

CHAPTER 2: AFGHANISTAN - PHONEY WAR IN ASIAN BUFFER STATE

WITHOUT FIRING A SHOT

When John Reid, then the recently appointed British Minister of 'Defence' announced in 2006 that British troops sent to Helmand he hoped would not fire a shot, he must have been naïve, incredibly badly briefed, self deceiving or lying. For this PhD in history any casual study would have enlightened him that the warriors of Afghanistan were almost bound to fight what they would automatically see as an invasion. Yet despite many invasions since the ancient Greeks, as one Afghan writer puts it 'no-one power has ever conquered the soul of Afghanistan'(1). Like so much of New Labour Reid was perhaps so busy revising history (2) he did not see the reality of what is going on in Afghanistan. While there has been a substantial public and parliamentary opposition to the Iraq war, on Afghanistan there has been a cross party agreement that the war is about fighting 'terror' and for 'reconstruction'. The clever 'development' deception that has been practised here is more typical of the propaganda in favour of the powers that be that so often rules Britain. As the British military death toll keeps on rising, it has been the military whose voice has been heard as the major mainstream critique. However it is dressed up the military answer is ultimately – send more troops (as they leave Iraq). With the add on – give us more and better hardware With George II's old Defence Secretary on board, President Obama's 'Security' consultants speak of an 'Afghan surge' – with troops from the USA going up from mid 2008's 36,000 to settle around 60,000 – the long run level once planned for Iraq. British troop numbers have also risen from 8 to 10,000 (3).

It is unlikely that Reid could have known the story that Anwar tells of the Khan of Kalia in 1838. The British resident – effectively ambassador – in Baluchistan commented to him that they had conquered without firing a shot. The Khan replied that he had seen how the British had arrived but added: 'how will you get out?' (4). The British army was eventually destroyed in the first Afghan War by an up-rising in 1842 as it tried to leave. The question for Reid's successors remains: how will this generation's conquerors get out? Some of Alexander the Great's troops it is said never did – to leave behind the green and blue eyes of some Afghans. While the British Liberal Democrats have continued their opposition to the war in Iraq their last leader Menzies Campbell argued the military case for the switch of troops to Afghanistan for here he said there is a better chance of 'success'. What will this 'success' amount to? It sounds more like a new British liberal imperialist version of the 'war without end'. Osborne in his strident and effective critique of New Labour and Iraq still sticks with the official narrative of Afghanistan as a 'winnable war'. Afghanistan has gained the label of a 'good war' in comparison with Iraq (5).

As Christina Lamb wrote on her visit to Helmand in 2007, the locals commemorate today the British defeat there in 1880. This is not just a case of modern Afghan 'tribalism' – for the Scots still celebrate Bannockburn – 700 years ago not the Afghan's mere 100. Writing in 1840 another English commentator concluded: 'we are still here...The government cannot bear the tremendous cost of holding Afghanistan. Unrest is growing...our posts are being attacked. ...Anyone who kills a European is considered a saint...Can we leave Afghanistan in such a state and on the other hand, will it change and will the country calm down? We must leave with a loss of honour' (6). The same issues confront the British in Afghanistan.

A HISTORY OF CONQUEST AND WAR

While today's Babylon plays Iran, Iraq and Latin America on its chessboards, Curzon, the man who invented the modern Great Game, described Afghanistan as the strategic cockpit at the heart of Asia. Wars both internal and external have been the dominant factor in Afghanistan's history: so much so that many of its young men today have no skills, other than how to handle weaponry. Our own British Empire, it should be remembered, fought three wars over Afghanistan from 1842 to 1923. In the twentieth century wars since the Russian invasion of 1979, nearly every major world power has in some way been involved directly or indirectly in Afghanistan. In the new Great Game for Asia, at least 14 major global players have been involved in financing war, supplying arms, taking drugs and supporting their own pet war lords. The list includes China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK, and the United States. Five Central Asia Republics, two with major ethnic groups in Afghanistan itself - Tajikistan (with its own civil war) and Uzbekistan - have either funded 'insurgency' or been indirectly affected. As Rubin eloquently describes, the appearance of the Taliban and forms of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan are not the result of some 'traditionalist' 'tribal' response, throwing us back 500 years in history, but a reaction to the impact of both modernity and post modernity. For Rubin, Afghanistan's 'fragmentation' shows the 'dark side' of our common present, in 'ugly ways we prefer to deny' (7).

The importance of imperial outsiders in this process cannot be emphasised enough. Afghanistan has always been the Buffer State between Russia, India and Iran and between the Islamic world and the West. Internally, as the Hindu Kush mountains split today's Afghanistan in two, there has always been a major division between North and South. To the South are the Pushtuns, especially in the more settled fertile lowlands of the South East; in the North and West are the related Persian and Turkish speaking peoples - Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks. In the 1990s there were around 7 million Pushtuns, 3.5m Tajiks, 1.5m Hazaras and 1.3m Uzbeks. The divisions build on the religious, (the Hazaras are largely Shia, the Pushtun Sunni), political, nationalist, ethnic, linguistic, and tribal. All were reflected in different areas of Kabul in the civil war in the 1990s after the defeat of the Russians. This partly explains the indiscriminate bombing in the City in 1992-6 by one warlord against another. 'Treachery, brutality and intrigue' (8) is a common place experience.

An ex communist described Afghanistan in 1996 as 'falling into a black hole': in 2000, it was described as being on the edge of a political, social and economic abyss. Much of the 12 percent of cultivatable land was laid waste; there was little work, food or housing. A devastated society was a prey to terror, drugs and smugglers. Kabul - the crossroads of Asia, in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, consists of 'miles of rubble', whose main manufacturing capacity is in the manufacture of artificial limbs (9). The country ranked 169th out of 174 in the UN human development index. One wonders how one could have found five countries in a worst position. Life expectancy in 2005 was 44 (10), adult literacy was 24 percent and 12 percent have access to safe water. 1 million civilians were killed in the civil wars between 1992-8 aided and abetted largely by the US and Pakistan. Indeed, on the pretext of the search for Bin Laden and the Taliban they had helped create, the US bombing campaign in 2001 killed far, far more than 9/11. A further 1.5 million dead in the war against Russia out of a population of 26 million; the US equivalent since 1979 would be 30 million.

