

8 Great Britain, Russia and the Central Asian Question

In early 1885, when London and Berlin were negotiating a solution for their dispute over New Guinea, Great Britain experienced one of its many political scares. The panic was occasioned by developments in Central Asia, a part of the world where Russia and Great Britain were engaged in an almost century-old imperialist rivalry. Though a fair distance away from the Pacific, the real and imagined conflicts in Central Asia would weigh heavily on the relations between the powers in the Pacific and in Europe. Russia and Great Britain were the main actors, but the proximity to Afghanistan, and thus to India, would also have its implications for British relations with and views of China and France. The first was important to keep Russia out of India, the second an additional threat to the British position there. What upset the British in 1885 was that in March of that year a detachment of Russian troops entered the small oasis of Penjdeh (Panjdeh, Panjeh), in present-day Turkmenistan, which according to the British was Afghan territory, giving rise to what contemporaries called the Central Asian Question.

The resulting commotion revealed a nagging, ever-present feeling of insecurity in the British colonial mindset. Great Britain's position in India was strong, but at the same time rivals were supposed to lust after Great Britain's major overseas asset. In a sense, India was a beleaguered colony, with enemies encroaching from all sides and, Great Britain being a naval power, aiming at its weak side, its land borders. Such fears – present at least since 1828, when an army officer, George de Lacy Evans, published his pamphlet *On the Designs of Russia* (Figs 2010: 49) – had a bearing on global strategic thinking and also affected the way the British reacted to and influenced developments in China and Southeast Asia. Aware of such apprehensions, which to some contemporaries looked completely unfounded – not least because of the difficult terrain a Russian army out to invade India would have to traverse –, one author wrote that one could never be certain of Russia's intentions. The question was whether Russia's advances aimed at India or were only intended to 'set up standing menace ... with a view of ulterior policy in other quarters of the East or Far East' (Temple 1902: 44).

During most of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia were coloured by commercial competition and reciprocal fears and suspicions about the other's territorial ambitions. Both suspected the

other of wanting to move forward to the detriment of their own position. By the end of the 1850s, after Great Britain had emerged victorious from the Anglo-Persian War of 1856-57 and had driven the Persians from Herat, Tsar Alexander feared a British advance towards the Caspian Sea (Figs 2010: 453). In British scenarios Russia did not just attempt to expand its Empire overland in Central Asia and China, its ultimate aim was India. Lord Curzon, portrayed by Hopkirk (1994: 504) as an 'arch-Russophobe', was one of the people who frequently called attention to the Russian danger and to Russia's 'passion for territorial expansion' and the 'Muscovite earth-hunger'. In his words, and many of his compatriots may have thought the same, Russia was in a stage Great Britain had already passed, 'in which the lust for new possessions is in excess of every other sentiment' (Curzon: 1892 I: 216, 238). Curzon (1892 I: 171), who had travelled through Persia as a correspondent of *The Times*, wrote, in an effort to sketch the Russian threat to Persia, that the Russian Empire was a 'great Power whose movements and intentions form the subject of conversation in every Oriental bazaar, and whose ever swelling shadow, witnessed with a sort of paralysed quiescence by the native people, looms like a thunder-cloud over the land'.

Defeat in the Crimean War of 1853-56 had frustrated Russian plans to march towards Constantinople and the Turkish Straits, connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Consequently, Russia turned its attention in that part of the world to the Caucasus and Central Asia, viewing their conquest as a preliminary step for incursions into the Ottoman Empire and Persia, and also moving in the direction of Afghanistan. The end of the Crimean War had come as a disappointment to the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston. He had wanted to fight on. Since at least 1840 some British had worried about a Russian conquest of Khiva (Buckley 1902 I: 347). But a prolonged war would have brought Russia to its knees and would certainly have prevented a Russian advance (Figs 2010: 497). Russia did advance. In the 1860s, it could call itself master of Chechnya, Dagestan, Azerbaijan and the rest of the Caucasus. Around the same time, in the name of civilisation, it moved onwards, east of the Caspian Sea, turning into protectorates the Uzbekistan Khanates, Bukhara (Bokhara, Bukhoro) in 1868 and Khiva in 1873, and annexing a third one, the Kokand (Khokand) Khanete, in 1876. Moving to the south, towards Persia, it also entered into Turkmenistan.

