



Remnants of a statue of standing buddhas in the Bamy

Strategic outcomes in Central Asia: A Surgeon's Perspective

David Rew Consultant General Surgeon explains how guided social evolution will shape development in Central Asia

Ali Masjid is the site of a small fort at the narrowest point in the Khyber Pass, some 10 miles to the East of Landi Kotal at the frontier between the Khyber Agency and Afghanistan. It sits high in the dry, rocky and barren foothills of the Himalyas at an altitude of almost 1000 metres. It hosted the first battle of the Second Anglo Afghan war, where Lt General Sir Samuel James Browne defeated Ghulam Haider Khan in a messy encounter on 21st November 1878. The rock faces along the Gorge are painted with the insignia of many famous British Regiments that passed through.

Major (Retired) Muhammad Nawaz Khan of Peshawar¹ recorded a visit of 9th May, 1994, stating that:

While travelling from Shagai Fort towards Ali Masjid Fort, one comes across a stonewalled enclosure near a mosque on the left of the road, about one kilometre away from Shagai. There are some trees in the vicinity. This is 'Da Gorao Adeera' as known to the local Afridis and literally meaning 'The British Cemetery'. A Khassadar Post is also established near the cemetery. The cemetery wall, made of dressed stones, is still intact. The grave rows run parallel to the road. The first

row starting from the farthest has eight graves whereas there is another grave also in line with this row but at a lower place. The second row has only two graves. The remaining space would have accommodated about 30 graves but thanks to the partition of 1947, the British left and the Afridi Muslims would not bury their dead in a Christian graveyard.

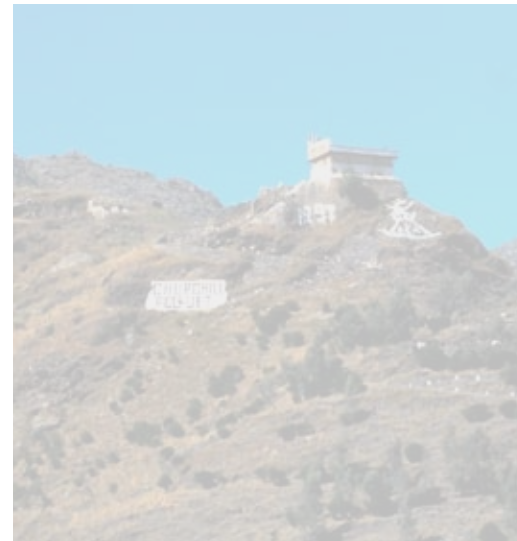
From the dates written on the graves, it seems that these Britishers died during the 3rd Afghan War 1919-20... One of the local Afridi elders, who remembers his long association with the British and other locals, met me near the cemetery. They surprised me by saying that all these Britishers were killed by the Afridis and had not died of cholera as was written on the graves. After having 'qahwa' (tea) with the Khassadars, I left them talking about the British, the Khyber Pass and the Afridi that live in it.

Eight years earlier than Major Khan, I had stood in this small and all but forgotten Commonwealth War Cemetery, at the grave of D.E.E. White, Assistant Surgeon, killed on 2nd October 1919, and now eking

¹ Writings of Major (Retired) Muhammad Nawaz Khan of Peshawar, published on: maverickpakistanis.com/wp-content/themes



The Ali Masjid Commonwealth War Cemetery, Ali Masjid, on the Khyber Pass, 1988
(Author)



Churchills' Picket, Malakand, North West Frontier, October 1988
(Author)

out his eternity on this barren mountainside.

Donald Edward Everard White was an Indian National, who served in the rank of Surgeon (1st Class) within the Indian Subordinate Medical Department, on attachment to the 4th British Station Hospital. His death is also recorded on Face 13 of the India Gate Memorial in New Delhi.

As a consultant surgeon in reserve military service over 36 years, I have travelled widely on the Indian Subcontinent. My work has taken me to the North West Frontier, to Afghanistan and more recently to India itself on a regular basis, where, like Major Khan, I have learned much through informal conversation, and have often reflected upon the lonely death of fellow surgeon Donald White in his prime of life.

