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Multiplayer Great Game: Nineteenth Century Maneuvers on the Chessboard of Afghanistan

| Peter John Brobst



“SAVE ME FROM MY FRIENDS!”

Nineteenth and early twentieth century strategists of the British Empire called their long struggle for mastery in the borderlands of Central and South Asia the “Great Game.” Their Russian adversaries styled it the ‘Tournament of Shadows’. Each phrase tends to elide as much as it evokes. The *Boy’s Own* flair obscures, even diminishes, the underlying geopolitics and high stakes involved. Nothing less was at issue, at least from the British point of

view, than the balance between global sea power, on one side, and consolidated land power based in the heart of Eurasia on the other. War between the principals frequently seemed in the offing. It erupted in the Crimea in 1854. However, as suggested by the phrase ‘Tournament of Shadows’, the competition between Britain and Russia over Asia and the Middle East played out largely through indirect means.

Proxy warfare figured prominently in the informal imperialism of the Great Game. For their part, the British relied heavily on their time-tested, European strategy of ‘guineas and gunpowder’¹—subsidies and arms transfers — to delineate spheres of influence, buffer states, and ‘anti-routes’ in the marches of India.² Lines of clientage were blurred if not invisible. This afforded plausible deniability, but the advantage was double-edged. Abdur Rahman, Afghanistan’s ‘Iron Amir’ between 1882 and 1901, offers a prime example of the dilemma. His internal wars to consolidate the Afghan state, assisted by British subsidies, helped to staunch the subcontinent’s northern frontier against Russia; they also rattled nerves in British India and a host of its smaller client states in the mountainous reaches west of the upper Indus. Thomas Barfield, an American scholar of Afghanistan, has noted another “surprising consequence” in the case of Abdur Rahman’s war against the Kafirs: it put the Amir in a position “if Russia was determined to invade India ... to ease their way” and thereby “direct the Russians away from any crucial Afghan territory.”³ British strategists

understood that their Afghan proxy left them “to some degree in a cleft stick.”⁴ Abdur Rahman’s kingdom was “rapidly being converted into one vast armed camp, equipped by our aid and largely at our expense.” This seemed an inevitable and small price to deter Russia. Still, the British hedged their bets by demarcating a hard border — the ‘Durand Line’ — between Afghanistan and what was then British India and is today Pakistan.

Informal imperialism was indeed, as the British historian John Darwin has noted, an inherently “unstable category.”⁵ The Great Game exemplifies how flexible yet fraught the sub-category of proxy warfare has been and remains. Current scholarship, focused on the prevalence of proxy warfare in the twenty-first century⁶ and its Cold War precedents⁷, emphasizes sub-state, transnational actors. While such proxies loom large today, size is not the defining factor; the uncertain dynamic between proxy and patron is. Moreover, proxies can be found on the highest levels of the international system as well as the lowest, a point that modern scholars underemphasize. Ethnic

1 John M. Sherwig. *Guineas and gunpowder: British foreign aid in the wars with France, 1793-1815*. Books on Demand, 1969.

2 Mahnaz Z. Ispahani. *Roads and Rivals: The Political Uses of Access in the Borderlands of Asia*. Cornell University Press, 1989.

3 Thomas Barfield. *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

4 David Dilks. “Curzon in India, 2 vols.” *Achievement, II. Frustration* (London, 1969-70) (1969).

5 John Darwin. *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013.

6 Andrew Mumford. “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict.” *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 40-46.

7 Geraint Hughes. *My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Apollo Books, 2012.

and political militias, tribal irregulars, and mercenaries each fought as proxies in the Great Game, as did conventional states. Proxies of both kinds often possessed substantial capacities, ambition, and will. “On the Central Asian board,” to quote the distinguished anthropologist Akbar Ahmed, “pawns often moved of their own volition.”⁸ Put another way, the Great Game embedded numerous lesser games at different levels. Abdur Rahman was certainly his own agent in a lesser game. And what was true of Afghanistan was true of smaller and bigger examples alike. Throughout the Great Game, proxies functioned at the sub-state, regional, and great power levels. Consider, for instance, the roles played by the Baluch, Iran, and China.