To the east lay China, another object of Russian commercial and territorial expansion. The groundwork for this had been laid in 1851. In the Treaty of Kulja (Ili, present-day Yining), Kulja and Tacheng (Tarbagatai, Chuguchak) in north Xinjiang (Sinkiang, also known as Chinese Turkistan or Uyghuristan) were opened to Russian trade, and Russian consuls were

allowed to take up residence there. These were prerogatives in inland China that remained denied to other powers for a long time. Nine years later, as part of a treaty concluded between St Petersburg and Beijing in 1860, Russia gained the same rights in Kashi (Kashgar), much further to the south, and thus more menacing in the British mind. A decade later, the instability created by an Islamic rebellion in Xinjiang and Yunnan, and the establishment of an independent Kashgaria Khanate by Yakub Bey in the mid-1860s, offered Russia the opportunity to enter the Chinese part of the Ili (Yili) River Basin. Ostensibly to restore law and order, Russian troops crossed the border in 1871. When in 1877 the Chinese army succeeded in suppressing the rebellion, Russia tried to hold on to much of its territorial gains. For a moment it seemed that it was going to succeed in doing so. Under the Livadia Treaty of 1879, Russia was only obliged to return part of the territory it had conquered. The treaty signed by the Chinese negotiator was immediately repudiated by Beijing. In what went down in history as the Ili Crisis, China succeeded in resisting Russia, assisted in doing so by Great Britain, Germany and the United States, which issued a joint warning to Russia – which had sent a fleet to the Chinese coast – not to attack any treaty port; thus preventing any aggressive intention St Petersburg might have had on the Pacific coast. It took until 1881 before the border between China and Russia was agreed upon. Under the Treaty of Ili, or Treaty of St Petersburg, of 24 (12 according to the Russian calendar) February of that year Russia gave up most of the territory it had seized. In return, St Petersburg gained the right to establish new consulates in Xinjiang, was promised that even more might be opened later, won additional trading concessions in the region, exceeding those other powers had elsewhere in China, and received an indemnity to compensate the military expeditions in the previous years and for the loss of Russian lives and property during the Yakub Bey rebellion. China came to regret the concessions, but proved too weak to undo them (Williams 1916: 801).

Persia and Afghanistan and the threat to India

By 1890 Russia controlled the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan, and had gained commercial preponderance in the north of Persia. Competition was fierce. Curzon (1892 I: 137), not given to moderate views, observed that ‘acute commercial warfare’ was being waged there ‘between Russian and Anglo-Indian merchandize’. He complained that Russia had shut ‘the northern gates to every other power’ and foresaw that, in the long

run, Anglo-Indian commerce would disappear from the north of country (Curzon 1892 I: 137; II: 558). Russian politicians may even have considered themselves the masters of all of Persia. In his memoirs, the architect of Russia's economic expansion into Central and north Asia, Count Sergei Witte, recalled that in 1896 'it was perfectly natural for us to look at Persia as totally under our influence and protection, a country with which we could do anything we thought useful for us' (Harcave 1990: 202). Witte, out to demonstrate how disastrous the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 had been for his country, exaggerated. Great Britain claimed the south. In the words of Curzon (1892 II: 41), though he probably exaggerated as well, Great Britain had 'undisputed ... commercial predominance' up to Isfahan. The obstacles British trade experienced in the north were more than compensated by the control Great Britain exercised over the Persian Gulf, where sea traffic with the homeland had greatly benefited from the opening of the Suez Canal and from intensified communication with Bombay (Mumbai) and other British ports in India.

