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Princes, Patriots, and Proxies: Great Power Politics and the Assertion of Afghan Sovereignty

| **Chris Mark Wyatt**

Despite the well-worn cliché, the relationship between proxy and sponsor is seldom as simple as that between puppet and master. Overlooking internal trends and ruptures, an outside great power may find itself incapable of maintaining the careful balance that ensured its dominance. Actors within a proxy state who have become independent from a sponsor's largesse may be prepared to strike out on their own when shifts in world politics provide an opportunity. Modern Afghanistan is currently caught up in a struggle that will determine both the shape of the state and its relationships with outside powers, once the dust of recent decades of upheaval settles. Those inside and outside the state considering the wisdom of re-forging old bonds or establishing new ones would do well to consider the lessons of an earlier period of Afghan history, the "Great Game", when the British began losing control of Afghanistan due to that state's shifting internal dynamics, and subsequently choose to give up the struggle due to major shifts in their own external calculations.

Afghanistan's status as a regional British proxy began to unravel during the latter stages of the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan. Afghanistan's foreign relations since 1880 had been controlled by the Government of India, which was an instrument of the British government led by an appointed viceroy and responsible for the empire's policies in India's neighborhood. Habibullah maintained

his father's policy of accepting that arrangement. This policy was opposed by both conservatives at court, who were anti-British but cautious, and modernizers, who wanted outright independence. At times the interests of the two camps coincided and at others they diverged. Their positions on foreign policy evolved based on the ways they saw the world, which were also reflected in domestic politics. Before the Afghan state could promote an independent foreign policy, a shift at the domestic level that undermined support for the British had to take place.

As the two groups vied for control, the conservatives started to gain the upper hand, and Habibullah found it increasingly difficult to maintain the balance between the factions. In consequence, the modernizers seized a moment to strike and took control of the government, purging the conservatives. Amanullah, son of Habibullah and leader of the modernizers, became Amir, declared full independence, and invaded India. Despite scoring a tactical victory in the resultant Third Afghan War, the British decided that it was no longer in their interests to continue the old arrangement, which had become outdated and expensive. Amanullah's military adventure came on the heels of the First World War, during which the world had changed irrevocably. London relinquished control of Afghanistan because there was no longer either a need for a buffer or a proxy actor.



A CAREFUL BALANCING ACT

In 1901, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan died peacefully in his bed. He had been Amir since 1880 and had enjoyed the support of the British Empire throughout his reign, including in the forms of a subsidy from the Government of India and the direct supply of weapons. He ruled in full awareness that he would not have remained in power for long without London's backing.¹ Before

becoming Amir, Abdur Rahman had spent time in exile in the Russian Empire and had come to mistrust his hosts, a position he considered vindicated after they annexed the northern Afghan territory of Panjdeh and its environs in 1885. A war was narrowly averted, and the Amir's relations with the British were on the whole cordial as he made common cause with them to keep the Russians out of Afghanistan.

His approach to foreign policy was simple: If the country remained backward, poor, and isolated, there would be less risk of attack from the outside. The value of the country, then, was as a buffer

¹ Hasan Kawun Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), xx, 6-8.

which no state had any direct interest in invading.² Why, he reasoned, would anyone wish to sacrifice that buffer and expend much blood and treasure conquering a country which could not begin to pay for the expenses so incurred?

This orthodoxy was first contested during the reign of his son, Habibullah Khan. The new Amir had always to walk a tightrope between what might loosely be called conservatives and modernizers at the Afghan court.³ The composition of the groups continually blurred and individual members moved between them, but in general there was always one camp which believed Afghanistan should be governed as under Abdur Rahman, and another which believed the country should modernize, emerge from its backwardness, and become fully independent.⁴ Despite their differences, the two camps saw common cause in their anti-British sentiment. This Anglophobia is best understood as the product of frustration with Afghanistan's status as a subordinate power, rather than any

feelings of warmth toward Russia or any other competitor state. However, the Amir himself always considered it important to follow his father's advice to keep faith with the British as, according to Abdur Rahman, they were the more trustworthy party.⁵ Despite setbacks, such as the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 over the head of the Amir, it was advice Habibullah followed throughout his reign. At the same time, Habibullah also wanted to slowly modernize the country while maintaining its Islamic character.