TRADITIONAL EMPIRES IN AFGHANISTAN: IRAN, UK AND RUSSIA

One could start the Afghan story with the conquests of Alexander the Great in 329 BCE –or by India in 200ACE, by the Persians in the twelfth century, or by the destructive impact of the Mongol invaders in the thirteenth century. The Mongol hatred of cities - all 160,000 people (bar 40) in ancient Herat were executed - also destroyed the cities' irrigation systems for the surrounding valleys. So, the economy of Afghanistan, bar the ancient cities on trade routes, was until 1979, largely agricultural and before that largely nomadic. The modern State of Afghanistan was created by the Pushtuns, after this nomadic people migrated from the mountains into the plains around Kabul by the fifteenth century (11). The area had been ruled from Herat as the old Samarkand Empire, in today's Uzbekistan, moved its capital here in 1405. After a period of Mogul rule, where Kabul was captured in 1504 by troops who went on to take Delhi, the area reverted to the Iranian Empire in the sixteenth century. The Ghilzais, whose central homelands were South of Kabul, rebelled against the Iranian Shah in 1709 and have been hostile both to Iran and Shiite Islam ever since. Sacking the ancient Iranian capital of Isfahan in 1722, they were driven out from Iran itself in 1729. Then a line of Kandahar based Kings took most of today's Pakistan, down to Delhi and Lahore in 1761, while also taking Kashmir and moved their capital to Kabul in 1772 to keep an eye on their conquered territories in the Hindu Kush. They remained in control of the kingship until 1973 (12).

The Anglo-Afghan wars began to affect modern day Afghanistan directly by the 1830s. With British India increasingly consolidated under Wellington by 1805, the British then negotiated a series of treaties in the 'Buffer States' – with Iran, the Punjab and Sind by 1809. When by 1827/8, Russia had taken Azerbaijan and reached Tabriz in Iran, whilst also threatening to take Constantinople, the British looked to the Hindu Kush mountains as their first line of defence for the newly absorbed British India. In the 1830s, the diverse Afghan principalities of Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar manoeuvred against each other and against local rival like the Punjab and Sind, ever mindful of the traditional powers in Iran and India. The incursion of the British further complicated these traditional rivalries. Traditionally the Pushtun area had been ruled from Kabul and extended over into Peshawar in today's Pakistan. In 1834, Peshawar was taken by the Punjab ruler in alliance with the British: Peshawar has been seen as a 'lost province' by traditional Afghan rulers ever since.

Similarly, until 1747, Herat in today's west of Afghanistan had been part of the Iranian Empire in the twelfth and again since the sixteenth century. Herat was an important strategic position because it provided a route into India that avoided the Hindu Kush mountains. In 1801, with the Napoleonic threat, the Iranians first made a deal with the British that if the Afghans attacked in Northern India (as they had fifty years before in 1761), the Iranians would come to the support of the British by attacking Western 'Afghanistan'. With the Iranian Empire increasingly struggling to survive between Russia and Britain, and left by the British to fight the Russians alone in 1804-28, the frustrated Iranians made an alliance with the ruler of Kandahar and in 1837 besieged Herat. The British now feared an Iranian alliance with Russia against them. For the first – and by no means the last time - one of the great modern powers, was now prepared to go to war in Afghanistan. Negotiating with the ruler of Kabul proved fruitless, as his price was Peshawar, so the British moved in.

THE FIRST ANGLO AFGHAN WAR: 1838-42

After attacking the Iranians first in 1838, the British moved first into Sind and then into Afghanistan in 1839, taking Kandahar and Kabul. The British Foreign Office increasingly suspected a Russian 'grand design' to move on India. Although the Russians were certainly prepared to expand in Asia, particularly if thwarted or at ease with their borders in Europe, there was no such plan. In hindsight, it is possible to see that (just as George II over Bin Laden or Eisenhower and Dulles over Stalin) when the British portrayed their opponents, they were actually describing their own shadows. Russian 'designs' (especially on India and later in the US case on the 'Middle East') became in fact a cover for British, or US, imperial expansion - by all means - social, economic, financial, political and military. The British invasion of Afghanistan in 1838 was notionally justified in the same way as the Russian one in 1979: it was because of factional opposition and foreign interference. Done to support 'traditional rulers', it actually meant putting their own client kings in place. The British domestic opposition questioned not the concept of a benevolent imperial rule - but its cost. In the 1840s Afghanistan was creating a deficit in Britain's overall funding of India. What was worse, as for the Russians post 1979 and the USA post 2002, the British writ did not run much wider than the towns. Anwar stresses that in all these eras the cities had little influence on the villages: there was a gulf between the rulers and the people (13). This has barely changed today.

In January 1842, the old King re-entered with Uzbek troops from the North (rather like the USA in 2001) accompanying a popular rising in Kabul. The entire British Afghan army and camp followers of 17,000, was destroyed bar one man, allowed to tell the tale. A confident imperial Britain was not put off by the loss of one army. Afghanistan was re-taken in the autumn of 1842. As in Iran in 1909-12, 1951-4 and 1978-9, the British decided that the bazaar – the merchants and traders - had led the trouble and their main act in 1842 was to promptly destroy it in Kabul. Even so as the forward line of defence was too exposed by the up-rising, Sind was conquered in 1843 and the Punjab in 1845/6. Two wars against the Sikhs resulted in 1845 and 1849. British imperial expansionism, despite mistakes and troop losses was not to be halted for the rest of the century. A lesson perhaps learned by the US elite today?