Russia's penetration into Persia posed a double threat. Russian troops could march straight south to the Persian Gulf to gain a port and a naval station there, as well as direct access to the Indian Ocean. An equally daunting thought was that halfway on its journey south to the Persian coast a Russian army could turn east, entering Afghanistan through a more accessible terrain than in the north; a possibility that was to haunt the British well into the twentieth century. Afghanistan played a crucial role in the British strategic scenarios of those days. Already for decades, and wary, if not downright alarmed by, Russia's aggrandisements in Central Asia, London considered Afghanistan to be vital to the defence of India and to fall within the British sphere of influence. Afghanistan should remain a buffer, protecting India against a Russian invasion. With regard to Afghanistan, Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, pointed out in 1898 that Great Britain had 'a large and long Frontier to protect, with a limited force'.¹

Russia approaching India via northern Afghanistan, via Kabul and the Khyber Pass would mean 'hard fighting' and a march of some 500 miles through wild territory inhabited by 'wild tribes', which would fiercely fight any invader, including the Russians (Curzon 1892 I: 236). Entering Persia would make the Russian task a little easier. It would bring Russia significantly closer to the boundary of India, with better access into and through Afghanistan via its western border, allowing a Russian army to

1 Hamilton in House of Commons 14-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/feb/14/address-in-answer-to-her-majesty's-most-gracious-speech).

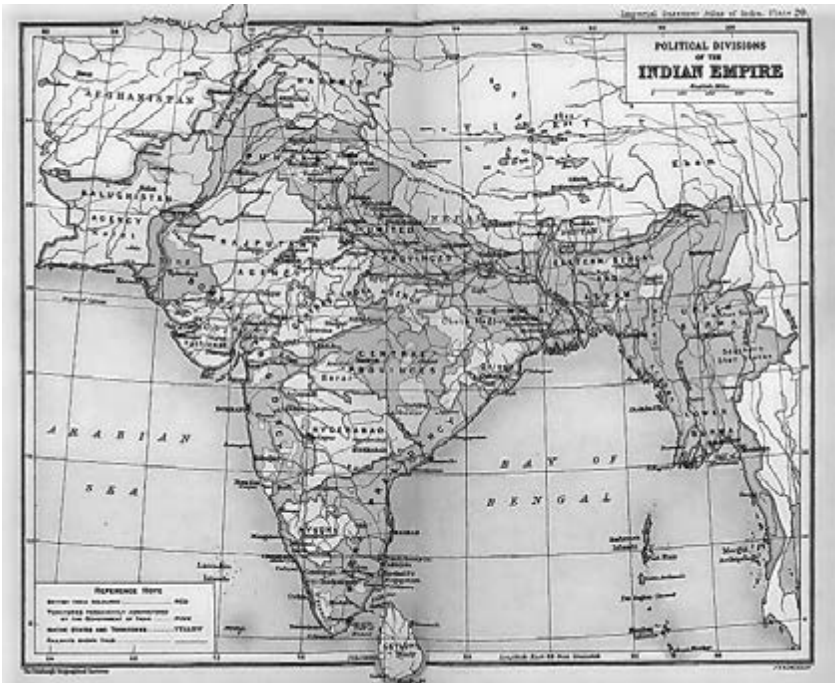
march from Mashhad (Meshed) in north Persia, via Herat and Kandahar in Afghanistan, to the Bolan Pass in Baluchistan in present-day Pakistan, near the garrison town of Quetta; though sceptics still wondered whether the Russians really could accomplish this (Temple 1902: 45). In the same vein, as some saw Chinese armies commanded by Russians marching southwards from Manchuria, it was feared that the Russians on their way to India might co-opt local tribesmen, luring them with the loot they might amass in India and aiming at fomenting unrest in Afghanistan and India; a scenario of old that was familiar to Russian dreams, as was, by the way, the fear that Great Britain might act in a similar way and arm Afghans to take on the Russians in Central Asia. Yet another possibility was that Russia might eye for the southeastern Persian regions directly bordering with British India. Such considerations made Persia matter to Great Britain. For some, among them former Governor of Bombay Richard Temple (1902: 46), the fact that Persia 'might become a highway between Russia and India' was the overriding reason why.

