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The Northern Frontier of India. Roads and Passes. Measures for Defence of Frontier.

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India is bounded in and protected on the north by a mountain snow-clad barrier which practically bars it from any serious invasion from that direction. By the open, fertile plains of Herat and Kandahar, or even by the narrower and more difficult valleys of Kabul an invading army might effect an entrance into India. But over the snowy passes and through the inhospitable defiles of the Hindu Kush and Karakoram ranges, only the smallest force, designed to divert attention from elsewhere, and to cause temporary annoyance, could ever hope to find its way.

2. Yet the Northern Frontier demands, and should receive, a large amount of attention and care on account of the people who inhabit the mountain valleys on it. These wild tribes are capable of being used as a weapon against us, and it would be impossible for us to remain in the plains and simply await attack whenever that might be made, because, if that were done, the Russians would be able to quietly establish themselves among the numerous tribes who inhabit the mountain belt and roll them off in one great avalanche on to the plains of India whenever they chose to do so. We might with equanimity await in the plains the arrival of the three or four or five thousand Russians who could push their way through the mountain barrier. But to check the avalanche of hill men they might set a-going at the same time, we must go right up to the watershed. We must be in a position to prevent its ever being started and not await below till it is crashing down on the top of us, and hence the necessity of a thoroughly accurate idea of the nature of the mountain barrier and of the various tribes who inhabit it.

3. The width of mountain between the plains of India and the plains of Russian Turkestan is, as the crow flies, four hundred miles. 12,400 feet is the very lowest point at which it can be crossed; and 14,800 feet the next lowest. Even further westward, from the plains of the Punjab to the plains of Badakhshan it is 200 miles in a direct line. And while this is the actual width of the barrier in different directions the distances by road across it are of course considerably greater. From Osh, the

first cantonment on the Russian side of the mountains, by the route across the Pamirs, and by Gilgit and Kashmir to the plains of India the distance is 920 miles; and the route which has the very shortest part through mountain country—that from Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan, to the Peshawur frontier is 343 miles in length. There is, it will be seen, therefore, just a solid mass of mountain stretching across our frontier on the north, and these mountains are often of enormous height; peaks of 20,000 feet are frequent and not a few are over 25,000 feet; while the valleys, though on the Pamirs widening out at times to a breadth of four or five miles, are as a rule deep and narrow, fit for cultivation only at intervals and, unless specially prepared, impassable for animal transport.

4. The principal roads across these mountains are:—

- (1) From Yarkand, by Leh to Kashmir and Rawal Pindi—a route which will be left out of account at present, as it is unlikely to be used so long as the Chinese retain their hold over Kashgar, and as in any case it has little value for military purposes, crossing as it does such immensely high passes, three of which average 18,000 feet.

- (2) From Osh by the Pamirs, the Mintaka Pass to Hunza, Gilgit, and Kashmir.

The distances by this route are—

	Miles.
Osh to Alai - - -	110
Alai to Murghabi - - -	133
Murghabi to Hunza - - -	220
Hunza to Gilgit - - -	65
Gilgit to Kashmir - - -	192

Osh to Kashmir - - -	<u>720</u>

- (3) From Osh by the Pamirs, the Baroghil Pass and Yasin to Gilgit, and Kashmir.

The distances by this route are—

	Miles.
Osh to Murghabi - - -	243
Murghabi by Aktash to Sarhad - - -	154
Sarhad to Gilgit - - -	130

Osh to Gilgit - - -	<u>527</u>

- (4) From Osh by the Pamirs and the Baroghil Pass to Chitral, and thence through Dir to Peshawur, or down the Kunar Valley to Jellalabad.

The distances by this route are—

	Miles.
Osh to Sarhad - - -	397
Sarhad to Chitral - - -	156

Osh to Chitral - - -	<u>553</u>

(5) From Faizabad in Badakhshan to Chitral 157 miles and thence as in No. (4).