Disputes with the Iranians continued in the West of Afghanistan. Iran gave up its claims to Herat in the treaty of 1857 and the Afghans captured it in 1863 (14). Disputes still remained in the 1870s over the fertile Helmand river valley area, as the river begins in Afghanistan and ends in Iran. A potential twentieth century agreement over the sharing of the river use for irrigation was made but never signed. The Iranians must only be too aware of UK troops now fighting 'Islamic insurgents' in an area that was once ruled by Iran and over which they and the British were in dispute a century ago. Nor has the Iranian influence ended – never mind the Persian speaking (Farsi) Hazara in the western area, a Herat up-rising in March 1979 has been blamed as the knock on impact of the Iranian Revolution. Iranian foreign policy specialists could quote an old Iranian proverb: 'a hyena at hand is more to be feared than a lion a far' (15). The British may fight like hyena and be led by political donkeys, but for the Iranians again they are near at hand. With the US military busy blaming the British for failures in Helmand since 2006, 5000 of the new likely 20-30,000 US arrivals are potentially bound for Helmand (16).

BRITISH HEGEMONY IN CENTRAL ASIA: 1842 - 1919

The Second Afghan War of 1878-9 was the war which began the process of radicalising William Morris. When Russia took over the Khanate of Bukhara, they had finally arrived at the Northern borders of Afghanistan. Russia and Britain were still attempting to agree a border when there was further Russian involvement in the Balkans in the Russo/Turkish war of 1877/8. The Tsar boasted that he could spoil British involvement in a European land war with his troops in Turkmenistan. When he did so in 1878, the British retaliated. 130 years ago, the British Empire had not been standing still in Asia as the Russians fought the Turks. Having once discussed the break up of the Ottoman Empire with the Russians (which of course they did with the French after the Russians were defeated in 1917)(17) the British while promising to defend Asiatic Turkey (but not European Turkey) needed to make sure of their Asian bases. Quetta in today's North Eastern Pakistan, in Baluchistan, only 50 miles from the Afghan border and 100 miles from Kandahar, was taken over in 1876 and a 'temporary' British mission was launched to Kabul in 1878. British troops were already on the move when the ultimatum was given before Kandahar and Jalalabad were occupied. When the British mission in Kabul was again massacred in 1879, new troops and a new ruler were put in. When Russian and Afghan troops clashed, at what appeared to be Russian expansion via the old West door in Herat in 1885, Gladstone put more troops into Quetta (18). Gladstone did not want another colonial war (there was one on-going in the Sudan at the time) or a repeat of the Crimean disaster. As if to point out to the Russians, the other pressure points that Britain could bring to bear in Asia, Britain temporarily invaded North Korea in 1885. This pressure on Japan eventually led to the Anglo-Japanese treaty in 1902, the Russian defeat of 1905 by the Japanese and the alacrity with which the Russians then agreed a deal over Iran in 1907. Realising their limits the Russians agreed the Afghan borders with the British in 1895; this re-confirmed the Durand agreement of 1893 which fixed the division of the Pushtun homelands into two - those in Afghanistan and those in British India. (This ethnic divide was of course becoming normal British practice in Africa, as in Somalia). No Pushtun resistance leader has ever accepted the Durand line.

Any US global strategist following Brzezinski today would argue as Curzon did: 'We do not want to occupy beyond India's walls..but we cannot afford to see (Afghanistan) occupied by our foes'(19). The Taliban are handy 'foes' for today's 'strategic defence'. This is still the hidden agenda for the UN's involvement in Afghanistan. Rashid argues that after 1879 and in a policy continued until 1945, the rulers of the British Empire decided that Afghanistan was easier 'bought than fought'. In the 1890s, as a bought client State Britain provided 20 per cent of the Afghan State's expenditure. When weapons spending are included, it amounted to 40 per cent. In 2008 foreign aid still accounts for 50 percent of the Afghan budget. The British also provided arms to their chosen Afghan rulers. A part of this Buffer State policy was the recognition that the Durand Line through 1,200 miles of mountains would be impossible to patrol. One estimate at that time was that it would need 1 million Indian troops. Finding Bin Laden on the border today or the requests for even 60,000 UN troops to 'secure' Afghanistan for 'development' should be set in this context. It is a military base alongside a weak government that the Empire of Capital needs not a democratic, developing Afghanistan. The latter would be good propaganda but does not fit so easily with imperial plans. Bombing wedding parties is easier.

A PEASANT STATE VERSUS A LANDLORD STATE

When Afghanistan declared independence in 1919, the 1895 agreement having left foreign policy in British hands, the British reacted by bombing Kabul. The Afghan peasants called the aircraft the 'engines of the Devil'. The British Indian army deployed 750,000 troops with their new tanks along the Durand line. It was 15 times bigger than anything the Afghans could field but the British quickly grew weary of the guerrilla war and a peace treaty was signed at Rawalpindi in 1923 - still the base of the Pakistan army. The economic base of Afghanistan in the twentieth century is best described by Rubin as being on a par with that of France in 1789. It is 85 per cent peasant and roughly the same percentage of the population depends on the rural economy, while agriculture accounted for 60 per cent of output. Ninety per cent of the country's cultivated land was under grain (mainly wheat), with some under cotton. The scarcity in Afghanistan, according to Rubin, is not in land but in water. Only 30 per cent of the arable land is irrigated in any one year.

The Afghan King Amanullah now looked to the countervailing power of the Russians. Here State land was not collectivised, but sold to create a peasantry. Slavery and forced labour were abolished. Tariq Ali notes that the Bolsheviks regarded it a 'bourgeois revolution without a bourgeoisie'(20). As a consequence, landholding in Afghanistan is a great deal more egalitarian than even in today's Iran or India. 60 per cent of farms are mainly family operated and two third's of these are less than 5 hectares; 40 per cent own less than one hectare (21). Only 370 families have more than 100 hectares. The fertile plains down towards Kandahar have more landlords, more landless (nearly 50 per cent of the population in Kandahar region) and sharecroppers. This may explain a more militant Taliban in this area. Wage labour had only been common close to the cities, with day labourers hired during the peak season. All in all, poverty before the Russian invasion was not endemic. Like the Taliban it has been a creation of external powers acting on old internal tensions.

