Strategic Importance of the North-West Frontier Rail and Road Networks on the Chessboard of the Great Game

Usama Bin Ashraf*

Abstract

Afghanistan and the regions of Central Asia, located at the crossroads of ancient trade routes such as the Silk Road, have long been the focus of regional and international powers. The geopolitical competition between the Great Britain and Russian Empire in the 19th century, known as the Great Game, significantly shaped the modern borders and dynamics of Central Asia. This paper explores the strategic efforts of the British Empire particularly through the development of railway and road networks in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of British India. Construction of these transportation networks was driven by the need to secure borders; rapidly deploy troops; consolidate military positions; and control the border tribes. This study highlights the strategic importance of important routes like the Bolan and Khyber Passes and their use by the British Empire. Furthermore, it examines how Britain integrated these transport projects into wider imperial strategies, using them not only for military logistics but also to exert political and economic influence on local populations. By masking their military objectives as economic and cultural missions, the British effectively secured their interests in the region and established a lasting influence on the geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia.

* MUSLIM Institute, Islamabad.

Keywords

The Great Game, Rail Networks, Silk Road, Geopolitical Landscape, NWFP, Russian Empire, British Empire, Afghanistan, Central Asia, South Asia.

Introduction

Brittain started laying railway networks in British India, especially in the current Pakistani region, in the second half of the 19th century. In the early developmental phases, Scinde Railway, Punjab Railway, and Indus Steam Flotilla companies were established in Sindh and Punjab, which undertook the construction of railway lines in these provinces. In the later periods, the existing railway networks were merged and expanded to other distant parts of the land (Hurd & Kurr, 2012; pp. 1-3).

Four important and strategic railway networks were laid in the frontier region: Sind–Pishin State Railway, Trans–Baluchistan Railway, Punjab Northern State Railway, and Kandahar State Railway. In these networks, Punjab Northern State Railway was stretched from Lahore to Peshawar by the year 1876. There were three key objectives which the British achieved through these networks: to counter the advance of Russia in Afghanistan and Central Asia; to normalize Empire's relations with Afghanistan; and to have strong control over the tribal areas (Baha, 1968).

In the first half of the 19th century, conflicts such as the Anglo-Afghan Wars of 1839-1842, the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-1846 and 1848-1849 resulted in the virtual annexation of the regions of Afghanistan, Punjab, and Kashmir. However, the atmosphere and war tactics were changing over time (Elham & Nazari, 2023; Robson, 1986). Therefore, the Britain orchestrated various methods to bring Afghanistan into its imperial influence. These methods included installing political agents like the Major Rawlinson, making diplomatic alliances, and attempting to install friendly rulers (Duthie, 2008).

The achievement of the strategic objectives was impossible for the British without building networks of railways and roads, in order to quickly transport troops into the frontier region (Duthie, 2008). The most intimate region with Afghanistan was the North-West Frontier Province.

Therefore, the British constructed a substantial number of roads and railway lines to connect the frontier regions to the military and other strategic facilities in India. Inevitably, these methods were employed as colonial warfare tactics and tools by British in the NWFP. The strategic importance of the railways and roads in the NWFP can be best comprehended in terms of the cold war between the British and the Russian empires (Duthie, 2008).

Research Methodology

The Great Game, a term first introduced by a British intelligence officer Arthur Conolly (Becker, 2012), refers to the intense geopolitical enmity between the Great Britain and Russia in Central Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The North-West Frontier, encompassing present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, served as the primary battleground for this imperial competition (Duthie, 2008). This qualitative research paper examines the complex dynamics of the Great Game, focusing on the balance of power between Britain and Russia, and the significance of trade routes connecting Central Asia with Afghanistan.

Through a comprehensive analysis of secondary data, including scholarly research articles, books, and conference proceedings, this study aims to justify arguments presented by various commentators on the subject. The paper is divided into two main sections: firstly, the great power politics and rivalry between Russia and Britain are explored, and secondly, the spread of trade routes connecting Central Asia with Afghanistan are examined. By investigating these aspects, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the Great Game's impact on regional politics, trade, and security in Asia.

British and Russian Rivalry

The diverse and vibrant regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia have always been at the crossroads of the old world. Located at the nexus of the main Silk Road arteries, they have long been the object of desire for many Empires and regional powers. Therefore, it is no surprise that modern sketch of Central Asia came into existence as the result of a 19th

century clash between two great powers, Britain and Russia. This clash, known as the Great Game, included wars, espionage, and diplomacy, and drew boundaries in the region that still exist in the present day.