In 1878, when in the last stages of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 British threats had stopped Russian troops from closing in on Istanbul, London decided to act. Kabul, more or less forced by Russia, had received a Russian mission that, as such missions often were, was protected by a strong military guard, and had concluded a treaty of friendship with St Petersburg. The Russian approach was described by Temple (1902: 40) as a 'collateral result' of Russia planning for the Russo-Turkish War. The Amir of Afghanistan, who might, as Hopkirk (1994: 382) wrote, have feared 'the might of Russia more than that of Britain', denied the British a similar prerogative. A British mission was stopped at the border. In reaction, troops were sent into Afghanistan. The Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-80 was a fact. The outcome was that, to all intents and purposes, Afghanistan came within the British sphere of influence. In May 1879 the Treaty of Gandamak was concluded. In return for a pledge of British support against 'any foreign aggression', the Amir promised to 'conduct his relations with Foreign States in accordance with the advice and wishes of the British Government'. The treaty did not end the war. In September mutinous Afghan troops massacred the newly established British Mission in Kabul. The Treaty of Gandamak had given Great Britain what it wanted, but the British remained highly suspicious of Russia's intention; an apprehension manifesting itself in the desire to move westwards to be better able to meet a Russian confrontation. Also, after the war had ended, the British government would make it plain a number of times that a Russian invasion in Afghanistan would be viewed as a hostile act and a cause for war.

Fears of further Russian territorial aggrandisements in Central Asia, and the consequences of such expansion for British political and economic interests in the region, were strengthened by the construction in the 1880s of the Trans-Caspian Railway, also known as the (General Michael Nicolaivitch) Annenkoff Railway and the Central Asian Railway. The railway, running parallel to the north Persian border, could not only be used by Russia to expand its influence in Persia, it was also an encroachment on China's and Afghanistan's borders. The new Trans-Caspian Railway, one contemporary author was sure, placed the northern frontier of Persia 'completely at the mercy of Russia' and allowed for the transportation of Russian troops to 'the Afghan frontier at a very short notice from all parts of Russia' (Inagaki 1890: 252).

Great Britain guarded its interests in the south of Persia zealously. London was adamant that Russia, having established its influence in the north, should not move further southwards; threatening British commercial interest in central and south Persia and, ultimately, reaching what many

Figure 11 British India in 1909



Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:British_Indian_Empire_1909_Imperial_Gazetteer_of_India.jpg)

thought was Russia's ultimate aim: the Persian Gulf. A Russian naval base in the Persian Gulf, would, as the most renowned expert of naval strategy of those days, Mahan (1900: 119) warned, form a 'perpetual menace' to a British fleet and that of its allies 'in case of complications in the farther East'. It would 'involve an exhausting effort, and a naval abandonment of the Black Sea, or of the China Sea, or of both'; of which especially the latter, with Great Britain still dominating China trade, the country could ill afford.

The British had no intention of letting this happen. 'A Russian port upon the Persian Gulf would no more be tolerated by any English minister or government than would an English port on the Caspian by any Czar', Curzon (1892 I: 236) wrote. He even portrayed the Persian Gulf as a 'British Protectorate'. Law and order there was exclusively due to British effort and the British pacification of the Persian Gulf had been tenfold more strenuous than that of the Caspian Sea by the Russians. If the latter had only 'scared a few penniless buccaneers', then the British in the Persian Gulf had 'effectively destroyed a pirate combination and fleet' (Curzon 1892 II: 464-5). Curzon's discussion of a Russian foothold in the Persian Gulf was one passionate appeal against it:

I would regard the concession of a port upon the Persian Gulf to Russia by any power as a deliberate insult to Great Britain, as a wanton rupture of the *status quo*, and as an intentional provocation to war; and I should impeach the British minister, who was guilty of acquiescing in such a surrender, as a traitor to his country (ibid.: 465).

His words carried weight, also at the British embassy in Russia. There, in July 1899, the British ambassador Charles Scott, referring to Curzon's assessment in a letter home to Salisbury, now Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister, wrote that 'the Persian Gulf [was] as much a British interest as the Caspian was Russian'.²

From a Russian perspective it was exactly the opposite. The Russian expansionist policy was an effort to prevent British influence extending northwards into Persia and northwestwards onto the Indian subcontinent. In the early 1870s, St Petersburg had successfully thrown a spanner in the plans of Baron Paul Julius von Reuter, a German-born British citizen, to become the prime mover in the economic exploitation of Persia. In July 1872, in return for a loan to the Shah, Reuter had succeeded in getting permission to build a railroad from the Caspian Sea via Tehran to the Persian Gulf, and

2 Scott to Salisbury 12-7-1899 (PRO FO 539 81).

had received the exclusive rights to the exploitation of coal, iron and other minerals in the country. He had also been promised preferential treatment for the construction of public works. Reuter had turned to London to ask for British assistance should problems arise with the Persian government. But subsequent Russian protests and domestic opposition resulted in the Shah cancelling the deal in November 1873 (Staley 1935: 8-9). Even an expansion of British economic and political interests less ambitious than Reuter aimed at, would have been unacceptable to St Petersburg. Curzon (1892 I: 237), a strong believer in the strategic considerations presented in those days, admitted that even by occupying only the most southeastern provinces of Persia, Great Britain 'would be in a position very seriously to menace the Asiatic status of her rival'.