5. Each of these, except the first, it is necessary to describe in detail. Of them Nos. (2), (3), (4), have the portion across the Pamirs in common. Starting from Osh, a Russian cantonment situated just at the northern foot of hills, a cart road has been made as far as the Alai Valley, 110 miles, though it is questionable whether it will be much used for wheeled transport, as the gradients are steep and the road unmetalled, soft and heavy. On this section one principal pass, the Taldik, 11,500 feet, has to be crossed. Beyond the Alai the road has not been made for carts, though there would be no great difficulty in doing so, for the valleys are wide and the lower spurs of the mountains rounded. At 16 miles the Kizil Art Pass, 14,000 feet, is crossed, and at 94 miles the Uzbek 14,800 feet. At 133 miles from the Alai, Murghabi, the Russian outpost on the Pamirs is reached and the Pamirs proper are entered. These are flat wide valleys from three to five miles in width, covered with either grass or gravel.

6. An alternative route to the Pamirs leads from Marghilan to the Alichur Pamir. It has been used by small parties of Russian troops, but it is more difficult than that by Osh.

7. From the Pamirs the various routes diverge.

No. (2) crosses the Baiyik Pass to the Taghdumbash Pamir, and then either the Kilik or Mintaka Pass to Hunza. Across each of these passes laden animals may be taken. But on the southern side as far as Hunza the road is of extreme difficulty. In the summer months—from May to September, it is impossible for ponies to go by it. At other times by fording the river they can manage to do so with considerable difficulty. Beyond Hunza there is a good mule road all the way to Kashmir, and from Kashmir a properly metalled cart road to Rawal Pindi. The passes by this route are open to traffic by laden animals, roughly speaking, from the end of May or beginning of June to the end of October.

No. (3) traverses the Little Pamir and a portion of Wakhan and then crosses the water-shed of the Hindu Kush at the Baroghil Pass, 12,400 feet, an extremely easy pass which would present no difficulty whatever to traffic of any description, and which is open winter as well as summer, and only closed temporarily for a week or two in spring when the melting snow becomes soft. A march from it, however, on this road is the Darkot Pass, 15,000 feet with glaciers on both its northern and southern approach. This is a difficult pass, and it was at one time thought that it practically blocked this road. But as we are getting more accustomed to the difficulties of mountain roads it is gradually being looked on with less and less diffidence, and

as the Wakhis regularly bring considerable numbers of laden ponies across it, it cannot be regarded as a really serious obstacle. It is open roughly from the beginning of June to the middle of October. From the foot of the pass to Yasin and Gupis there is a fair road, and from Gupis by Gilgit to Kashmir a newly-made mule road.

No. (4) branches off from No. (3) at the Baroghil Pass. The first reports of the difficulties of this route as far as Mastuj are incorrect. As soon as the Yarkhun river becomes fordable—about the middle of September—none of the obstacles, the glaciers and the stiff stony ascents which lie along the summer road, have to be crossed and the road passes instead along a broad pebbly river bed and is perfectly practicable for laden animals. From Mastuj to Chitral the route is, at present, bad in places, but can at all times, with a little labour, be made practicable for laden animals. From Chitral to Peshawur the route is in constant use by caravans of mules and ponies. One principal pass, the Lowarai, 10,400 feet, has to be crossed, but it is quite easy and, though ordinarily considered to be closed from about the middle of December to the end of May, is even then practicable for men or animals if they are in sufficient numbers to trample down a way through the snow. The branch route from Chitral to Jellalabad is scarcely used at present from political reasons, but there is no doubt that it could without difficulty be made into a good mule road.

No. (5) is the shortest and most direct route; it is in use every year by caravans from the plains of India to Badakhshan, and it is that by which Sher Afzul, two years ago, made his successful raid upon Chitral and placed himself on the throne there. The road in the valleys is, of course, rough, but only one serious obstacle, the Dorah Pass, 14,800 feet, has to be crossed. This is stony and difficult, but still practicable for animals. It is open from the middle of June to the middle of November.