In the British sources, the first mention of 'the Great Game' is found in an 1840 correspondence between Captain Arthur Connolly and Major Henry Rawlinson, a political agent in Kandahar. Connolly describes the idea of a mission to 'civilize' Afghanistan, and wrote,

> You've a great game, a noble game before you, and I have strong hope that you will be able to steer through all jealousy, and caprice, and sluggishness, till the Afghans unite with your own countrymen in appreciating your labours for a fine nation's regeneration and advancement. (Yapp, 2001)

Later novels such as Rudyard Kipling's Kim shifted the meaning to the geopolitical struggle for domination (Edwards, 2003). Russia for its own part, saw the conquest of the various Khanates present in Central Asia as a 'civilizing mission' of its own, conquering what they saw as barbaric states built on slave-trading (Morrison, 2014).

Through a celebrated public memorandum written by Foreign Minister Alexander Gorchakov, Russia disclosed a plan in 1864 for securing its frontiers and laid down the course of action to accomplish it. This sketch sought to absorb or occupy the territories which were not characterised with organized form of society and lacked any governmental structure. This memorandum considered such societies unstable and turbulent and put them in the category of undesirable neighbours. However, if a government in that region would respond with peace and sought commercial relations with Russia then it would be spared (Hopkirk & Case, 1992).

Russian actions fostered deep sensitivities on Britain's side. It would translate any Russian activity in Kabul as a hostile military plot against the British Empire. In lieu of this immense scale of sensitivity, Brittain devised plans not only to control the Afghan frontiers but also its government, which set the stage for another British invasion of Afghanistan (Yapp, 2001).

Buffer State Blues

A developmental project which would change the strategic equation between the British and Russian empires was the construction of railway networks. Russia undertook the construction of Transcaspian Railway. By the year 1890, it ran through the Krasnovodsk on the shores of Caspian Sea to all the way east to Tashkent and Khokand. This remarkable development provided the Russians with a grand lateral line of communication. When seen from Afghanistan side, it was running parallel above the entire length of the northern Afghan frontier with Central Asian states, which were already being absorbed into the Russian Empire. It was obvious that Russia now was looking forward to move towards Afghanistan. Being too close to the North-Western Frontiers of India, it triggered discomfort in the British Empire (Asil, 2024).

Other actors in the region included Qajar in Iran, which tried to establish a diplomatic network with what they saw as their greater homeland, and France, which also launched attempts to influence both Afghanistan and Iran, albeit in a mostly diplomatic and cultural context (Cronin, 2008). In current narratives, the Great Game usually takes place primarily in and around Afghanistan. However, other regions were impacted, as Russian expansion throughout Central Asia continued throughout the 19th Century, while regions such as Tibet also saw diplomatic and espionage overtures by both powers (Cooley, 2012).

As the first of two major Empires, the British expansion into central Asia began with the Emirate of Afghanistan, which occupied parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. This was an ethnically diverse Emirate, with Pashtuns, Turkmen, Tajiks, and most of the other ethnic groups living across very loose frontiers, the North-West Frontier Province. For Britain, Afghanistan was interpreted as either a place to be conquered, or a buffer state between them and Russia, which was rapidly expanding into Central Asia (McLachlan, 2007).

The founder of the Emirate of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammad Khan, fought to defend his position, but was captured and exiled. However, the British failed to maintain stability and withdrew, allowing Mohammed Khan to return and become the second-longest reigning ruler of

Afghanistan since its founding (Dupree, 1976). The second Anglo-Afghan War, however, was far more successful for the British. The then ruler of Afghanistan was Sher Amir Khan, a man who carefully maintained a neutral stance between the growing British and Russian spheres of influence (Kárník, 2014). By that time, the British were growing increasingly belligerent due to Russian incursions into Central Asia and saw Amir Khan's fence-sitting as Russian collusion. Their invasion quickly led to the takeover of Kabul, which resulted in the Treaty of Gandamak, a negotiation which gave much of the Emirate's southern territories to the British Raj in exchange for protection. In 1893, these borders were finalized under the Durand Line agreement, which formalized the divide between Afghanistan and frontier regions of British India (Robson, 1986).

