh Crisis of 1885 and the Pamir Crisis of 1895. And it led to actual war between Britain and Iran in 1857 as well as to a Second and Third Anglo-Afghan War, in 1878-81 and 1919 respectively.

These troubles produced Afghanistan’s distinctive appearance on the map today. They spawned several joint commissions – Anglo-Russian, Anglo-Iranian, and Anglo-Afghan – that demarcated the country’s modern borders over the course of the late 19th century. To be sure these formal boundaries reflected no small degree of artificiality in relation to ethnic geography, patterns of trade and migration and local custom. They reflected external imperatives and interests. But they were not arbitrary. Britain’s mapmakers spent years in the field. They knew the terrain firsthand and often spoke the languages. They saw Afghanistan in terms of zones and regions as opposed to provinces or districts. They would have readily appreciated the ‘Swiss cheese’ metaphor to explain a historical polity in which the Afghan state “[did not assume uniformity across the landscape or their control of it.](#)” That said considerations of British politics and diplomacy took precedence over various realities on the ground in Asia. As a recognizable *casus belli*, whether in Parliament or the chancelleries of Europe, the formalized boundaries provided a deterrent to rival powers seizing on the vagaries of a borderland as a pretext for advance. The “interspace” was preserved, and the Afghan buffer suspended in a strategic stasis based, [in the words of Fraser-Tyler](#), “on firm foundations, treaties, and duly demarcated boundaries.”

This equilibrium held imperfectly but well enough so long as the unity of the Indian subcontinent formed a solid counterpoise to Russian – and subsequently Soviet – power consolidated in Central Asia. The dissolution of the Raj in the aftermath of World War II left that foundation, Engert’s “nether millstone,” fractured. Britain’s partition of its Indian Empire into two successor states turned the power balancing potential of the subcontinent in on itself. From the standpoint of Anglo-American strategy, Pakistan occupied the frontline position in the metamorphosed Great Game of the Cold War. But for its own part Pakistan identified India as the ultimate enemy. The results, as Olaf Caroe, Britain’s last colonial governor on the Afghan frontier, [argued](#), included the emergence of a pernicious “quadrilateral, India achieving an axis with the Soviet Union and Pakistan with China.” This only reinforced division and stood in the way of rapprochement in South Asia. The impact on Afghanistan was catastrophic albeit not immediate. Caroe regarded the Soviet invasion in 1979 as one of the “after-effects of India’s partition.” The only surprise was that just over 32 years had passed before Soviet forces advanced south of the Oxus.

The Soviet occupation destroyed the Afghan buffer once and for all, but failed to impose a new order in its place. The upper millstone had shattered altogether by 1992, and Afghanistan spun into civil war. The [recent suggestion](#) that an Indo-American partnership might restore something of the advantage and stabilizing influence once exercised by the British Empire along the Asian rimland has much to commend it. But “reconfiguring the Raj,” if it can be done, would not likely involve reconstructing the Afghan buffer. Both the United States and India stand, perhaps to a greater and lesser degree respectively, on the sea power side of the geopolitical divide. And each possesses a considerable affinity of interest with the other in Afghanistan, particularly in combating jihadism and balancing China. The two putative bouncers, however, would have trouble agreeing on the guest list. Washington is more wary of Russian and certainly Iranian involvement than New Delhi, while the Indians understandably worry about the susceptibility of the Americans to an overly conciliatory attitude toward China and especially Pakistan. Fortunately, at least from the vantage of Indo-American proponents, these differences are necessary spoilers only of a would-be buffer policy. Playing the 'New Great Game' does not necessitate the enforced isolation of Afghanistan. On the contrary, the rules demand the country's integration into the world economy as much as possible. Afghanistan should come to form, as at times before the Raj, as an intersection rather than an “interspace.” That at least is the proposition behind widespread discussion of a “[Silk Road Strategy](#)” to develop Afghanistan as a Turko-Persian hub connecting Central Asia to the Indian Ocean – networking Eurasian land power and global sea power to in effect occlude the fault-line rather than damper it.

...To potential roundabout

Such an outlook, of course, perceives strategic advantage in globalization and reflects basic faith in the power of liberalization. It posits that the more powers with a substantial stake in Afghanistan, the less likely that any one of them will meddle, let alone dominate, to the disadvantage of others. Much has been made in this regard, by the Afghan government, American authorities and in the world press, about the attraction of Afghanistan's trove of critical minerals from copper to lithium and rare earths. In July of this year, Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, [spoke](#) of his hope that Afghanistan “could become ‘the Asian Roundabout’ for trade on ‘the new Silk Road’.” But none of this is really new. Afghanistan's economic geology [has been the subject](#) of considerable surveying and speculation since the 70s. And Karzai's turn of phrase [is actually Arnold Toynbee's](#). The imminent historian was director of studies at Chatham House, the influential British think tank on international affairs, from 1926 to 1956. Toynbee compared Afghanistan to a “Roundabout” somewhat later, after making a grand tour of the region in 1960. He imagined that new trunk roads then being

built in a great loop around the massif of the Hindu Kush by competing teams of American and Soviet engineers promised to “reinststate Afghanistan in her traditional position in the World.” He supposed that the roads represented Afghanistan’s “economic bonus” from the Cold War, but cautioned that the “accompanying risk is high.” Toynbee was an optimist, but he was no Norman Angell: “Roundabouts,” he warned, “are strategic as well as economic assets, and strategic assets are tempting political prizes.”

In other words, although the reconstruction of an Afghan buffer is all but impossible, an Afghan roundabout, however desirable, is not the obvious next iteration of the country’s geostrategic form. From the vantage of those who see the development of a “horizontal Asia,” Afghanistan appears a possible viaduct that would do more to reinvigorate Eurasian land power on a lateral alignment between China and the Middle East than to bridge the Crush Zone. A roundabout will almost certainly fail to take shape if the Americans abandon Afghanistan – whether out of sheer exhaustion, exasperation or lack of a long-view beyond the defeat of al-Qaida.

If American policy tends to lose sight of the great power forest for the “Af-Pak” trees, the main defect in Britain’s approach to Afghanistan in the 19th century was neglecting the trees of the tribal belt in the effort to conserve the wider forest. “This problem,” Fraser-Tyler wrote, “distracted successive British Governments of India and remains to vex and possibly to destroy their successors.” But “it did not disturb the architects of the Anglo-Russian boundaries.” Britain’s one-time man in Kabul explained that “they were settling a question which if not solved would have threatened the peace of the world.” In comparison, “the problem of the Indo-Afghan boundary was a local affair of scant significance, of which they knew little and cared less.” A more acute appreciation of the great power stakes in regional counterinsurgency, and of Afghanistan’s position in the balance of world power, remains needed today as much as ever.

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