8. Besides these principal routes there are a number of minor importance, forming connections with them on alternative lines of communication. Of these the most noteworthy are—

(1.) From the Taghdumbash Pamir by the Khunjerab Pass to the Hunza Valley. On account of the difficulties on the southern side the route cannot be considered practicable for laden animals.

(2.) From Bozai Gumbaz by the Khora Bhort Pass and Ashkuman Valley to Gakuch and Gilgit, 139 miles. This can be used by animals or even laden men for only one month, October; for until the end of September the road down the valley is blocked by the river, and by the beginning of November the Khora Bhort Pass closes. Supplies along this route are very scarce. A strong defensive position might be made at the junction of the Karumbar glacier above Bhort.

(3.) From the valley of the Panja River of Wakhan by the Khan Khon Pass to the valley of the Yarkhun River. This is of some importance as, though difficult, it can be used by laden animals and forms a means of communication between Wakhan and Chitral during the summer months when the road below the Baroghil Pass is impassable owing to the depth of the Yarkhun River. It is frequently used in this way by the Wakhis.

(4.) From Wakhan by the Ocbil and Kachan Passes to the Turikho Valley. These are glacier passes and can only be used by mountaineers.

(5.) From Wakhan by the Sad Istragh Pass to the Turikho Valley. This is extremely difficult and never now used.

(6.) From Kazideh or Istragh in Wakhan by the Sar Istragh Pass to the Arkari Valley of Chitral. This is not passable for laden animals; but on account of its directness is frequently used by men on foot.

(7.) From Zebak in Badakhshan by the Khatinza, Nuksan and Agram Passes to the Arkari Valley. These passes are all difficult and not practicable for laden animals.

9. As regards supplies on these routes, between the plains of Turkestan and the valley of the Hindu Kush, the only supplies which are to be obtained are sheep in limited quantities and grass for fodder. No grain is grown anywhere on the Alai or Pamirs. In the valley of the Hindu Kush, supplies in only very small quantities are procurable. The country barely supports the inhabitants. Chitral with some difficulty keeps the hundred men of the Political Officer's escort supplied. Yasin supports another hundred men. Hunza cannot support a single man of the garrison, and Nagar under fifty. The Gilgit garrison is supplied almost entirely from Kashmir and as a consequence of this dearth of supplies it would be necessary for a Russian force using the Pamir line to bring all supplies of grain for men and animals with them the entire four hundred to five hundred miles which separate their nearest cantonment from the strategical points inside the Hindu Kush frontier. At the same time grass, though plentiful at certain places in the summer on the Pamirs, is as a rule very sparse.

10. On the Badakhshan line supplies are more easily procurable. On both banks of the Oxus there are considerable villages and small towns, and supplies could therefore be obtained from them.

11. A most important point as affecting the defence of this frontier has now to be considered. That the season for operations, which it will be seen is fairly well defined and very limited. Not only the condition of the passes, but the necessity of awaiting the growth of the young grass for fodder purposes, makes it practically impossible for a force to leave the Alai for an expedition across the Pamirs, till

the end of June; and the dying off of the grass would make it necessary to close operations by the end of October. About four months only are consequently available for operations by the Pamirs. Small parties could, of course, cross them at other times, but a force of any size can only operate while grass is to be obtained.

12. The season for operations by the Badakhshan line is regulated by the condition of the Dorah Pass which, in ordinary years, may be considered to be passable from the middle of June till the middle of November.