Russian moves and British countermoves

In March 1885 Russian troops, 'actively aggressive', as Temple (1902: 43) would later write, capturing the mood of such front troops, defeated a small Afghan army detachment and moved into the Penjdeh Oasis, and it soon became clear that they had no intention of leaving. The Russian Foreign Secretary, Nicholas de Giers, defended the move by talking of acquiring 'a defensive position against the hostility displayed by the English government towards us since the Crimean war'.³ London regarded Penjdeh as being part of Afghanistan. St Petersburg claimed that the oasis belonged to the Khanate of Merv, which Russian troops – in spite of earlier assurances by St Petersburg to the contrary – had annexed some three years before. After St Petersburg had refused to withdraw its troops war seemed likely. Russia had advanced uncomfortably close to the northwestern frontier of Afghanistan and Herat. Queen Victoria even sent a telegram to Tsar Alexander III urging him to prevent the 'calamity of war' (Hopkirk 1994: 427). At the German Court the mood was more cheerful. An Anglo-Russian confrontation over Penjdeh appealed to the future Wilhelm II. 'It would be such a pity if there was not war', he wrote to Bismarck.⁴

In Great Britain and India there was much public anger over the Russian incursion into a region 'of only a few miles of territory 500 miles from their Indian Possessions', as one less hot-headed contemporary described

3 Giers to Staal 5-7-1884 (Taylor 1971: 298).

4 Wilhelm to Bismarck 3-5-1885 (Quoted in Carter 2010: 27).

the Russian move.⁵ There was also talk of the negative consequences for the British image among the Afghans of a British retreat and a Russian army marching to Herat (*New York Times* 17-4-1885). Having been 'slapped violently in the face', the *New York Times* correspondent (12-4-1885) wrote, the British were 'all tingling with passion for an immediate fight'. Disquieted also by the appearance of a Russian cruiser in the Andaman Sea, which was seen as a Russian move to disrupt British shipping in the Gulf of Bengal, the imperial government in London and the colonial government in India prepared for war. In India troops were moved to the border and the possibility of sending them into Afghanistan was considered. This was easier said than done. Military Command did not yet fully realise the consequences of such a marching order. On their way to Afghanistan the soldiers had to pass through 'almost inaccessible regions, and the fearful difficulties of sending a large body of troops with transport were then recognised for the first time'.⁶ In London the Board of the Admiralty, one of its members would recall later, was ordered 'to make hasty preparation for war'.⁷ One of the measures taken was that the Chinese and Australian stations of the British fleet converted merchantmen into warships. The conversion had caused the Admiralty 'grave anxiety and wasteful expenditure'.⁸ The ships were too slow.

Great Britain was prevented by the other European powers from moving against Russia in the Black Sea, the most obvious target of retaliation, but hit back in East Asia. In May 1885, on the instructions of the Admiralty, British warships occupied Port Hamilton, a number of small islands off the southern coast of Korea, which a year earlier the American Secretary of the Navy had identified as a suitable place for an American naval station (Field 2001: 4). The aim was to check the Russian Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok and to frustrate any Russian hope of turning Port Hamilton into an ice-free Pacific port for the Russian navy. For Britons expecting war it was 'vital' to 'have a coaling station and base of operation within reach of Vladivostok and the Amoor at the beginning of a war' (Inagaki 1890: 30).

Within months, and before the Penjdeh crisis could escalate, London and St Petersburg agreed to respect the territorial integrity of Afghanistan. St

5 The Duke of Marlborough in House of Lords (hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1885/aug/04/questions-observations).

6 J. Dickson Poynder in House of Commons 14-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/feb/14/address-in-answer-to-her-majesty's-most-gracious-speech).