After the division of the Pushtun people in two by the British, Pakistan has historically always been involved in Afghanistan. Tariq Ali, following Marx, points to the limited number of the elite who maintained British rule in India. According to his analysis, after the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, local rulers were transformed, as the British were to do elsewhere, to a landed gentry. A crucial turning point was in the inter war period where with the growth of an Indian nationalist movement, the British increasingly looked to Muslim notables, particularly in the North, to cement their rule. This created an apparent 'religious' divide, which actually was a part creation of a modern colonial order and gave ideological sanction to political, economic, regional and philosophical divisions and disagreements. One further key was the refusal of the Indian National Congress party to support the British in the Second World War. The British used the Muslim League, founded in 1906, lead by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who was a constitutionalist and a liberal; but also an elitist 'fuehrer' worried by the Congress mobilisation of the peasantry. These 'Muslim' leaders, the landlord class in the plains of the Punjab and Sind, were worried about the rise of an industrialising secular India - but mostly by the potential land reforms and Communist parties. The use of the religious card by the British Empire was classic divide and rule; where religion was made the cover to reward the landlord class for their past support to the British and to provide law and order for the future. Pakistan was a 'thank you' to the Muslim League. It provided nothing but class rule sanctified by Islam (22).

WARRIORS FOR RENT?

When Mountbatten sanctioned the hasty British departure, it set India up for a religious war. To make the new Islamic 'Pakistan', landlord rule in the Punjab West was added to that of the peasant Bangladesh East. In the 1954 elections, East Pakistan voted for the United Front while the British Champions, the Muslim League only obtained 10 seats out of 309. The Communist Party, despite being parcelled off into areas of India (like West Bengal) had more - 26 seats. The Legislative Assembly was dissolved by the army and a defence pact was signed with the USA a week later. Restored again, there was another coup in 1959, encouraged by more US aid. Years of military dictatorship followed. The landlord driven Pakistan that had Islam as its ideological justification has had a top heavy elitist structure quite unable either to develop a sustainable democracy or an industrialising development. After years of military dictatorship, it has had three democratic Presidents overthrown by army coup. As India finally emerges onto something akin to the Chinese path, Pakistan looks increasingly to be anachronism amongst the great powers of Asia. Its militant Islam could be used to deflect Pakistan from more fundamental change. This is precisely the role which the Taliban has played for Pakistan; take the pressure away from its own militants and push them onto the Afghan cause. Whatever the debate about religious ideologies and Islamic fundamentalism, Pakistan and Afghan relations have been dominated by money, politics and war. In the 1950s Afghanistan partially turned to Russian aid because Pakistan would not help. Without the British Empire, the landlords of Pakistan could not subsidise Afghanistan. The USA also turned down an aid request to Afghanistan in 1954: Pakistan was a greater priority. Again after the insurgency had been used to defeat Russia, the USA stopped funding the mujahideen. Sited on ancient trade routes, the merchant class was important in Afghanistan and taxes on this trade accounted for up to 50 or 60 per cent of revenues. There was little productive capitalism and in 1970 there were only 30,000 industrial workers (largely Hazaras in Kabul). Russian loans and grants provided for 50 per cent of new investment. By the 1980s this rose to 80 per cent. The Parliament was 60 per cent Pushtun and was dominated by the bigger landlords. With its peasant base, Afghanistan in the 1950s and 60s was effectively ruled by its middle class intellectuals. The Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) like the Tudeh in Iran arose out of the study groups of the 40s and 50s. Founded in 1965, it reflected its Russian pay masters by using the appearance of Marxist theory while Islam was ignored in its 1966 platform. The major difference between Afghanistan today and France in 1789 is tax; the Afghan peasant, unlike the French in 1789, pays none. The Buffer State regime, as the British discovered both in the nineteenth and twenty first centuries has to be paid for with external aid. Until the 80s revenue came from an export tax on commodities (hence smuggling) and a natural gas sales tax from production sold to Russia from the North. Rubin describes Afghanistan as the 'Rentier State', rather like so many of the Oil States (23). The UK gives most of its aid to the Afghan government; the US more to the private contractors. As in Iraq, the UN, the UK and the US simply use their revenues to buy the 'Afghan army' and police. The Afghan State pays tax in warriors not in oil; and like oil, Afghanistan has exported its warriors to the world. As the casualties mount in a war the Afghans are long used to fighting so have the lies grown up alongside. In 2007 the British Ambassador to Afghanistan spun the line that our stay would be a 'marathon'(24); now media spokesmen add that Pakistan needs sorting too. Wrapped in a patriotic flag, this is a recipe for an endless war.

THE PUSHTUN PROBLEM

Today the three largest urban centres of the Pushtun are in Peshawar and Karachi in Pakistan with a large Diaspora in Dubai. Kabul and Kandahar are 300 miles apart, it is 200 miles from Kabul to Peshawar. In the last 30 years Peshawar has expanded three fold to 3 million people. Even without the historical division of the Pushtun people, and without the US decision to extend their bombing into Pushtun areas of Pakistan, it should hardly be a surprise that divisions in Afghanistan are now increasingly reflected in the violence in Peshawar especially. Blaming 'Pakistan' or 'Pakistan based terrorists' for the problems of Afghanistan is propaganda; a military deflection which distorts a divided history for an imperial agenda. The Russian leaders too were advised that to flush out their rebels they would need to bomb Peshawar. As we have seen Pakistan has no logic and its supposed Islamic basis is a cover. There is nothing that Pushtun Pakistan and Punjab Pakistan have in common, except as Anwar puts it the experience of (British) colonial slavery. The Pushtun have been the nominal rulers of the other ethnic peoples of Afghanistan for 200 years. In their rule of the new Afghanistan from the mid nineteenth century, the demand for the lost Pushtun provinces has never been entirely abandoned. Perhaps aware of this, while Curzon divided Bengal as one potential trouble making area, the Pushtun areas were never given an ethnic name - unlike the Punjab, Sind and Baluchi areas which were. Hence the wonderful term, explained to us by countless BBC journalists today of that troublesome area known as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Here is the re-writing of history by Empire - the Pushtun people are dismissed as merely an administrative and military (or a 'terrorist') problem . The way the US sells its bombing of Pakistan today goes straight back to Curzon's vision of Empire.