The Durand Line played a key role in the geopolitics of the 'Great Game' between the British and Russian empires, acting as a border regardless of the region's cultural and geographic complexities. The purpose of its creation was to establish a buffer zone that would protect British India from a possible Russian advance. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905, which undermined the notion of European invincibility, further heightened geopolitical tensions and influenced British strategic decisions in the region. This conflict with British colonial policies had a profound impact on the intellectual landscape of the Indian subcontinent. During this period, Muslims struggled with the evolving concepts of nationalism and nation-state, which eventually led to the drawing of new borders and the creation of Pakistan (Mazari, 1979).

The British, for a while, had been busy in Afghanistan while the Tsar's agents had been continuing their incursions into the south, annexing most of the Central Asian Khanates. By 1847, the Kazakh Khanate had been thoroughly conquered after a ten-year long rebellion against increasing Russian influence and taxation by tribal leaders. However, after failing to conquer the Khanate of Khiva in 1839, the Russians opted to more carefully pace their expansion into the region, building forts over the Sur Darya River, and laying down rail lines, such as the famous Siberia line. The 1860s proved to be a decade of monumental expansion, as Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand, major

Silk Road hubs and parts of the Great Khanate of Bukhara, were slowly conquered by the Russian Imperial Army. By that time, the rapid expansion of the Tsar's armies into Central Asia, combined with fears from the Crimean War and the Russo-Turkish War of 1878, made Britain see Russia as a barbaric and backwater foe (Buranelli, 2023).

Development Works as War Tactics

The British were using sea routes through ships to connect the Indian Subcontinent to Europe and Africa. In the beginning, they were mainly focused on the present-day India and Sindh and Punjab provinces of Pakistan. They started building a network of roads within the Subcontinent over time for trading the consumable domestic products. However, they diverted the focus of their attention on the development works in frontier regions Baluchistan and the NWFP after the second Anglo-Afghan War 1878-1880. They were fearing the attack or containment of Russia through Afghanistan. Therefore, they were acutely concerned to deploy their forces on the boarder of Afghanistan. Hence, they needed quick means of transportation within the Indian Subcontinent for the transportation of and communication with the military troops. There was no direct water route from Indian sea to Afghanistan. The only means of transportation to Afghanistan were only Roads and Railways. The strategic importance of roads and railways for the Empire can be understood from the following statement of Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief in India 1885-1893.

> We must have roads, and we must have railways; they cannot be made on short notice, and every rupee spent upon them now will repay us tenfold hereafter. Nothing will tend to secure the safety of the frontier so much as the power of rapidly concentrating troops on any threatened point, and nothing will strengthen our military position more than to open out the country and improve our relations with the frontier tribes. There are no better civilisers than roads and railways; and although some of those recommended to be made may never be required for military purposes, they will be of the greatest assistance to the civil power in the administration of the country. (Roberts, 1898)

In the light of the above statement, the foremost strategic objectives of the roads and railways were only four: securing the safety of frontiers; rapid concentration of troops on any threatened point; strengthening the military position and improving and civilizing the frontier tribes. Therefore, the British marched towards both the South and the North frontiers at once from the centre of the Indian Subcontinent. In the South, they wanted to secure the Bolan Pass that connects Quetta and Pishin with the Kandahar city of Afghanistan. In the North, they wanted to secure the Khyber Pass that connects Peshawar to Jalalabad, Kabul and Ghazni in Afghanistan. Peshawar was strategically a pivotal city in the NWFP (Husain, 2018). Now, keeping in mind the strategic objectives and the geographical connection between these cities, the construction of roads and railways in the NWF elaborates the plans and strategies of the British Empire in the NWFP.

The Scinde Railway Company was established in 1855 under the flagship project of expanding the existing network of railways in the subcontinent. In the first phase, a 108 km long railway line was opened between Karachi and Kotri. In 1859, the Indus Flotilla Company was established to connect the Karachi-Kotri section to Multan. In later period, Multan was connected to Lahore and Amritsar under the Punjab Railway Company. In 1869, these railway companies were merged into one company called the Scinde, Punjab and Delhi Railway (Grace's Guide, 2012).