7 Lord Brassey in House of Lords 8-7-1902 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1902/jul/08/merchant-cruisers-in-the-navy).

8 Ibid.

Petersburg, in the words of Curzon, made 'the honourable concession ... of certain territory on the border of Afghanistan, important to the Ameer'.⁹ In 1887 an Anglo-Russian Joint Afghan Boundary Commission, which had been set up three years earlier, a few months before the Penjdeh incident, reached agreement on the delineation. Penjdeh remained in Russian hands. In return, Russia acknowledged Afghanistan's rights to the Zulfikar Pass. A Russian advance was halted, but, to the disappointment and even alarm of some in Great Britain, Russia had gained a position 'inconveniently near to Herat' (Temple 1902: 43). Shocked by the Penjdeh incident, Great Britain decided upon a more aggressive 'forward policy' or 'advanced frontier policy' aimed at preventing Russian agitation along the Indian border and meeting a Russian military threat right on India's border with Afghanistan; or, better still, in 'Kabul', and not as the previous doctrine was along the Indus. Effective control was expanded westwards, with high costs and, at times, with disastrous results.

To realise this policy, the Durand Line was agreed on with Afghanistan in November 1893. The line defined their respective spheres of influence over the independent frontier tribes living along the infamous present-day border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁰ The British never tired of emphasising that these tribes, among them those living in the Valleys of Swat and Bajaur in the northwest, were savage people who coupled fierce feelings of independence with religious fanaticism. There was 'an almost inexhaustible supply of fanaticism' in that corner of India, as Lord George Hamilton put it to the House of Commons in 1898.¹¹

With the Penjdeh crisis solved, Port Hamilton was returned to Korea in January 1887. This happened after London had solicited a written guarantee from Beijing that China – which, on its part, had received a promise from St Petersburg that Russia would not interfere in Korea if the British did not either – would not allow any another power to acquire a part of Korea. The fate of the naval base had been decided by a change of government and a change of mind. Naval experts, among them three Naval Commanders-in-Chief on the China Station, had spoken out in favour of abandoning Port Hamilton. In times of peace the base was too expensive to maintain, in times of war defending the unfortified port would tie down warships that

9 Curzon in House of Commons 21-1-1886 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1886/jan/21/first-eight).

10 After Pakistan had become independent in 1947, Kabul made it clear that it did not recognise the British-imposed Durand Line.

11 J. Lawson Walton in House of Commons 14-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/feb/14/address-in-answer-to-her-majesty's-most-gracious-speech).

could be better deployed elsewhere. To some, leaving Port Hamilton was yet another indication of the weakness of Great Britain. They assumed that Russian pressure was the real reason for Great Britain's withdrawal (Krahmer 1899: 187).

After the Penjdeh crisis the focus of Anglo-British rivalry shifted to the extreme northeast of Afghanistan, to the Pamir mountains in present-day Tajikistan, an isolated and in those days still mostly uncharted region, which had its own passes into northern Kashmir (which a century later would be among the main supply routes of Russian troops into Afghanistan). In 1891 Russia moved in to occupy part of the mountains, 'empty land' that did not belong to Afghan, British Indian or Chinese territory. In doing so, they evicted from the area Captain Francis Edward Younghusband and another British officer gathering intelligence there. Their treatment and the stories they brought back about the Russian intentions caused anxiety about the defence of India. The Russian advance was seen as a threat to the towns of Chitral and Gilgit, both located on the British side of the Durand Line; though not everybody was that worried. The supply line that invading Russian troops would have to depend upon was too long. What followed resembled the Penjdeh scare. There was much speculation about an Anglo-Russian war and in India troops were mobilised.