In 1947 as India was being partitioned, the Afghan government made a last ditch attempt for the return of Pushtun lands. Similarly Pushtun politics in Pakistan, which today votes largely for the autonomist Awami Party were much closer to the Congress party of India than to the Muslim League of Pakistan. At the same time came the demand for Pushtun independence from both India and Pakistan - not so different from the view of Kashmir's nationalists. The nationalist regimes of both India or Pakistan too frequently responded to the pressures of other nationalities by force - and have tended to escalate the likelihood of violence in return. Afghanistan would not join the Anti Soviet Baghdad Pact in 1955 partly because of its continuing dispute with Pakistan and border clashes quickly followed. On some Afghan maps, the NWFP is shown as Pushtun-istan. Afghanistan has often borne subsequent tension between India and Pakistan. When Bangladesh seceded in 1971, Pakistan then suspended local government in Baluchistan. The NWFP Pushtun leaders resigned in protest. President Bhutto looked at the idea of occupying Pushtun Afghanistan as far North as Jalalabad - it offered the prospect of an easy victory for the Pakistan army after the devastating defeat by Indian forces over Bangladesh. When the Afghan resistance against the Russians began, as Tariq Ali noted Pakistan's elite were again keen to deflect their own problems into Afghanistan. The Taliban were becoming a menace in Pakistan so they were given another country to play in. The Taliban 'managed' Pushtun areas for Pakistan'; at some points the Taliban rule parts of the NWFP and South Afghanistan. The Taliban's take over in Kabul was a victory for Pakistan's army (25). There will be no solution in Afghanistan, even the British military has argued, which does not see the Taliban as a real political and military force - like the Sinn Fein and the IRA in Ireland - and the problem of Pushtun-istan.

THE RUSSIAN INVASION AND CIVIL WAR

In 1973, the Afghan Shah was overthrown in a coup masterminded by the PDPA leader – Muhammad Daoud. The PDPA's factions in part reflected both ethnic differences and social backgrounds. It did not have an open membership and was never larger than 10,000. At the top it was accused of Pushtun domination; most of the non Pushtuns involved were urban based. Its first two leaders were Babrak Karmal, with both Kashmiri and Tajik blood, whose father had been a general and Nur Taraki, a lower middle class Pushtun. As early as 1967 there was an open break between two factions - the Khalq dominated by Taraki and Parcham by Kabral. This Pushtun/Tajik infighting also reflected the North/South divide and had led to an armed struggle around Faizabad. The fragile equilibrium was broken by the economic decline caused by the oil price rises after 1973. Daoud was killed in April '78 while the military coup of 1979 was a further attempt to find a way out of the impasse, killing Karmal. The power base of Hafizullah Amin, the military ruler, was tiny and depended largely on his extended family. Rule was now more Pushtun than ever, all dissent was treason, there were mass arrests and torture and all the major Islamic leaders were killed in one night. Taliban brutality to their enemies has ample precedent. The Russians seeing the trouble in Iran, and wanting a stable buffer State, John Reid like, initially intended to withdraw after putting their own clients in after 6 months. The first big Russian offensives of 1980-2 depopulated huge areas. By 1983 the Russians had 105,000 troops in Afghanistan plus the back up of an Afghan army of 30,000. Rubin reckons they would have needed 500,000 troops to win. (A useful context to understand the 2009 US troops surge in Afghanistan to 100,000).

The rebellion was initially led by religious leaders; the landlords had most to lose from continued instability. The major turning point in the Russian/Afghan War came with Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, partly because of the 'bleeding wound' of Afghanistan. Gorbachev told the PDPA to widen its rule and prepare for Russian withdrawal within a year. In 1986, although only half of the new Ministers were PDPA, there was an even more dictatorial ruler - Amin's ex KGB right hand - Dr Najibullah, the 'butcher of Kabul'. By 1988 Eastern Afghanistan had been ceded to the mujahideen. The Russian lost 15,000 troops in Afghanistan, our 200 looks small by comparison so far. Interestingly, it is at this point, as the Russians were leaving - that US aid doubled. The US were not funding a resistance but their own take over. As the old Afghan government had a social base it did not just collapse. As the UN had its first attempts at 'peaceful governance' what the US had underestimated was the extent of the civil war unleashed. Although different ethnicities fought on the same side versus Najibullah, the core of the civil war was ethnic. General Rashid Dostum's Uzbeks, although Dostum was himself once a protégé of Najibullah, fought with him in '92 and then against Ahmed Massoud's Tajiks in '93. In Herat Ismail Khan began to take control. A Pakistan army which had been fearful of Daoud's support of Pushtunistan and was itself 20 per cent Pushtun supported the Pushtun ex PDPA commander Gulbadin Hekmatyr in the South East who made Jalalabad his capital from 1992. In Kandahar Mullah Omar's Taliban had won by 1994 and took over the growing opium trade in the Helmand valley. The bulk of Taliban's 'seekers' were rural lads from Kandahar and Helmand recruited from the madrassas while refugees in Baluchistan and Peshawar. They fought Hekmatyr's forces for control of the South. By September 1996 the Taliban took Kabul, hanging Najibullah. With Khan's high taxes disliked in Herat he fled to Iran when the Taliban took over (26).

A FAILED STATE?

The Afghan State, as it is today, has always been external to the life of the peasantry. As Rubin puts it there were no institutions for interacting with 'civil society'. The State struggled to collect tax and pay its civil servants. Language about 'failed States' is common place in today's politics literature. Since Afghanistan was virtually designed to be a 'failed' State in its role as an easily controlled buffer, this language too often seeks to remove the imperial and geo-political dimension and locate the problem with the client rulers. There can be little doubt that after the US take-over in 2001-2, President Karzai was a convenient client ruler. Having removed the Russians, the US oil companies had representatives in Kabul from the start. The US was prepared to pamper the Taliban negotiators in Texas and just before 9/11 Unocal (now a part of Chevron) was all ready to sign up for a gas pipeline onwards to India and Pakistan. Yet Karzai's regime inherited enormous problems. A third of the villages had been destroyed in the fighting since 1979, 5000 more were made un-inhabitable. 70 per cent of roads and 60 per cent of rural health centres were destroyed. Wheat output was down to a third of its 1978 level, cotton was down to 25 per cent.