In the autumn of 1988, towards the end of the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, I worked for a brief period on the North West Frontier for a voluntary surgical team in Peshawar in three surgical facilities run by various members of the exiled Afghan² and Mujahiddin factions.³ Here I was able to explore the lands from the Indus valley to the top of the Khyber Pass and to Swat. I even retraced some of the footsteps of Churchill in his formative years as a war reporter, and managed to climb up to the top of Churchill's Picket in Malakand, where a huge Pathan tribal force was held at bay in 1896. Many of the regimental crests of that era which were carved in the rocks along the highways are still maintained.

While little was achieved in clinical terms on this visit my political and geostrategic education was intense. Our forefathers, fully understood and worked with the Pashtun mindset, which has not changed over centuries and which will not be changed during Operation Herrick.

I saw at close quarters the social structure and workings of the Pathan people, experiencing their customs, their generous hospitality and the workings of the code of Pashtunwali. For example, lunchtimes at the Afghan hospitals were an excuse for conviviality and social discourse, attended by various exiled politicians and administrative leaders. I learned that Pashtun tribes will invariably unite against external occupation, however well intentioned, and that they will then revert to inter-communal and inter-tribal conflict when the invaders were gone. Naively, my belief that a better future was just around the corner as the Russian Occupation of Afghanistan drew down were met by a brutal assessment of politics in respect of future tribal in-fighting.

The pessimistic projections of our Afghan hosts for the immediate post-Russian era were fully realised with the destruction of Kabul and much of the country in the early 1990s by Afghan factional tribal fighting. This virtually necessitated the rise of the authoritarian and fundamentalist Taliban, which in its early days was widely seen as a force for good.

I wondered how our current Afghan experience could have been different if the politicians had availed themselves of a similar frontier education as Churchill did.

UK Strategy and Tactics in Central Asia

For decades the debate over a definition of Strategy and Tactics has waxed and waned across the pages of BAR with a recent contribution from Professor Colin Gray.⁴

However, I suggest that strategy determines the fate of nations, peoples, religions and political philosophies. Tactics are the processes by which strategic aims may or may not be achieved. The strategy and tactics of brilliant minds and great leaders alone do not determine grand outcomes. In the turbulent torrent of human history, the forces of nature, of economics, and of human aspirations and behaviour, multiplied across thousands, millions and billions of individuals, create events and directions which are far beyond the ability of any one individual or organised political or military force to control. So it is with the Arab Spring of 2011, and so it will be with the future of Afghanistan and Central Asia.

By this definition, our small scale expeditionary engagement in Afghanistan has no grand strategic consequences for our national security, for our core values, for our way of life or for democracy in the UK and the wider world. Terrorism creates headlines, but not existential threats to nationhood. The outrages of September 11th 2001 killed around 3,000 people in horrific circumstances yet many thousands more are killed and maimed in America by firearms every year, but the National Rifle Association has yet to become a proscribed organisation.⁵

From the Afghan perspective, battles against occupying armies have always been strategic, in defence of a way of life which we see as 'Mediaeval' but which is central to their tenets and culture. Over the centuries we've played Away Matches with bombs and bullets against the Afghan tribes. These Great Games always end in a strategic draw. We get to keep the British Isles and they keep the foothills of the Hindu Kush. The score is the number of casualties and the misery of lives wrecked on the battlefield, as immortalised in the poems of Rudyard Kipling.