Russia backed down, but this time the British did move. Still in 1891, in a pre-emptive strike, a military expedition brought Hunza and Nagar in Gilgit-Baltistan under British control. Chitral would acquire a special place in British history. In early 1895, fearing for the life of the British political agent who had been stationed there a few years earlier at the request of the local ruler, troops were directed to Chitral. The expedition resulted in the famous, almost disastrous, siege of a British garrison in the Chitral Fort. In the background loomed the suspicion that St Petersburg might take advantage of the dynastic strife in the Princely State; a threat not deemed unrealistic as Russian troops had already advanced within some 20 miles of Chitral. As so often was the case, people in India were more alarmed than the home government. In London Prime Minister Rosebery considered it very unlikely that India could be invaded via Chitral. Sarcastically, he wrote to the Indian Viceroy, the Earl of Elgin, that India seemed to be 'guarding against Russia on every peak of the Hindu Kush'.¹²

In March 1895, under the 'Pamir Agreement', Great Britain and Russia decided that the contested spot of 'empty land' the Russians had marched into in 1891 would be added to the territory of Afghanistan, which now

12 Rosebery to Elgin 18-6-1895 (Chandran 1977: 151).

effectively formed a buffer between Russian and British territory. The Russian benefit was clear. One author, Dodwell (1932: 464), concluded in 1932 that the 1895 agreement 'brought Russia a great extension of military and political prestige'. Later, Hopkirk (1994: 501) also concluded that the Russians had not only 'secured their long southern frontier, but they had also placed themselves advantageously if ever it came to a war with Britain'. Russia controlled most of the Pamir region (Hopkirk 1994: 499). In Great Britain people worried about the consequences of the agreement for the Indian state of Kashmir (Temple 1902: 44).

The settlement more or less fixed the Russian and British positions in the region, but did not put an end to British anxiety regarding India. In 1900 the Minister of War, General Aleksey N. Kuropatkin, told the British ambassador, Scott, that Afghanistan remained Great Britain's 'sensitive point', and pressuring the British there 'could always be turned to Russia's political advantage elsewhere'.¹³ The conversation took place after Great Britain was still in shock over its reverses in the first phase of the Boer War and the Russian military saw the British engagement in South Africa as a good opportunity for some offensive action along the Persian and Afghan borders; there aspirations were kept in check by Nicholas II who wanted to stay clear of a conflict with Great Britain.¹⁴ Persia would indeed give the British a lot to worry about. At the end of the century, Calcutta rather alarmingly concluded that Persia, in view of Russia 'closely pressing upon Persia and upon Afghanistan', had become 'a matter of vital concern' to India. The reason was that Persia shared a frontier with Afghanistan 'for many hundreds of miles' and was 'conterminous for hundreds of miles' with Baluchistan in present-day Pakistan, while the Persian Gulf was uncomfortably close to the Indian Ocean, where Indian influence was 'supreme'.¹⁵

British military presence in Chitral also continued to be a source of concern for Calcutta and London, leading to heated debates about its purpose. Chitral became 'a post of observation' and a road was built between Chitral and Peshawar. Not everybody was convinced of its usefulness. In a letter to *The Times* it was posed that Chitral was 'a post of defense and observation which defends and observes nothing', while the road was 'a road which leads

13 Scott to Salisbury 22-2-1900 (PRO FO 539 81).

14 Scott to Salisbury 11-1-1900 (PRO FO 539 81). Speculations about an Anglo-Russian confrontation in Central Asia also circulated in South Africa, where it was used to boast the morale of the Boers (Pakenham 1992: 338).

15 Government of India to Secretary of State for India 21-9-1899 (cited in Shuster 1912: 231).

nowhere'.¹⁶ It may have led to nowhere, but it also traversed a region where, Secretary of State for India Lord George Hamilton observed in August 1897, the inhabitants could 'be subject to sudden outbreaks of fanatical zeal'.¹⁷ At that moment Hamilton was still full of optimism, presenting the British presence in the region and the economic progress it would bring as a successful implementation of the 'forward policy' of meeting the Russian threat by extending the territory under British control. What he did not yet know was that in the previous month local tribesmen, led by someone the British called 'Mad Mullah', had attacked and laid siege to British outposts along the Chitral road at Malakand and Chakdara. It was, as one Member of the House of Commons, Henry Fowler, claimed, 'the greatest outbreak since the Mutiny'.¹⁸

16 Cited by Lawson Walton in House of Commons 14-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/feb/14/address-in-answer-to-her-majesty's-most-gracious-speech).

17 Hamilton in House of Commons 5-8-1897 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1897/aug/05/army-in-India).

18 Fowler in House of Commons 14-2-1898 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1898/feb/14/address-in-answer-to-her-majesty's-most-gracious-speech).