The conservative group was dominated by Amir Habibullah's brother, Sardar Nasrullah Khan, the aging Abdul Qudus Khan, who served as Lord Chamberlain, and Muhammed Hussain Khan, who ran the government's finances. Nasrullah was seen by the Government of India as a nationalist, while Abdul Qudus Khan was considered conservative, fiercely anti-British and concerned chiefly with his own interests.⁶ Both these men sought a more traditionalist and Islamic approach to government and considered the British to be as bad as the Russians. They were keen to keep both powers out and attempted constant maneuvers to that end.

The conservatives were opposed at court by Amir Habibullah's sons, Sardars Aman-

2 Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan*, 71, 179, 230. See also Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah, *The Tragedy of Amanullah* (London: Alexander-Ouseley, 1933), 73, 74. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan argued that the development of Afghanistan could only take place when the Afghan Army was strong enough to defend the country against outside aggression.

3 Christopher M. Wyatt, 'The Rise of Nationalism at the Afghan Court, 1903-1914', *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* XLV, No. II (1997), 189-202.

4 Christopher M. Wyatt, *Afghanistan in the Defence of Empire: Diplomacy and Strategy during the Great Game* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 2-4.

5 Shah, *The Tragedy of Amanullah*, 76-77.

6 India Office Library and Records (IOLR) MSS Eur. D 573/17 Minto to Morley, 5 August 1908, folios 6 and 7.

ullah Khan and Inayatullah Khan. The princes sought to modernize the country and had formed a close association with Mahmud Tarzi, a significant figure in Afghan history acknowledged for his role as a modernist and journalist. He and his family had been exiled to Syria by Abdur Rahman Khan, but Habibullah allowed him to return to the country in 1902. While in Syria, Tarzi had imbibed new ideas, such as the Islamic revivalist writings of Sayyid Jamal ud-din al-Afghani and the modernist thinking of the Watan Movement, which also influenced the young Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the reformist general who later became the founder of the modern Turkish state. On his return, Tarzi edited a newspaper called the *Siraj ul-Akhbar* (which can be translated as “the light [or torch] of the news of Afghanistan”), and became the founder of journalism in Afghanistan.⁷ Two of Tarzi’s daughters each married one of the Afghan princes. Sardar

7 Vartan Gregorian, ‘Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Akhbar: Ideology of Nationalism and Modernization in Afghanistan’, *Middle East Journal* XXI, No. 3 (1967), 345-346; Abdul Ali Arghandawi, *British Imperialism and Afghanistan’s Struggle for Independence, 1914-1921* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), 38-39; Ibrahim V. Pourhadi, ‘Afghanistan’s Press and its Literary Influence, 1897-1969’, *Afghanistan Journal* 3, No. 1 (1976), 28-29; Mohamed Kazem Ahang, ‘The Background and the Beginning of the Afghan Press System: Part Six The Pioneers’, *Afghanistan* 22, No. 2 (1969-1970), 73-80; Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (London: Penguin, 1992), 91; Mohammad Ali, ‘Sayid Jamal-ud-Din Afghani: Politician, Reformer, Journalist and Orator’, *Afghanistan* 17, No. 1 (1962), 7; and Abdul Hakim Tabibi, *Afghanistan: A Nation in love with Freedom* (Cedar Rapids: Igram Press, 1985), 67-68.

Amanullah’s wife, later to become Queen Soraya, had a particularly strong influence on her husband’s thinking, which came to value full independence as an appropriate companion to modernization.

In balancing these two groups, Amir Habibullah could count on independent allies, particularly Muhammed Yusuf Khan and Muhammed Asif Khan, both of whom had powerful tribal backing and were prominent at court. These allies allowed the Amir to act as more than simply an isolated arbiter, lending him a body of support of his own. Habibullah favored a degree of modernization but realized that backing one faction would make an enemy of the other. Throughout his reign, he continued to assume that the interests of Afghanistan were best secured through friendship with the British.⁸ After all, he continued to receive a subsidy from the Government of India greater than that his father had enjoyed, and relations were warm enough to allow for a visit to India in 1907.

TESTING LOYALTY TO LONDON

What grated most for both conservatives and modernizers was the Government of India’s control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy. This was agreed by treaty in 1880 and confirmed in 1905. Habibullah was willing to accept this subordination but his courtiers were not. For the Amir, a much greater concern was the

8 IOLR L/MIL/17/14/15/1, 4.

Anglo-Russian Convention, signed in August 1907 and announced on the heels of his return from India, which normalized relations between Britain and Russia in Central Asia. Habibullah saw the treaty as a betrayal, as the two powers had agreed to clauses covering Afghanistan without consulting him. The new entente was widely greeted in Afghanistan with a sense of alarm, and fears of partition between Britain and Russia grew.⁹ The Convention, though, included a clause requiring ratification by the Amir before it could enter into force. The only card the Amir could play was to withhold that ratification, which he did.