The enormity of trying to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan and its surrounding region, and the ferocity with which the Afghan Tribes will defend their



Working lunch: Staff and visitors at one of the small Afghan Hospitals in Peshawar, October 1988:
(Author)

place in the firmament, will be apparent to all who have been involved in Operation Herrick. Afghans are survivors in a brutal landscape which shapes their customs, social structures and their survival instincts. The issues were well understood by our military and political forefathers on the North West Frontier.⁶

Setting aside the emotions and history of spilt blood, a detailed analysis indicates that Afghanistan has no real direct strategic significance for the UK. This makes those arguments that say the current situation there affects our strategic interests somewhat specious. There are no natural resources which the UK cannot source elsewhere. Afghanistan does not sit astride any of our trade routes. The Heroin trade could be better countered by addressing demand in the Western target markets, through education and control programmes, rather than through increasing the producer price by creating scarcity in the Helmand Valley; or by commercialising and regulating a trade in medicinal morphine to meet worldwide healthcare needs.

The containment of international terrorism is not advanced by a large Western presence in the region, or by demonising the Taliban.⁷ The Taliban is a complex hydra which merges tribal, nationalistic, and criminal forces with Islamic fundamentalism. As we have seen in the Arab Spring, the latter is likely to be a bankrupt force in the course of history. It can be allowed to run its course to self destruction and rejection in the wider

⁵ Anon. Firearm Injury in the US. Firearm & Injury Center at Penn, 30,000 Killed and 300,000 maimed

⁶ Douie, James McCrone, The Punjab, North-West Frontier Province and Kashmir, University Press, 1916; Bartrop, Michael, The North-West Frontier - British India and Afghanistan - A Pictorial History 1839-1947, Blandford Press, Poole 1982; Stewart, Jules, The Savage Border: The Story of the North-West Frontier. 2007 Sutton Publishing Ltd.; Stewart, Jules, On Afghanistan's Plains: The Story of Britain's Afghan Wars. IB Tauris Books 2011; Stewart, Jules, The Khyber Rifles: From the British Raj to Al Qaeda. 2006, The History Press; Naval & Military Press, 2003, Official History of Operations on the North-West Frontier of India 1936-1937; Marsden, Magnus, Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience In Pakistan's North-West Frontier. Cambridge University Press, 2005; Nevill, H.L., Campaigns in the NWF 1851-1908, The Naval & Military Press, 1999

⁷ Cowper-Coles S. Opinion: Call a ceasefire in Afghanistan this summer. The Times June 8th 2011

² Krushelnicky A., British doctors help mujaheddin, The Sunday Times, Oct 16th 1988

³ Chetwynd R., Yesterday's Enemy, Impala Press, London, 2005

⁴ Gray, Colin, The Practice of Strategy. British Army Review (2010) pp 36-38

and more moderate Islamic community.

The relatively small scale but highly effective entry ops of late 2001 and early 2002 led to the routing of the Taliban, the capture of Kabul and the flight of key Al Qaeda operatives into the North West Frontier tribal hideaways. The strategic distractions of the Iraq campaign of 2003 onwards, and an early misunderstanding of frontier character and tribal dynamics, have brought us into conflict with a resurgent Taliban, which is now acting as the armed wing of the Pathan nation in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan with a huge hinterland of willing bodies in the tribal areas, Pakistan and beyond.

The difficulties inherent in finding simple political and military solutions to the problems of Afghanistan have been widely acknowledged. The creation of a harmonious, unitary Afghan state, founded upon some form of national democratic electoral mandate, strong national institutions and the individual rights and responsibilities of all citizens, and integrated into the world economy and political system, may yet prove elusive. In training and arming large Afghan security forces, we may yet be destabilising the tribal checks and balances to create the conditions for further civil war.

All factors other than geography and climate can and will change with time, but time moves glacially on the North West Frontier. It should be clear to us that the search for influence through military intervention simply stirs up a hornet's nest of tribal loyalties and resistance, fuelled by the universal access of Afghan men to weaponry. Foreign armies, however peaceful their intent, will not win sufficient hearts and minds to effect durable change. Indeed, they provide a continual recruiting focus for the forces which resist change.

So what can be done? We need to articulate a clear purpose for operations in Afghanistan, not one that is lost in vague aspirations of economic development and stable governance along the same lines as our own Western society. We need to create a better and more persuasive narrative for the experience of recent years. Until the end of Empire and the Partition in 1947, Afghanistan was the frontier of Imperial India, and this is a clue both to its future and for future strategy and policy.