Closely linked to the old royal family and now the drug trade, Karzai had spent the Russian and civil wars in Silver Spring, Maryland. Consolidated in nominal power in the 2005 elections, where only a third of the potential electorate voted and where there were accusations of widespread coercion, three recent commentaries comment on how Karzai and his foreign Minister both seemed to be run by their own security guards, placed by their US minders. Karzai's younger brother is now reputed to be one of the richest drug barons. Not only does the Western press comment on it, the Pakistanis when accused of failing to control their 'insurgents' usually reply that Karzai cannot even manage his own brother. Tariq Ali describes the family's corruption as a 'untreated tumour' (27). Karzai's complaints about both UN and US military involvement are essential if he is to remain with any semblance of local political legitimacy.

According to that bastion of anti imperial thought, the Economist in 2007, without enough troops the British and Canadians have abandoned large areas of the South to the 'neo Taliban' – the new insurgency. One Taliban warlord claimed in late 2006 to have 12,000 troops under his command. The 'insurgency' in Afghanistan now covers most of the Pushtun speaking areas. Canadian forces quip that fighting the Taliban is the military equivalent of 'mowing the lawn'. Bell comments that like Vietnam, 'the further you are from the front lines the more optimistic the military assessments become' (28). In the last 7 years the faked 'uneasy' marriage between 'development diplomacy and defence'(29) in Afghanistan a plausible case could be made for saying that the British intervention has driven the reality for most Afghans backwards. Nearly the entire population bar the ruling elite are below the official poverty line, 1 in 4 children die before their fifth birthday, 40 - 60 per cent unemployment. The so called 'war on terror' against the Taliban in its own terms has not been going well given the objectives we are told are key. Opium, corruption and the military still rule Afghanistan. In 2007 more Western soldiers were killed in Afghanistan than in any year since the invasion of 2001 - with a record number of suicide bombings to boot. In 1998, at their peak, the Taliban effectively controlled 80 per cent of the country; ten years later in February 2008 after the US intervention, the US military reckoned that Karzai's regime was back to controlling a third of it (30).

TODAY'S 'OPIUM JIHAD'

If we move back to the UK, we will find that Class A drugs were criminalised in 1971 and an on-going 'war on drugs' frequently declared. Since then drug addiction has gone from a few thousand to 300,000. Drug related offences account for 17 per cent of male and 35 per cent of female prisoners. Maybe a half of all crimes are linked to drugs - up to 75 per cent of shoplifting and burglary. 40 per cent of prisoners still get drugs when in prison. It was in that bastion of liberation the Financial Times where I took this commentary. Opium now accounts for perhaps 50 per cent of Afghan GDP. Stephens went on to criticise the 'moral posturing' on our war against drugs. He also drew the right comparison with Afghanistan: 'Nato commanders say that to eradicate the poppy crop in the South would simply drive the peasant farmers into the arms of the Taliban' (31). What he does not go on to explicitly link is that at the two ends of the imperial spectrum we create further poverty and dependence in Afghanistan amongst peasant farmers whilst vilifying our own British drug 'failures'. We have created our own underclass - of the definitely un-deserving indeed criminal poor - who bear in the marks of their own bodies the definitions hammered into their hearts and minds.

In Afghanistan the so called drug eradication programme drives the peasants into higher production and often into the waiting arms of the Taliban for protection - a replica of the role first played by the FARC in Colombia. In 1999 Afghan output of opium was 4,600 tonnes. In 2006 it was 6,100 tons, 92 per cent of world production. In 2006, 165,000 hectares were planted for the opium poppy; against 104,000 in 2004. In Nangarhar province, a success story poppy cultivation fell from 28,000 hectares in 2004 to 1000 in 2005. Then US troops killed 16 in an attack on a convoy as part of their eradication drive. Now the poppies are back: the wheat crop did not give the farmers enough money to pay for elementary schooling. Most peasants own insufficient land to meet their own needs. They will grow the crop that gives them the best returns - a good neo-liberal principle. The peasants do not know whom to trust - other perhaps than close family and clan. The police often appear to be the worst predators of all - demanding money by day and maybe becoming Taliban by night (32). The peasants will look for protection - from the Taliban if need be - if others seek to destroy not just their living, but their survival.

The war on drugs has been so monumentally unsuccessful one either goes to the 'cock up' theories or 'conspiracy' - that word so beloved of the Establishment when its mind set is challenged. If the foreign invasion had wanted to revive the drug trade and as some commentators put it 'bring the Taliban back' they could hardly have done a better job if this had been their objective (33). It leads one to suspect either total incompetence - as in Iraq - or that this was indeed their objective. (PS don't tell the military boys on the ground - they just like fighting). For like the on-going civil war in Iraq the Taliban are badly needed by the US to justify its presence. The Taliban is the US equivalent to South Ossetia. And how handy to have drugs finance the Taliban - without opium the US may need to finance the Taliban themselves, for they are very useful strategically. Oh I forgot - the Taliban were created and financed by the USA, in league with virtually everyone else. If the Taliban did not exist, the US imperial elite would need to invent them. As for searching for Bin Laden as one Pakistan intelligence expert sarcastically put it - with Pakistan propped up by US aid of at least \$10 billion - 'why would we kill the goose that lays the golden eggs' (33).

POLICING A WHIRLWIND

Christian Aid in a 2008 critique rightly condemns the new 'civmil' - the increasing use of military means to gain supposedly civilian ends. While the Afghan police and private firms, plus local and foreign military are there supposedly to provide 'security' what Christian Aid points out is that NGOs who had spent years building up trust now cannot travel to many of their projects because it is too dangerous, while hearts are supposedly won over by forced entry and aggressive house to house searches. Attached to this new 'security', a whole breed of US private contractors look to make huge profits out of their infrastructure projects. No clearer link between the use of the military for the ends of Capital and of profit could be asserted. Is it any wonder that local Afghans join in the game cynically? Warriors as in Iraq- can be bought by the highest payer whether the US government or drug barons in league with the Taliban and the warlords. It is as the Afghan proverb has it: the same donkeys..with different saddles' (34). This is not an 'infringement' of the 'humanitarian space' as Christian Aid puts it, but the re-creation of the spaces for capital with the use of military means legitimised by development speak. It does not listen to the Afghans because it is about external imposition. There is no way such a military occupation - however much presented as re-construction - will ever win hearts and minds. Tariq Ali concludes with what should be a warning to President Obama: 'it beggars belief that more of the same will be the answer' (35).