The first strategic railway track to contain the NWF region was Punjab Northern State Railway which connected Lahore with Peshawar: the cultural and influential centre of the NWFP. It was completed in 1876. The Northwestern State Railway (NWR) was formed by the merger of existing six railway companies in 1886. The sole purpose of these railway lines was to counter the Russian expansionist policies (Imperial gazetteer of India, 1908). The Punjab Northern State Railway constructed four bridges at the different points on its route including Jhelum Bridge, Alexandra Bridge over Chenab, Ravi Bridge over Ravi and the famous Attock Bridge which was completed in 1883. Hence, in 1883, the British were able to transport their troops from Karachi via Lahore and Rawalpindi to Peshawar and Khyber Pass. Therefore, the

British officials were able to do most of their traveling in the subcontinent through the Railways (Hussain, 1997).

Connecting Conquests and Commerce

The next project was envisaged by Lord Roberts but was completed by the stewardship of Lord Curzon. The British were aware of the most critical routes of Russian advances into the British India. They were the Bolan Pass in Baluchistan and Khyber Pass in the NWFP. They had secured the Bolan Pass by building railway track up to Pishin. Now, they were focused on the extension of railway line from Peshawar to Jalalabad in Afghanistan via Khyber Pass to secure the northern side. However, the route through Khyber Pass was very troublesome due to the requirement of toughest engineering designs, difficulties of maintenance and the apprehensions of line damage by the nearby tribes (Khan, 2014). Therefore, the proposal of Khyber Pass was not adopted. The line was constructed through the Kabul River Valley route which was comparatively easy to build and maintain. Finally, a thirty-six miles long railway track was completed. On 31st August 1907, the Anglo-Russian Entente was signed between Russia and the United Kingdom in St. Petersburg, which put an end to the shaky British-Russian relations and solidified boundaries, particularly in Afghanistan. The new alliance and boundary agreement meant that Russia was no longer a threat to the British, and work on the railway stopped (Johnson, 2003).

The British also constructed several roads and secondary railway lines as a part of this mega project of containing and strengthening the frontier regions. In 1864, the famous Grand Trunk Road was constructed on a route parallel to the railway track from Attock to Peshawar. In 1890, the North-West Frontier Road – 234 miles long – was built that connected Punjab with three districts of NWFP: Dera Ismael Khan, Bannu and Peshawar (Gazetteer, 1908). A sixty-four miles long road was built to connect Bannu with Tochi Valley. A ninety-six miles long road was built to connect Kushalgarh with Thal and Kohat. Several other roads were constructed to connect different districts of NWFP like Dargai, Sawat Valley, Abbottabad, Lawarai, and Chitral. In 1900, there were almost 448 miles long network of road in the NWFP. Furthermore,

a forty miles long line was built in 1901 to connect Nowshehra with Dargai. In 1902, a 33 miles extensive line was laid between Kushalgarh, Kohat, and Thal. The British did not only build the roads and railway lines but also focused on their regular maintenance (Baha, 1968).

These roads and secondary railway lines were used to assist the primary railway lines for the quick transportation of British troops and weapons in the NWFP and neighbouring regions. Furthermore, they served the second most important strategic objectives of the British in this region i.e., to bring the frontier tribes under the British influence. The tribal lords were becoming suspicious of the British intentions due to the construction of railway lines and roads. Therefore, the British wanted to make peace with them to reinforce and inspire the tribal people with 'greater confidence in themselves' and to give them 'security in their loyalty' to the British (Khan, 2014). These roads and secondary railway lines facilitated the people of the NWFP for the transportation of people and goods. It augmented economic activities in the region that concealed the hidden agenda of the British from the common people of the region. Hence, it gave a tremendous success to the British in strengthening its military position and improving and civilizing the frontier tribes.

Conclusion

The strategic advancement of Russia in the Central Asia was perceived by the British as a severe threat to their hegemony in the Indian subcontinent. They apprehended the Russian advancement as a plan to invade the British India through Afghanistan by building a network of railway lines and roads. Therefore, they planned to thwart the Russian objectives by strengthening the frontier region of India – border between present Pakistan and Afghanistan. In south side, they strengthened their strategic position at Bolan Pass. In north side, they constructed a network of railway lines and roads to secure their hold at Khyber Pass – the NWFP region. In the first phase, they connected the NWFP with major districts of Punjab and Sindh through railway lines. In the second phase, they extended the lines to Jalalabad in Afghanistan. In the later periods, they worked on building secondary roads and railway lines to connect them with the major railway lines. They achieved the four most strategic objectives through the construction of these railway

lines and roads: secured the safety of frontiers; materialised rapid concentration of troops on any threatened point whenever necessary; strengthened the military position; and controlled the frontier tribes.

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