Guided Social Evolution on the North West Frontier

The social history of the region is one of enormous complexity. Wave after wave of invaders have passed

across the lands of central Asia in various directions for aeons, leaving their physical and genetic imprints in their wake. The ethnic mix is very complex. The Afghan national identity is secondary to the tribal groupings, whose loyalties usually take precedence over loyalty to the state. Intertribal hostilities simmer beneath the surface, and can be readily exploited by those with money and arms. The central Hazara, the western tribal mix of Almak, Hazara and Tajik, with their Persian origins and influences are among the most educated and cultured. The northern groupings include the Tajiks and Nuristanis of the north west Panshir Valley and the Turkmens and Uzbeks of the north east plains. The Pathans spread from North West Pakistan, across the mountains into South East Afghanistan, in a transnational grouping that we can consider as Pathanistan.

During the 1950's, 60's and 70's, Afghanistan spawned an urbane and educated middle class around Kabul, which is now scattered around the world. They demonstrated that social change and development from intrinsic motives is possible.

However, the rural Afghans left behind are survivors who take the long and patient view of history. They fall back on family and tribe when times are hard, which is most of the time, and when invaders are at their door, which is much of the time. They are an extraordinarily resilient, tough and at times cruel people, whose social systems, codes and behaviours are very different to our own, but who are also pragmatic, loyal and generous to those who they adopt.

The key to social and economic development must be the informal and formal education of rural Afghans and of those in the Frontier tribal areas. Many of the modernising influences of the Western world of the past 50 years have passed them by. Poverty and illiteracy rates are high, and television has been virtually unknown to most of the population until the past few years.

But we now have an opportunity to promote social change through widespread access to the digital media, both terrestrial and satellite, through development of the necessary infrastructure, and through the broadcasting of high quality information to supplement that which Afghans receive through other channels. We should not underestimate the power of the well crafted TV Soap Opera to move minds and change social attitudes.

Mobile telephony is proving to be a potent force

for social change, empowering individuals and bringing information and knowledge to otherwise isolated areas. The universal spread of mobile phones in rural India is already empowering and emancipating communities and individuals, including women, to an unprecedented degree.

This means we can now take a long view of change in Afghanistan, driven by the growth of modern technology, over decades rather than a few years. There are powerful social and technical forces at work in our favour, which we need to harness as effectively as possible to realise our aspirations for peace and trade in the region. I believe our mission militarily and diplomatically at a strategic level should be to facilitate these forces of change over a long time frame, with a view to creating an economic common market in Central Asia.

The Strategic Relevance of Pakistan

The fate of Afghanistan is inexorably tied to the economies and conditions in Pakistan and India, in particular, in the South-East, and currently to a lesser degree to those in Iran in the West.

Pakistan plays a major role in the events in Afghanistan. The Pushtun tribes of the North West

Frontier have common bonds with the Afghans, and the Pakistan military view Afghanistan as giving them 'strategic depth'. The NWF has played host to millions of refugees from Afghanistan during the Russian invasion and subsequent upheavals, and the Pakistan Intelligence Services are said to be extensively involved in shaping events across the border. The NWF was used as a training ground by Western agencies for mujahideen groups against the occupying Russians and these skills are now being used against Western forces in Afghanistan. The crossings of the mountains of the NWF are the gateways for trade into Afghanistan, including NATO logistic routes.

The population of Pakistan is around 165 million people. Pakistan is a Muslim state, with a populist democracy that cohabits in a fragile political accord with the Pakistan Armed Forces (PAF) which are structured along British regimental lines from the Imperial Indian Army, and the PAF retains many historical and personal links to Britain and to the Raj.