Although partition failed to materialize, the Convention damaged Habibullah's position at court because his general attitude toward Britain was inconsistent with his reaction to the entente. While he would not ratify the Convention, neither could he do much against what was a *fait accompli*. Both Britain and Russia treated the Convention as if it were in force. However, with no invasion on the horizon, the Amir was able to reassert his control over the court, foiling an assassination plot in 1909. With the conspiracy quashed, both factions were wary of challenging Habibullah's authority.

In the following decade, this balancing act became ever more difficult. Habibullah came to agree with reformers, espe-

cially after he had seen the Army of India in all its glory, that the Afghan army needed outside training to begin to bring it up to a reasonable standard. To accomplish this, Turkish officers were brought in. The head of the regular military, Habibullah's son Inayatullah, was a modernizer.¹⁰ He was pro-Turkish, neatly aligning his external slant with promotion of a modernizing domestic agenda, and his thinking was in line with Tarzi's, which held that Islamic unity was the best defense against the West.

There was, then, every expectation that Afghanistan would involve itself when the Ottoman Empire found itself at war, first with Italy in 1911 and then with the First Balkan League in 1912. At first, Habibullah made a show of appealing to the population for donations to "help the wounded Turkish soldiers, their widows and orphans" but then decided that the weakness shown by the Turks was due to their softness and abandonment of Islam.¹¹ The result was that the Amir did nothing, which hardly endeared him to factions at court. Both sides had wanted to keep faith with the Ottoman rulers, who then held formal leadership of the Islamic faith through the Caliphate, and with the Turkish government in general.

Following this episode, Habibullah resolved to govern in his father's more authoritarian mold.¹² To an extent, this shift

9 Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 211.

10 IOLR L/MIL/17/14/15/1, 3-4.

11 IOLR L/MIL/17/14/15/2, 9-10.

12 Roland Wild, *Amanullah: Ex-King of Afghan-*

allowed him to mobilize traditionalists against the pro-Turkish modernizers. However, the Amir's rule was further tested by the Mangal revolt of 1912 and 1913, which was precipitated by rumors of the Amir's conduct with certain tribal women. Much of the countryside rose in open revolt and there was widespread refusal to pay taxes. In the end, Habibullah had to rely on Nasrullah's ally Muhammed Hus-sain Khan to raise a tribal levy at his own expense to put down the rebellion.¹³ This produced an image of an Amir and a state which could not act independently in the face of rebellion and which were beholden to particular interests, in this case a conservative one. The modernizers saw the episode as a setback.

Habibullah pursued a divide and rule policy to manage the two main court factions. As part of this approach, and in order to prevent anyone becoming too powerful, Nasrullah's functions in government were formally handed to the Amir's sons, Amanullah and Inayat-ullah. However, the dividing lines between roles were not defined well, and the resulting confusion allowed Nasrullah to keep working as if little had happened. The Amir could not risk alienating his own brother, who had "the whole priestly class at his back...and the conservative party at his side". Even in

1914, the traditionalists were a force to be reckoned with.¹⁴

The factions continued to balance each other during the course of the First World War. Court politics were not an issue at the outset but the situation changed radically with the Turkish decision to enter the war on the side of the Central Powers. This was followed by a German-led mission to Afghanistan in 1915. Led by Oskar Niedermayer and Werner Otto von Hentig, the delegation also included representatives from Turkey. The modernizers pressed the Amir to take the German side, not because they were pro-German but because they saw treating with the Germans as a means to undermine British domination. After keeping the mission waiting for weeks, Habibullah succumbed to pressure and agreed to grant them an audience. The Amir relented because of a concern that turning away the delegation would be seen as a rejection of his Turkish co-religionists, which might invite a *coup d'état*. Under such tense circumstances, Habibullah did just enough to keep the mission interested. He demanded an impossibly high price for his intervention and ultimately signed a treaty which the German Foreign Ministry declined to ratify and by which he had no intention of abiding.¹⁵

istan (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1932), 40-41.

¹³ Cambridge University Library Hardinge Papers, Volume 119, Part II, Hardinge to Crewe, 4 September 1913; Volume 85, Part I, Roos-Keppel to Hardinge, 6 March 1913; IOLR L/MIL/17/14/15/2, 25.

¹⁴ IOLR L/MIL/17/14/15/2, 18.