When the Afghan strategy was debated in the British Parliament in mid 2008, a Tory MP correctly pointed to the bad history of Anglo-Afghan wars. Des Browne, then another New Labour Minister of Defence, claimed that the difference this time was that the Afghans were on our side (36). Certainly, on our side 'In Kabul everyone with a flashy car is almost certainly a drug dealer, a warlord, a corrupt government official or a rich Westerner looking at poverty through tinted windows'. What Browne's clever deflection reveals is that in fact 'our' (bought) Afghans are fighting a civil war alongside our imperial war. Until recently the Pakistan Army was not only the permanent US 'cop' in the area , it was effectively fighting the Northern Alliance via and with the neo-Taliban and had been doing so all through the 90s. Christian Aid argues that part of the on-going aims of the Northern Alliance since their US aided invasion of 2001-2, has been to prevent the re-emergence of Pushtun domination (37) - all the better if the Pushtun are divided too - pro and anti Taliban, in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

The USA has now achieved in Afghanistan all that the Russians wanted after 1979 - a pliant weak buffer 'governance'. A State which cannot prevent them from having a huge air base in the region - at Bagram - under independent US command and 11,000 US troops (largely in the North). The NATO troops struggling in the South are to provide convenient cover and window dressing under reconstruction speak, while the US lords it close to Russia's back door from its relatively safe havens with the Northern Alliance. The propaganda trick in this war - a repetition of Colombia's potential role in Latin America - is to pretend that the invasion, the regional divide largely between Pushtun and Tajik (with the Hazara thrown in for good luck and further complications), the on-going civil war and thereby the huge US base are all really about the war on terror and its helpful subsidiary the 'war on drugs'. Bluntly, as in Iraq, these are merely excuses for a continuing USA and imperial presence.

‘STRATEGIC’ AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN’S FUTURE

After 9/11 and with another dictator General to do their bidding (Musharaff was trained at Fort Bragg in the US), Pakistan strategy in Afghanistan since 2001 has been largely under US dictation. There are two elements in this process that are changing, however, as the US bombing in the NWFP indicates. First the new democratic regime has been anxious to assert some relative autonomy. Why then would the USA not turn to India as a bigger, better and more economically vibrant ally? Pakistan could be left to stew in its backwardness - and especially so if it is ripe for its own Taliban style revolution. Second, a 'successful' war against the Taliban in Afghanistan is only likely to push the Taliban back to their bases - in Peshawar, for example. A 'defeated' Taliban in Afghanistan may only mean a threat to Pakistan instead. The Pakistan military and intelligence may have wanted to push their problem onto Afghanistan - it may now re-bound with double the force. As the Israeli model of asserting military power reveals in the increased militancy of Hezbollah and Hamas, the US and Pakistan elite worry of a 'jihadi' up-rising would then become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rubin argued in 1995 that the North and Kabul were the Russians' 'strategic Afghanistan'. Presumably the US State and Defence Departments would therefore be well informed by such commentators. Even with Karzai in place, would not the same hold true for the USA now? As early as 1994, the North long angry about Pushtun domination and with the Tajiks increasingly pushed out of their own ancestral lands, had virtually declared autonomy and Massoud had set up his Supreme Council of the North. Most of the non Pushtun elements of the Afghan Army had already gone over to Massoud. The Taliban hated him and fought him – it is suspected they were behind his assassination 2 days before 9/11. With a civil war in next door's Tajikistan, the Tajiks by this time were armed to the teeth. The split between North and South has become ever greater - the North had the potential mineral, oil and gas resources; the South had the majority of the population and therefore nominal political rule of the State of 'Afghanistan'.

In the end, any real kind of peace will need a modus vivendi with at least some elements of the neo-Taliban. But when the British attempted to do a deal with them directly in Helmand in 2007 – buying them onside – as with the Sunni Iraq insurgents bought in the surge - it was vetoed by Karzai. It too obviously undermined him. Similarly, Karzai has put his own serious 'feelers' out. The more likely short term outcome in Afghanistan is that de facto the US will continue to control the North. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan could become almost divided into mini States – Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Pushtun in the first case. A divided Pakistan military may find it increasingly difficult to hold Pakistan together as Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan split to leave the Punjab as a 'cock on a dunghill'. After Benazir Bhutto's killing Sind nationalism was aflame and the voting in Pakistan in 2008 split on national lines. A violent never recognised and constantly at war Pushtunistan is left to rot, while being convenient ideological gun fodder in the permanent reactionary war called the wars against drugs and terror. Meanwhile we British having backed our Indian Empire problem into Pakistan, now have our own migrant Pakistanis to bring the war on terror over here or to tourists and business folk in Mumbai. Curzon, Blair's and Brown's liberal imperialism will have a lot of deaths to answer for.

THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY AT STAKE

When I was close to finishing this chapter I talked a Minister friend who has helped the Afghan Action charity sell its carpets. I mentioned that the major theme was that the war in Afghanistan was a phony war that 'we' were not fighting there for the reasons given. He said 'we all think that' and my reply was 'why will nobody say so?' We have what Tariq Ali calls a 'blanket consensus' on Afghanistan. To question it given means that the entire diet on which we are fed is suspect. As the credit crunch avoids the key questions about Capital, so the Afghan War development speak avoids questions about our sell out to Empire. It is right at the end of this piece to remind ourselves again of the imperial geo-politics – in Asia this means seeing the India and China dimensions of this conflict. We shall also look at the threats of Encircling Iran in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here, that the presence of large numbers of US troops in Afghanistan can only be seen by the Iranians as a further encirclement, especially if the residual troop numbers remain high in Iraq. As Seymour Hersh, a crusading investigating journalist has pointed out, the old threat to Iran from the US came from a potential sea attack in the Persian Gulf. Now the US threatens Iran from Afghanistan and Iraq, by land and sea (38). It should be expected that with Brzezinski's influence and the consequent emphasis on foreign policy being about Russia and China, policy in Pakistan will become central, because of its steady alliance (Burma style) with China. The warnings implied in the bombing campaign in Pakistan in the last months of George II's reign may already reflect this. In the publicity for Obama taking power Pakistan and Iran have been lifted up as the new President's most difficult testing ground for his immediate foreign policy. Pakistan has been a 'treacherous swamp' for some time now. If the US really is determined to win the war in Afghanistan it could in effect detach the NWFP – the Pushtuns from Pakistan. Tariq Ali speculates – having predicted the break away of Bangladesh – that if the de facto break up of Pakistan did suit the US, it may not suit China's rulers, who needs a united Pakistan as a card against India, more perhaps than the USA elite does.