PROXIES GREAT AND SMALL

In most accounts of the Great Game, the Baluch do not get the attention they should. The Baluch are an Iranian ethno-linguistic group, who today number between five and six million. They inhabit the expansive and desolate landscape that stretches across what is now western Pakistan, southeastern Iran, and parts of Afghanistan. Despite their comparatively small numbers, the transnational Baluch have historically played a conspicuous role as a proxy force on the sub-state level, and still

do. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Baluch mercenaries enabled the sultans of Oman to secure a commercial empire and dominate the slave trade between East Africa and the Persian Gulf.⁹ Baluch mercenaries later formed the backbone of forces that the British developed to secure their Omani allies against insurgency at home.¹⁰ On their home ground in the late nineteenth century, the Baluch functioned as middlemen in the arms traffic between the Gulf and Afghanistan. This benefitted the Russians and French, as well as Abdur Rahman and, to the chagrin of British authorities, a number of British firms. During the Cold War, Baluch separatism generated anxiety about Soviet-backed proxy warfare in Pakistan.¹¹ Such potentialities similarly alarmed Iran under the Shah, while in recent years the Islamic Republic has charged that insurgency among the Sunni Baluch of Iran enjoys the sponsorship of both Pakistan and the United States.¹²

9 Nicolini, Beatrice. *Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar: Three-terminal Cultural Corridor in the Western Indian Ocean, 1799-1856*. Vol. 3. Brill, 2004.

10 John E. Peterson. “Oman’s diverse society: Northern Oman.” *The Middle East Journal* (2004): 32-51

11 Selig S. Harrison. *In Afghanistan’s shadow: Baluch nationalism and Soviet temptations*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981.

12 Abubakar, Siddique. “Iran’s Sunni Baloch Extremists Operating from Bases in Pakistan.” *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 12 Issue: 6, March 20, 2014

8 Ahmed Akbar, S. “Tribes and States in Waziristan.” *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (1983): 196-7.

A player as much as a pawn, Iran illustrates the variability of proxies at the level of regional states. Iranian foreign policy in the early to mid-nineteenth century was animated substantially by irredentism in the Caucasus and later Afghanistan. During the Napoleonic wars, the British alternately moved into and out of an alliance with Iran as they moved into and out of an alliance with Russia. Russian influence grew in Tehran after the Treaty of Turkmanchai, which settled the border in the Caucasus in 1828. Iran subsequently focused eastward on Afghanistan, its irredentism now working to Russia's advantage. Twice, in 1838-39 and again in 1856-57, Iran moved to reclaim Herat, only to be met in each case by a British counterpunch in the Gulf. The second instance led to war and to Iran's agreement to demarcate through British arbitration a border with Afghanistan. The fixed boundary was perhaps arbitrary in a Middle Eastern context, but it undermined the pretext on which Russia could promote a proxy war against British India. Britain's friend-or-foe dilemma in nineteenth century Iran has considerable resonance today. Is Iran an ambitious rival to be contained, or a useful and even necessary proxy against the Taliban and the recrudescence of Russian imperialism?¹³

Similar uncertainty, of course, arose over China during the Cold War. Colonial strategists did not speak of the 'China Card' per se, but they certainly debated how and whether it could be played. In 1880, amid the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British saw China's reassertion of its authority in the Ili Valley as a useful diversion of Russian attentions. A decade later some British officials urged backing China's reconsolidation of control over the whole of Xinjiang as a bulwark against Russia.¹⁴ Others in London, however, warned against such a course, lest China's underlying weakness invite the very extension of Russian influence the British wished to block. The dilemma persisted into the twentieth century. One recent scholar has provocatively claimed that efforts to sustain China's front against Japan in the south represented an Anglo-American proxy war to divert Japan away from the Soviet Union during the critical fall and winter of 1941-42. The Chinese dimension reminds us that while Anglo-Russian rivalry dominated the arena, the Great Game was a multi-polar contest. India's independence after World War II, and more particularly the subcontinent's partition, compounded the problem of games within games and clouded the role of proxies further still.