13. Some account having now been given of the nature of the country it is necessary to describe the people who inhabit it. North of the Hindu Kush we have firstly the Pamirs inhabited by the nomadic Kirghiz, a lazy unreliable lot, and of not much account for military purposes, as they are incapable either of offering resistance defensively or furnishing material for levies likely to be of any value; secondly, Wakhan, Shighnan, and Roshan, inhabited by a particularly insipid race of men, strong physically, but with no fighting qualities whatever; and thirdly, Badakhshan, inhabited by as poor a race as the last named States. None of these people have any hostility to Russia. The Kirghiz would prefer the Chinese, as they think they are more lightly taxed by them, but they have no rooted objection to the Russians. And with regard to the others, the Wakhis, the Shighnis, the Roshanis and the Badakhshanis, they would gladly welcome the Russians and would prefer any masters to their present Afghau rulers. They are such spiritless people that they would be incapable of giving the Russians much help in a directly military way, but they might do so as carriers for an army and in furnishing supplies.

14. On the southern side of the Hindu Kush watershed we have a variety of tribes inhabiting the mountainous strip between it and the plains of the Punjab. Most of these are hostile to us, but fortunately, the immediate frontier—the states of Chitral and Hunza-Nagar—is inhabited by people on the whole fairly well-disposed to us, and with none of that fanaticism which is the characteristic of the Pathan tribes further south. These states, Chitral, Hunza, Nagar, Gilgit, Punyal, have together a population which may be roughly estimated at from 200,000 to 250,000. The inhabitants of them, though varying in their degree of warlike ardour and capacity, all have certain characteristics in common. They are easy-going, anxious to take life as quietly and smoothly as possible and be left alone. They have no taste whatever for wandering into other countries nor any trade enterprise or wish to engage in trade. They are passionately fond of amusements, of dancing, the band, polo, and shooting or hawking. Among themselves

there have been numerous little wars, but detailed inquiry shows that these have never been very bloodthirsty; slaves would be carried off and a village or two taken, but the actual number of killed would be very small. Still, though these tribes have not that fierce craving for fighting which seems to characterise the Pathans and the tribes of Afghanistan, it is noticeable that they have managed to hold their own through all these years against attacks from Pathans, and the Hunza-Nagar people for many years against the more regular troops of the Maharaja of Kashmir. The Hunza-Nagar men are perhaps the best fighting men among them, and they used to show remarkable boldness and enterprise in their raids. But there are men in Chitral and Yasin who are not far behind, and within the last twenty-five years the Chitralis have fought two successful battles with the Pathans, and driven back an invasion from Badakhshan. All these hillmen have, too, most marvellous marching powers, being able both to cover long distances in a short space of time and to go for prolonged periods on very scanty rations. In the winter of 1892 at the time of the disturbances in Chitral 100 Hunza-Nagar men were suddenly warned to proceed to Gilgit. The orders were issued at 10.30 one morning and by 10 the next night they were at Gilgit, sixty-five miles distant, and from there proceeded by double marches towards Chitral. They are good mountaineers on rock; they can endure extremes of cold well; and, as they are most of them accustomed to shooting, they ought to be easily trained into good riflemen. Such men would, therefore, be very valuable as levies for carrying out the duties of light troops in a mountainous country; they could be used for crowning the heights along the line of march, for making raids upon the enemy's line of communication, and by cutting in by paths known only, or accessible only, to themselves, harrassing him always and everywhere on the line of march. Of these men from six to eight thousand would be forthcoming on the whole frontier, and with a background of trained troops and under the guidance and control of British officers, the damage which they might do to Russian troops, untrained as they are in mountain campaigns, is difficult to over estimate. But to face Russians they must feel themselves supported by our own troops, and how and where those could best be placed will be shown below.

15. As has been already said these tribes on the extreme frontier are well-disposed, and they are at present well in hand. Inside of these, however, and between them and the settled districts of the Punjab, is a belt of fanatical fighting Pathans thoroughly hostile to us at present, and they form a barrier which now shuts us off from direct communication with our frontier posts.

