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British India's Northern Frontier

1865-1895

A Study in Imperial Policy

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G. J. ALDER



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**FOR
MOTHER AND FATHER**

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FOREWORD

UNLIKE the 'north-west', India's northern frontier has been such as to cut her off almost entirely from land communication with her neighbours; indeed India's commercial connections with the rest of the world in the modern era have been largely sea-borne. None the less, throughout the nineteenth century, the mountainous 'roof of the world' was the scene of constant observation and frequent intervention by British agents, patrols and garrisons. Although any large-scale invasion of India over such forbidding terrain struck many sensible soldiers as inconceivable, 'strategic' frontier posts grew up like mushrooms, each more advanced than the last.

The reasoning that justified such interference was simple. If the British left any penetrable pass unguarded, or any potentially hostile tribe untended, the Russians might move in. And so the expensive multiplication of roads and forts went on, each new advance further complicating and swelling the legacy of frontier defence. Suspicion beget suspicion, every tactical move, a counter-move – producing the kind of nervous hostility that we would describe today as 'cold war'. There was never any question of conquering the frontier, although occupation often followed the progress of influence; the main object was to secure the defiles, valleys or passes that led downward to the plains, by controlling the peoples that lay astride them. Dr Alder's detailed study concerns essentially one salient of the total frontier – the area best known as the eastern Hindu Kush whose remote inaccessible valleys encouraged a stubborn independence among the tough peoples inhabiting them. During the second half of the nineteenth century, hardly a year went by without at least a minor operation involving this intractable land or its outskirts.

Although the Imperial Studies Series has been in existence since 1927 this is the first monograph that concerns itself with the sub-continent of India. Such apparent neglect was simply an accident of annual competition. The original object of the series was to salve some of the important research work of young post-graduate students which might otherwise gather dust on archival shelves, before being ransacked by another academic generation

in pursuit of similar themes. Obviously the studies selected for publication have varied in subject matter, geographical setting and merit; but on the whole they represent diligent and scholarly attempts to deal with some problem of imperial development. The series was not designed for writers of established reputation; it is intended, in the words of one of my predecessors, for those 'who are mature in mind, but young in years'.

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PREFACE

THIS study describes the formation and execution of British policy in that area on the north of India lying roughly between latitudes 33° and 40° N and longitudes 70° and 80° E. Within those limits at the end of the nineteenth century ran what I have called 'British India's northern frontier'. This borderland, protected and defined by the mighty ranges of the Eastern Hindu Kush, the Mustagh and the Karakoram, swept northwards in a great arc from the Dora Pass on the west to the Karakoram Pass on the east – three hundred tangled miles of mountain and precipitous valley. Thrusting up into the very heart of Central Asia, this massive salient came to be directly threatened by the apparently inexorable advance of Imperial Russia. Had this threat not existed, it is extremely doubtful whether there would have been any British *policy* in the area at all.

But there *was* a threat and hence the steps, described in this book, which were taken to make the remote limits of one Empire secure against the potentially hostile proximity of another. The work is based mainly upon the writings of the men who guarded and governed that Empire and who, without exception, took for granted their right to do so as implicitly as we accept the law of gravity. Imperialism is of its own time, and the fact that it has become a slogan in a new and more terrible 'great game' in Central Asia does not give the historian the right to ignore it as a phase of history, any more than it obliges him to pass judgment upon it in the light of today's values.

On the contrary, recent events have done much to give back to the area treated in this survey much of the importance which it possessed at the end of the nineteenth century but which it subsequently lost. Today the troop-carrying aeroplane can cover the old four or five day journey from Peshawar to Chitral in an hour, and the intercontinental nuclear rocket far to the north in Central Asia can vault the mightiest mountains in the world and obliterate Peshawar in only a few minutes. These things have made nonsense of traditional nineteenth-century concepts of warfare. High passes and barren plateaux are no longer beyond the range of modern armies, as the presence of Chinese tanks in the erstwhile Forbidden

from Chitral, while the Pamir question is still unsettled, would be premature and unwise.⁹

Nevertheless, and Elgin emphasized this privately, there was no question of supporting the 'policy of activity' favoured by the local officials. As soon as possible the British force would be removed from Chitral.¹⁰

He was quickly forced to change his mind. On the first day of 1895, a few short weeks before the final exchange of notes which terminated the Pamirs dispute, Nizam-ul-Mulk was murdered by his almost equally incompetent brother, Amir-ul-Mulk. The change seemed unlikely at first to cause even local fighting.¹¹ Yet on 14 March, just three days after the Pamir settlement, orders had to be issued by the Indian Government for the mobilization of a large force of fifteen thousand men to relieve the small British garrison besieged at Chitral.

This dramatic development came about because, within two months of Nizam's death, the two pressures which from different directions had been threatening the stability of Chitral for years were suddenly exerted at the same moment and apparently in concert with one another. Umra Khan advanced with several thousand men into Southern Chitral and shortly afterwards Sher Afzal appeared on the scene from Kabul with the support of most of the Chitralis. This peculiar and entirely unforeseen combination – a popular claimant to the Chitral throne in agreement with the fanatical Pathan tribes who stood astride the only feasible route from India to Chitral – was, of course, extremely serious. It turned almost the whole of Chitral against the handful of British troops beleaguered there, and at the same time made it extremely difficult to relieve them.¹²

Nevertheless the attempt to save them from annihilation had to be made. Besides a direct assault in force along the Dir road, the Indian Government tried to enlist the help of Afghanistan against

9. 99, India, 12 June 1894, extract in AP 1895 LXXII C.7864, p.31.

10. To Fowler, 31 July 1894, ELP/1, p.72b.

11. This was the opinion of the men on the spot, sub-enclosure 32 of 46, India, 6 Mar. 1895, PFI/78, p.1453.

12. For the events of the first phase of the crisis, see AP 1895 LXXII C.7864, pp.34–42; tels. in HC/156, pp.83, 173, 287, 379, 507, 845, 1099; Elgin's letters to Fowler, especially ELP/2, pp.32–6; enclosures of India despatches 46 of 6 Mar., 66 of 17 Apr., and 78 of 1 May 1895.