14 Parshotam Mehra. *An "agreed" frontier: Ladakh and India's northernmost borders, 1846-1947*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

13 Shireen T. Hunter. "Containing Iran Helps Putin's Russia." *Lobelog Foreign Policy*.

NEW ROUNDS, OLD RULES

The Great Game is usually considered an issue of the nineteenth century. But understood as shorthand for using the power of South Asia to balance and parry that based in Central Asia, it continued through the twentieth. In fact, one was more likely to hear the expression in Anglo-American policy circles during the Cold War than ever in offices of the Raj. Britain's transfer of power on the subcontinent in 1947 did not end the Great Game. Neither did the advent of nuclear weapons. What British Air Marshal John Slessor called the "Great Deterrent" reinvigorated the Great Game and its indirect methods of war.¹⁵ The battlefield Slessor reasoned, now belonged, and had to belong, to the "termite"—to the guerilla forces and regional states we so associate with proxy warfare. Pakistan, the Afghan *mujahidin*, and the Taliban present essential and standard examples of the attraction, convolutions, and limits of the old wine in new bottles. The collaboration between the United States and India to sustain armed resistance against China in Tibet during the late 1950s and early 1960s presents a lesser-known but equally compelling case.¹⁶

15 John Cotesworth Slessor. *The Great Deterrent: A Collection of Lectures, Articles, and Broadcasts on the Development of Strategic Policy in the Nuclear Age*. Praeger, 1957.

16 Kenneth J. Conboy, and James Morrison. *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*. University Press of Kansas, 2002.

More delicate and difficult to appreciate is the role that India itself, as an emerging great power, has played and continues to play as a proxy for Anglo-American interests in post-independence rounds of the Great Game. Last year, General Raymond Odierno, the US Army's Chief of Staff, visited India and proclaimed the Indian Army to be "by far the most influential" in Asia.¹⁷ Some discerned an oblique reference to aligning India's continental power¹⁸ with the maritime posture of the United States in the Indo-Pacific as part of a larger strategy for the containment of China.¹⁹ Odierno was quick, however, to preempt speculation, emphasizing the importance of India's "strategic autonomy." As a proxy force India, is neither a pawn nor a puppet. Nor was it either during the Cold War. New Delhi's avowed neutralism was vexatious, but the more acute in the Anglo-American defense establishment recognized that "in spite of conflict between certain United States and Indian policy objectives, there are many lines of parallel action."²⁰


17 "Indian Army most influential in Asia Pacific: US General Raymond T Odierno." *Economic Times*. July 30, 2013 http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-07-30/news/40895242_1_indian-army-asia-pacific-asia-pacific

18 Evan Braden Montgomery. "Competitive Strategies against Continental Powers: The Geopolitics of Sino-Indian-American Relations." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2013): 76-100.

19 Iskander Rehman. "The Wider Front: The Indian Ocean and AirSea Battle." *Research & Analysis Archive*. May 30, 2012

20 Mahmud S Ali. *Cold war in the high Himalayas: the USA, China, and South Asia in the 1950s*.

Ultimately, the notion of India as a proxy force underlines not only the persistence but also the ambiguity and contingency of proxy warfare as both a strategic and analytical category. In the Indo-American case, it is not even clear who is gaming whom. Americans no more look on their considerable forces in, say, Afghanistan or the South China Sea, as proxies for Indian interests, than Indians see their country's position vis-à-vis China in Central Asia as a proxy for the United States.²¹ But, at least to some degree, do they not act as such? In the nineteenth century, Great Games men engaged proxies to achieve the effects of empire where they could not or would not fight; in the twenty-first century the idea is perhaps more to achieve the effects of alliance where one cannot or will not be formalized. In the former circumstance, a proxy stands somewhere between autonomy and occupation, and in the latter somewhere between the free agency of neutrality and the definite obligations of alliance. The attraction and utility of proxy warfare lies in those vagaries, whether employed as a strategy between big patrons and small clients, as scholars typically treat the phenomenon, or between great powers, as the Great Game suggests scholars more often might. Either way, Rudyard Kipling's admonition still pertains: "Who can

say," he wrote about the uncertainty of war in Abdur Rahman's game, "when the night is gathering, all is grey."²² 

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St. Martin's Press, 1999.

21 Ian Hall. "Mapping Central Asia: Indian perceptions and strategies." *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 3 (2012): 420-421.

22 Rudyard Kipling. "The Ballad of the King's Jest." *The Definitive Edition of Kipling's Verse* (1940): 247-50.



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