Since its formation out of the horrors of the Partition in 1947, Pakistan has been in an avoidable and unnecessary state of prolonged hostility with India, both along the Punjab frontier and more

The Khyber Pass.
Author



actively in Kashmir. Corruption and confused politics have undermined economic development and the development of its massive human resource, allowing Fundamentalist Muslim influences to expand and to further destabilise the state in recent years.

The Strategic Relevance of India

India is estimated to have a population of some 1,200,000,000 people, of whom some 80% are Hindus and some 13% are Muslim. In the 20 years or so since the oppressive hand of the socialist state was lifted and the Indian entrepreneurial spirit was given free reign, there has been a massive uplift in education and wealth. Some 300 million Indians are now classified as 'Middle Class'. While there is still a long way to go for the material and educational benefits to trickle down to the impoverished masses the rate of change suggests the process will accelerate.

The most interesting and strategically relevant aspect of this development, and one that gives the greatest hope for the future, is the rate of technological change and of social emancipation in India. Anyone who has watched the output of the massively creative Indian TV and film industry will recognise the power and momentum of this social emancipation. The quality, vibrancy, humour and energy of the output makes for compulsive viewing. Contrast the vibrant modern image of Bollywood urban youth with the repression of the Burkha.

The Strategic Relevance of Iran

The demonisation of Iran under its current regime may be blinding us to substantial opportunities for future good. Iran is a complex country with an educated and emancipated middle class, a long history and a profound culture. While we cannot predict at the time of writing whether the Arab Spring will re-energise the process of liberalisation in Iran which found its expression in the forcibly suppressed Green Revolution of the Summer of 2009, the long term prospects for Iran as a force and partner for beneficial change in the Region should not be underestimated.

Future British Strategic Interests in the Indian Subcontinent and in Central Asia

For more than three centuries Britain has had profound ties to the Indian subcontinent from which we withdrew in 1947. Since then the flow of wealth and emigration has been in the reverse direction so that we



*Afghanistan from the top of the Khyber Pass.
Author*

now have a large and economically successful Anglo-Indian community in the UK. India is the economic and cultural powerhouse of the central Asian region, and the time has come for us to re-engage with it socially, emotionally, economically, diplomatically and politically.

We already have significant advantages on the subcontinent:

- We have substantial ties of history and influence, including influence with both the Indian and Pakistani Armed Forces, and the respective Civil Services, which we can put to good use.
- English is the language of the Middle classes and of commerce
- We have a large population of entrepreneurial Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Pakistani citizens in the UK who have close links to the subcontinent.
- We have substantial cultural ties and goodwill at grass roots level, as anyone who has visited and worked in India can testify.

The long term solution to Afghan development requires a determined political commitment to resolve the sources of conflict between India and Pakistan in particular, while keeping an eye on positive developments in Iran. The further social, political and economic development of these countries and a huge free trade area on the Indian subcontinent and beyond will have substantial benefits in the longer term for Afghanistan itself. Wealth and cultural influence will migrate across the Frontier and raise standards of living and expectation on the Afghan side. Democratic processes will only grow firm roots when the demand for higher standards of living are established and met.

In the short to medium term, we can expect the conservative social forces of the Frontier which are embodied in the Taliban to resist such changes ferociously and with cruelty. Nevertheless, the irresistible forces of history and human nature are effectively ranged against them, as is the march of digital technology.

An Asian Economic Community of 1.5 billion people will enjoy progressive financial and social emancipation.

Such grand strategic and long term speculation does not change the immediate realities for British Forces on the ground in Helmand. However, it does allow us a broader perspective on the achievable and creates a political narrative enabling us to step back militarily from Afghanistan. This carries the short term certainty of instability and upheaval, but with honour preserved. Military withdrawal will be the prelude to a more active socio-economic strategy, where the television transmitter supplants the guided missile, and the satellite dish supercedes the IED. It offers us the prospect of long term social and political re-engagement with a more harmonious Indian subcontinent, to the benefit of all.

Assistant Surgeon Donald White and the Gunners of Ali Masjid will lie on in their mountain graves, to remind us for ever of the human cost of this Frontier vision.