2nd Annual National Security & Strategy Workshop
Afghanistan the Old-New Geopolitical Black Hole

29th October 2010, Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Western Australia

Geostrategic Lessons from the Past: British & Soviet Campaigns

By Dr. John Bruni, Director SAGE International

Introduction

In the rush to analyse contemporary conflicts we continuously forget what our fathers and forefathers achieved, and in doing so, each age has to re-learn the lessons of the past – often at great pain and sacrifice. Hopefully, as I begin to revisit some of the historical aspects of the 4 Afghan wars that preceded the ISAF mission, you can see continuity between the Afghanistan of today and that of the 19th Century. The weapons and social mores may have changed, but what drove the wars – motivations fuelled by mistrust, misinformation and misinterpretation still resonate clearly to this day.

To begin with, I'd like to offer up the closing passage from Rudyard Kipling's *'The Young British Soldier'*, written in 1895, fifteen years after the Second Anglo-Afghan War. No doubt some of the young men and women serving with ISAF today, especially from among the British contingent, will find the words a poignant reminder of the perils of serving in that country…and I quote:

"When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier".[i]

First Anglo-Afghan War 1839-42

The world of 1839 was one of rapid technological and political change. Britain, with a young Queen Victoria on the throne was at the zenith of its imperial prowess – making major inroads in Asia and consolidating its power in India.

Tsar Nicolas I of Russia encouraged Russian expansion southeast, into the area of Central Asia. A prime Russian motivation for this expansion was that the independent Khanates, which ruled this inhospitable region, frequently raided southern Russian towns, capturing townspeople and selling them into slavery. A Russian military presence was thought to act as a deterrent to this ongoing activity. But, the then unknown concept of 'mission creep' turned an initially 'protective' role into a much wider campaign to bring these troublesome regions under the imperial banner.

However the closer Russian military incursions moved towards Afghanistan, the more British strategists worried that the Tsarist leadership in St. Petersburg had its eyes firmly fixed on India.

At the time, European thinking on Russia was generally unflattering.

Russia was seen as a primitive and aggressive state whose rule was considered brutal and the court of St. Petersburg 'semi-civilised' in comparison to the other more genteel and sophisticated imperial realms west of the Carpathian Mountains. Fear of the unpredictable and destructive 'Russian Bear' was ever present in western propaganda.[ii]

The start of the Great Game between London and St. Petersburg in Central Asia began not as a clash of imperial titans coveting territory, equally matched and equally motivated, but on a British misinterpretation of Russian intent. The battlefield to be was Afghanistan.

Afghanistan in the early 19th Century was a land-locked, independent kingdom ruled by Dost Mohammed Khan of the Pashtu Barakzai dynasty. It was a country deeply influenced by the cultures of Mongol and Persian invaders. The state was a crossroads of these cultures and an ethnic patchwork of mutually hostile tribes.

The British considered Afghanistan a buffer state between its Raj in India – then controlled by the British East India Company – and Russian interests further north in Central Asia. While London considered Tsarist Russia a competitor to British influence in South Asia and a potential threat to its Indian holdings, the Russians were more interested in suppressing the Central Asian khanates and preventing the rest of their vast and loosely knit empire from declaring independence.

In Afghanistan, Dost Mohammed had seized power from the former Pashtu Durrani dynasty in 1823. The country had fought a number of short wars with the Sikh Empire for dominance of the Hindu Kush, the last one ending in a Sikh victory and their capture of the city of Peshawar in 1837. Dost Mohammed wanted this city back under Afghan control and considered the British ideal allies in this quest, but the British refused to help.

Dost Mohammed, however, did not give up on finding an external ally to regain Peshawar. He turned to that other European power in relative proximity to Afghanistan – Russia.

In spite of Russia being in a considerably weaker position in Central Asia than Britain was in India, Nicolas I saw some merit in sending an envoy to Afghanistan to net some low-cost diplomatic leverage for his country and a slight rebuke to the British. But the Russian envoy failed to reach an agreeable settlement with Dost Mohammed. Angered by this failure, Nicolas I pressured his Persian allies to launch a punitive military expedition into western Afghanistan, laying siege to the city of Herat. After a 10-month siege of the city, considerable Persian casualties, and the threat of British military intervention, the siege ended in September 1838. For British observers, this was ‘proof positive’ of Russia’s malevolent intention. They slowly but surely drew up their plans to counter any future Russian encroachment.

Back in India, the camp was divided on whether an invasion of Afghanistan should go ahead if the Russians weren’t even in the country.

Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General of India, continued to agitate for military action in spite of the evidence that the Russians were not interested in consolidating a presence in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless a joint British-Indian army crossed into Afghanistan in April 1839.

Not long after the battle of Ghazni, Dost Mohammed fled into exile, paving the way for the former Durrani dynasty's return to power in Kabul – the British placing Shuja Shah Durrani on the Emir's throne.

But Shuja Shah was almost totally dependent on the small British military presence, some 5,000-strong, and British East India Company finance. Afghans quickly grew restive under his authority and sensed weakness in the British position. This incendiary situation was further fuelled by one of Dost Mohammed's sons, Mohammed Akbar Khan, who actively fomented a rebellious atmosphere in Kabul and in the other Afghan cities.