16. These tribes can turn out many thousands of fighting men. Their feelings can be readily acted on by their fanatical priests. And the only reason that they are not a greater source of danger to our frontier than they are is, that they are so engaged in fighting and quarrelling amongst themselves and have such little trust in each other that combinations of them under any leader of their own are impossible. Should, however, a power from outside come amongst them to weld them together, and show them one great object which they can make for in common, the force which could be engendered is enormous. That power the Russians would provide if they were ever allowed to come in contact with them, and the object they could set before these tribes to urge them on would be the looting of the plains of India.

17. This being the situation it is obviously of the utmost importance that we should make the outward belt of friendly races into a compact barrier, which, stiffened by the re-organised troops of Kashmir, and, where and when it is necessary, by British Indian troops, would effectually block the approaches to India. Upon that work we are already engaged. Our political hold over these tribes is complete. The rulers of Chitral, Hunza and Nagar all hold their thrones through us. They are bound to us by every tie, both of gratitude and self-interest, and nothing but serious blundering on our part could estrange them from us. The people at one time had to fear forced labour for transport purposes, but the construction of roads, the consequent ability to use animals instead of men for this purpose, is gradually diminishing the amount of coolie labour we are obliged to ask of them, and year by year fewer demands of that sort will be made of them, and, at the same time, more and more trade will flow into the country, so that the people will be able to change the rupees which they earn, and acquire from the sale of supplies, for necessaries and luxuries which cannot be produced in their own country. With proper management there is no conceivable reason, therefore, why these tribes should not permanently remain friendly to us. At one time it appeared improbable that they would ever attach themselves to British protection. Like all mountain people they are inherently suspicious of strangers, and the first Englishman who went amongst them was killed. But the ice has now been broken; the first step, which is always the one which costs, has been taken, and but little now remains to attach these men permanently to us.

18. And having effected this, or being well on our road to effect it, the next point of importance is to gain readier access than we now have to our outer frontier—to these tribes. It is unnecessary to work out here the details, but it has been

computed that, from their present position, the Russians could hardly hope to actually cross the Hindu-Kush frontier with more than about 1,500 men by the Baroghil route (either on Chitral or Gilgit), and 500 or 600 by Hunza. But by the Dorah route or Chitral they might possibly bring 3,000 or 4,000 men, because that route lies over so much less elevated country, and has many more facilities for obtaining supplies and transport, leads more directly to the plains of India, and is in much closer contact with that which would be used by the main body of any invading force from Turkestan which would undoubtedly march for Kabul. Chitral, therefore, must be the pivot of defence of this frontier, and it is to that place that we must gain direct access through the belt of hostile Pathan tribes which now bar our approach to it. But Chitral cannot be defended from Gilgit. If a Russian force got into Badakhshan, and held that country up to the Dorah Pass, they would be within 47 miles of Chitral, and, to show how liable to sudden attacks from that direction it is, it is only necessary to point out that Sher Afzul, the usurper who killed Afzul-ul-Mulk, the young ruler of Chitral, was actually before the walls of that place with a hundred or two of horsemen before one reliable word of his approach had been received there. A storm might in a similar way collect behind the Hindu-Kush, and burst upon Chitral without absolutely any warning. How then can this place be held only as an outpost from Gilgit, 220 miles distant, when Gilgit itself is a hardly sustained outpost 237 miles from the nearest British cantonment, Abbotabad? It is impossible and unnecessary to do so. It is impossible because the distances are so great and the country so mountainous by the Gilgit route, which is in addition liable to a flank attack from the Baroghil; and unnecessary, because there happens to be a road, only 186 miles in length, which leads direct to the large cantonment of Peshawur in the plains of the Punjab. Chitral then must be defended from Peshawur, and it is by the direct road from that place that the force it would be necessary to oppose to the Russian force advancing by the Dorah and Baroghil must reach Chitral, and it is only as the ruler and people feel that they are to be supported by this road that they will have any confidence in us, for they are as keenly alive to the strategical strong points and defects of the lines of defence as we ourselves are.