¹⁵ Arghandawi, *British Imperialism and Afghanistan's Struggle for Independence*, 93-106; Thomas L. Hughes, 'The German Mission to Afghanistan, 1915-1916', *German Studies Review* 25, No. 3 (2002), 471-472; Sir Charles Hardinge,

At the close of the First World War, by all appearances Habibullah had succeeded in keeping tensions at court under control. He had avoided involvement in the war and had proven his faithfulness to Britain. His position appeared secure, but events proved otherwise. On the night of February 19, 1919, the Amir was assassinated in his tent while on a hunting trip in the Laghman Valley. The true battle for supremacy between the factions began, as Amanullah and the modernizers overturned Nasrullah's claim to the throne and took power for themselves. For the modernizers, it was a now or never moment.

THE MODERNIZERS ASCENDANT

No one knows for sure who killed Habibullah, but there is enough circumstantial evidence to form a case against Amanullah. The prince was in Kabul, the capital and seat of power, when the Amir was killed. Nasrullah was in Jalalabad, too far away to affect the course of events. Despite proclaiming himself Amir, Nasrullah was cut off from the center of power and lacked the money, arms, and support to press his claim. He abdicated in favor of Amanullah in order to avoid bloodshed and the outbreak of a civil war.¹⁶

His reward for such consideration was to be blamed for the assassination and

thrown in jail. Nasrullah was denounced as “a traitor to Islam and the murderer of the Amir” and, after being given a life sentence, did not survive long in captivity.¹⁷

Amanullah became Amir, declared Afghanistan independent, and immediately attacked India. He had long dreamed of a modern and independent Afghanistan and moved quickly to realize that ambition. This resulted in the Third Afghan War, which was fought on the North-West Frontier of India. It ended with the 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi, which recognized Afghanistan's independence. This included restoration of the right to a free foreign policy, to be exercised for the first time since 1880.

For the British, there was a recognition that the old way of doing things could not continue and the Afghan leadership could no longer be relied upon to follow a course set by the Government of India. The First World War had been costly and the price of fighting the Third Afghan War was also high. The cost of continued involvement was just too exorbitant. Indeed, the elimination of an obligation to defend Afghan territorial integrity was at the time seen as a net benefit, which significantly softened the blow. London had concluded that the Russians were not about to invade in force in the near future, as the country was convulsed by revolution and, after the First World War,

My Indian Years, 1910-1916 (London: Constable, 1948), 133.

¹⁶ Wild, *Amanullah: Ex-King of Afghanistan*, 45.

¹⁷ Arghandawi, *British Imperialism and Afghanistan's Struggle for Independence*, 163-177.

there was neither the money nor the will to fight in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Indeed, the Bolsheviks were fighting for their own survival in the Russian Civil War.

Amanullah's position looked strong. He had outmaneuvered his rivals and consolidated control over Afghanistan. But he also misjudged the country and soon began to alienate everyone. His modernizing agenda was particularly unacceptable to the tribes and the religious establishment. The country was shocked by his Westernized manners, unveiled wife, and forsaking of the title "Amir", with all its religious connotations, for that of "King."

In asserting the sovereignty and independence of Afghanistan, Amanullah courted outside powers that were themselves modernizing.¹⁹ Both Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkey and Lenin's Bolshevik Russia were considered as models of modernization, with numerous trade treaties signed as a result. While Amanullah saw Turkey as a key ally, there was no comparable comprehensive diplomatic realignment toward Russia to replace the British. Both Atatürk and Lenin had to win wars in order

to secure their right to govern. Amanullah had not, and therefore, ruling in a deeply conservative country, did not have a level of popular support comparable with his foreign peers and lost his throne in 1929 in consequence.

When Abdur Rahman Khan became Amir, Afghanistan entered what is considered by historians to be its modern phase. As father of the nation, he gave the country the borders and shape which are familiar to us now. However, it took his grandson to lead the country to full independence. Although Amanullah's modernizing mission met with resistance and caused, ultimately, his deposition, he was able to convincingly assert Afghan sovereignty in a way which his successors have been keen to emulate. The periodic crises of Amir Habibullah's reign and the consequent ascendance of the modernizers were critical preconditions for Amanullah's diplomatic rebellion. Ultimately, it was the mutually reinforcing interaction of foreign and domestic policy which led Afghanistan to, for a time, shed its proxy status and claim the agency of a truly independent nation state. ☪

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¹⁸ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 446-449; and Arghandawi, *British Imperialism and Afghanistan's Struggle for Independence*, 182-233.

¹⁹ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 450-452; and Leon B. Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 48, 160-193.



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