In late 2006 not far from the end of his reign as Prime Minister, Tony Blair claimed the 'future in the early twenty first century of the world' was at stake in the conflict in Afghanistan (39). For once he was right. But not in the way the British Establishment would like us to think - that the war is about 'defeating the Taliban, as Brown puts it frequently, or about creating 'development' in Afghanistan - whatever that is. Or even more laughingly about 'winning hearts and minds'. Did Blair know that in his words he was precisely echoing Curzon 100 years earlier? For Curzon was not worrying about hearts, minds or development - but about world domination. The real strategy in Afghanistan is an imperial strategy - at the crossroads of further global capitalist development in India, China and Russia. Afghanistan, like Iraq and maybe like Iran is a war fought by and for the Empire of Global Capital. Blair may be aware of its hidden agenda - we are not supposed to be. In 1916, when writing about the stupidity of the Great War, the Italian Anarchist Errico Malatesta wrote that in combating Prussian 'aggression', like the fight against Bin Laden and the war on terror, the Imperial State would only make 'itself the aggressor' (40). There has been much debate in the UK about our 'combat' troops coming home by 2014 or 2015. As with Iraq our leaders have not been as pressed on how many NATO or US 'garrison' troops will stay. What is assured is that the long aggressive imperial strategy for Afghanistan will remain

END NOTES

1. Rashid, A in Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia. Yale University Press, 2002 p vii
2. John Reid's first job in the New Labour Government was as Armed Forces Minister in 1997, he became Minister of Defence in 2005; His PhD was in History at Stirling University – a revisionist critique of Marxist theories on the African slave trade.
3. Estimates of Afghanistan troop numbers from Paul Rogers Oxford Research Group, July 2008. On 50-70,000 also being the long run troop level in Iraq see Chapter 1.
4. Anwar, R. The Tragedy of Afghanistan. London, Verso 1989 p 11.
5. Ali, Tariq. The Duel. Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power. London, Simon & Schuster 2008 p 217.
6. Sunday Times, July 2007, Anwar p 11.
7. Rubin, B.R. The Fragmentation of Afghanistan. State Formation and Collapse in the International System. 1995, Yale University Press, this ed 2002 p ix-xiii, 8 26. Also see Cooley and Rashid (2000) p 5. Tariq Ali's and Rubin's are two key works.
8. Griffiths, J.C. Afghanistan. A History of Conflict. London, Andre Deutsch 1981, this ed, 2001 p 13.
9. Quoted in Griffin, M. Reaping the Whirlwind. The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan. London, Pluto Press 2001 p 157. It is also this Communist who speaks of going back 500 years in history. Also see Rashid (2000) p 207-8.
10. UN Statistics Division, 2009 [http.unstats.un.org](http://unstats.un.org)
11. I have decided to use the term Pushtun for the dominant people of Southern Afghanistan. I have followed Anwar's usage so it fits with the land they should really rule – Pushtun-istan. Many call them Pashtun; the British imperialist – Pa(r)thans. It is Pushtun identity and nationalism which lies at the heart of support for the 'Taliban'.
12. Rashid (2000) p 10-12, 38.
13. Morris, J. Heavens Command. London 1973. This Ed 1984 p 90-111. Gillard p 51-64, Griffiths p 16-31.
14. Robson, B. Road to Kabul. The Second Afghan War, 1878-81 Staplehurst, Spellmont 2003 p 19, 25-33.
15. Quote is Robson p 39. Also see Kramer, M (ed) Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution Boulder, Westview Press 1987. In particular, Khalilzad, Z. Iranian Revolution and Afghan Resistance p 258-62. Also see Rashid (2000) p 37.

16. The Times 16.12.08.
17. On William Morris' critique of the war in Afghanistan, and the carve up of the Ottoman Empire, See Wilde (2006).
18. Robson p 47- 55, 68, 278.
19. Anwar p 265.
20. Rashid p 11, Rubin p 49-51, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office on aid.
21. Tariq Ali. Clash of Fundamentalisms.Crusades, Jihad and Modernity. Between Hammer and Anvil London, Verso 2002. This ed 2003 p 205, Rubin p 19- 37, 55.
22. Ali (2008) p 31-3, Rashid p 12.
23. Ali (2002) p 181-3, Rubin p 59-63.
24. Then the new British Ambassador to Afghanistan, the Guardian 21 June 2007.
25. Nojumi, N. The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.London, Palgrave 2002 p 65, Anwar p 26-30.
26. Anwar p 42, Griffiths p 60-1.
27. Stewart, R. The Places in Between. London, Picador 2005, Ali (2008) p 26.
28. The situation in Afghanistan is described as 'calm but volatile...This is code for bloody awful'. Bell, M. Memories of Vietnam, New Statesman 20.08.07.
29. Christian Aid - Afghan Hearts, Afghan Minds p 4, Sunday Telegraph 02.07.06.
30. Ali (2008) p 224, Nojumi p 170.
31. Financial Times - P Stephens, 13.03.07).
32. Observer 03.09.06, Red Pepper July 2007, Jelsma. M & Kramer, T.
33. Independent 10.05.07 Sands; Independent 07.09.06, Hari, J.
34. Ali (2008) p 209, 234
35. Christian Aid p 6,16, 28.
36. Browne, D., House of Commons, Parliamentary debate 16 June 2006.
37. Red Pepper, Dec 06- Jan 07, Ali p 181, 223, Christian Aid p 21.
38. Richards, V. (ed) Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas London, Freedom Press, 1965 p 249.