19. With Chitral as the main centre of defence of this frontier, outer position would be taken up at the various "darbands" which block the roads leading to it. The principal of these "darbands" are at Shogot on the Dorah route, and at Jhopu, three marches above Mastuj on the Baroghil route. Gilgit in a similar way would be covered by defensive position at Darkot on the Yasin route, and at some point, probably Khaibar, on

the Hunza route. Up to these points it is necessary to have good roads so that our troops could be brought rapidly up to them. Beyond them our strength would lie in keeping the roads in their present execrable condition. A thoroughly good mule road from Gilgit to Chitral, which would bind those two places and the outer positions together, and a telegraph line along it are also of course a necessity. Gilgit is already connected by a good mule road and a telegraph line with Kashmir, and by a passable road with Abbotabad. Chitral must likewise be connected by a proper road and a telegraph line with Peshawur. Then the accessibility of this frontier will be established. There is no necessity to keep large garrisons on this frontier in times of peace. Large numbers of troops are not required to keep the people in order. A quite small force is sufficient for that. But what is necessary is that we should be able to rapidly and easily pour troops into the country when danger threatens. Keep them down in their cantonments in the plains while everything is quiet, and do not burden the people of the country with all the worry of supplying them and working for them, and Government with all the cost of supporting them in distant parts while all is quiet. But have the means to launch an army into the place whenever the necessity for doing so arises. This advantage would be given us by good roads and a telegraph line. And when those are completed a garrison for Gilgit considerably under its present strength, a political officer with a small escort in Hunza, and another in Chitral with some small posts to connect these places together, are all that is necessary to keep up in ordinary times. These would be sufficient to keep the frontier quiet in times of peace, and to keep it accessible for our troops whenever a Russian advance should make it necessary to send them there.

20. At the same time everything should be done to make the most of the material on the spot. We cannot defend the frontier entirely with Kashmir troops and local levies. These must have a backing of our own men. But on the Gilgit side every use must be made, as in fact it is now, of Kashmir troops locally available. And throughout the whole frontier the local tribesmen should be turned into serviceable levies. The more efficient and loyal we can make these, the fewer of our own Indian troops, so much needed elsewhere, shall we require. We cannot expect to make these hillmen into anything approaching regular troops. They could never be made into anything like so regular as the Kashmir troops for instance. But they can be taught to shoot, and when they can do that men who are as hardy as they are, who can march as they can, who know and can move over their mountains as they do, will, in the special conditions of the defence of this frontier and under British officers, be oftentimes as valuable as any regular

troops. And if in peace time they can be made to feel that our protectorate over them is an advantage to them by bringing money into the country and causing good roads to be constructed through it, and not a burden on them to weigh them down, they will, in the case of a Russian invasion, feel that they are fighting not for us alone but for their own liberty and well being. With careful and sympathetic handling this result could undoubtedly be arrived at, and it is one of the most important points of all to be attended to on this frontier. Here, as we are doing elsewhere, we must turn men who might be a source of danger to us into a source of strength. We have no need to be a burden on them. We do not want their country. All we require is that their country should be preserved intact to themselves, and that we, and not another Power, should have access to it. When this is thoroughly understood we shall have these tribes willingly working their own and our own salvation in complete accord with us.

21. The definite results we have now arrived at are, firstly, that on the northern frontier Chitral is the most important strategical point; secondly, that Chitral must be approached from Peshawur, not from Gilgit; thirdly, that good roads up to the defensive position must be constructed; and lastly, that the men of the country must be trained to defend their country. When this has been accomplished it will be easier to support Gilgit from Chitral than it now is to support Chitral from Gilgit, the necessity for shutting up British-Indian troops in the remote and isolated Gilgit district will be removed, and the defence of the Hindu-Kush, instead of being isolated and separated as it must needs be if conducted from Gilgit, would be incorporated with that of the whole North-West, and troops detailed for Chitral could, when required, co-operate with those on the far more important line of defence through Kabul.

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