In late 1841, a number of British officers were set upon and killed in Kabul by anti-Shuja Shah Afghans. This act of insurrection was followed up by local Afghans storming a British supply depot.

Panicked by this deteriorating situation, Major General Elphinstone, commander of the British garrison in Kabul, ordered a full withdrawal of the British presence (military & civilian) back to India.

Though promised safe passage out of Afghanistan, the forces of Mohammed Akbar Khan harassed the retreating British, their Indian levees and attendant civilians. When not attacked by tribesmen, the British contingent was assaulted by the fierce Afghan winter.

Elphinstone made a stand at Gandamak. Outnumbered and without hope, the men of the 44th Regiment of Foot, ably supported by units of the Bengali infantry, cavalry and artillery, attempted to turn their fortunes around. Overwhelmed by approximately 30,000 tribesmen, almost the entire British contingent was cut down, including the civilians. Elphinstone was captured by the Afghans and died in captivity in 1842.

The British released Dost Mohammed in late 1841. Also in response to the Gandamak Massacre, the British sent into Afghanistan an 'Army of Retribution' and laid waste to Kabul. Unlike the first invasion force, this one did not stay. As soon as it had completed its mission, it withdrew back to India.

Dost Mohammed resumed his throne, Afghanistan its independence and a vengeful and bitter Britain learned a hard lesson in occupying an enigmatic and hostile land.[iii]

Second Anglo-Afghan War 1878-80

The Second Anglo-Afghan War was as much an extension of the first, as a continuance of general 19th Century Anglo-Russian enmity, which flared into war on the Crimean Peninsula in 1854.

Russia, now under the rule of Alexander II, the son of Nicolas I, had seen his country humiliated by the Anglo-French-Ottoman coalition during the Crimean War. It was obvious to him that Imperial Russian forces needed to be improved and the new machinery and tactics of war adopted, if Russia was to be taken seriously as a major European power. Consequently he launched a military modernisation and reform

program which saw strategic railways built, linking the developed west of the country to the underdeveloped southeast. He freed the serfs from their centuries old bondage, and by doing so liberated a vast force for industrial labour and national modernisation.

By 1877, the new Tsarist army was ready to exact revenge for Crimea. Russian forces attacked the weak Ottoman Empire, cutting a swath through Turkish military lines. So rapid was the Tsarist onslaught, that only the arrival of the British fleet into the Black Sea deterred the Russians from marching into the Ottoman capital of Constantinople.

The war ended in 1878 with the Treaty of San Stefano and Russia regained its strategic prominence in the Black Sea. With Russian pride restored, its foreign policy could afford to be more adventurous.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, another of Dost Mohammed's sons, Sher Ali Khan, now ruled the country. His ambition was to hold onto Afghan sovereignty and his country's status as a neutral.

But the British were no fans of Afghan neutrality. They believed that this neutrality was more of a strategic vulnerability to them, especially since it came at the cost of their humiliating defeat at Gandamak.

After the Congress of Berlin in June 1878 had attempted to tamp-down Anglo-Russian hostility,[iv] the following month, in a provocative move, Alexander II sent an unsolicited envoy to the court of Kabul.

The envoy was welcomed by the Emir and negotiations on opening up bilateral relations commenced. However this was completely unacceptable to London. Accepting the Russian envoy was seen to compromise Afghan neutrality and therefore posed a direct threat to British primacy in South Asia.

The British Viceroy, Lord Lytton demanded the Afghan Emir accept a British envoy. Sher Ali refused. In fact, in barely veiled language he told the British that any attempt to force a British envoy on him would be rebuffed. Lord Lytton called the Emir's bluff and sent an envoy. True to his word Sher Ali had his border guards turn the envoy and his accompanying entourage back.

In response, Lytton ordered a 40,000-strong British-Indian force into Afghanistan. The Afghan Emir attempted to solicit Russian military assistance but was unable to do so. He retired to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif where he died the following year.

Sher Ali's son, Yaqub Khan ascended the throne and in an act designed to save his country from a full British take-over, he signed the Treaty of Gandamak in May 1879. This Treaty conceded strategically important Afghan territory to the British Raj, including control of the Khyber Pass and the city of Quetta.

By September of 1879, local Afghans tired of the British presence and rebelled. They stormed the British mission and killed its staff. Yaqub Khan was suspected to have had a direct hand in ordering this massacre and as a consequence, under British

pressure, he abdicated and spent the remainder of his life in exile in India. Yaqub Khan's brother, Ayub Khan, was overlooked as his successor with the title of Emir going instead to his cousin Abdur Rahman Khan.

An embittered Ayub Khan, as governor of Herat, rose up in revolt and raised an army that defeated the British at Maiwand in July 1880. But at the battle of Kandahar, the following month, the British decisively defeated Ayub Khan's forces, paving the way for Abdur Rahman to rule Afghanistan unopposed and maintain the Treaty of Gandamak.[v]

Third Anglo-Afghan War 1919

1919 – Russia was in its third year of civil war (1917-23), after having suffered Revolution which culminated in the violent demise of the Romanov dynasty; wartime defeat at the hands of the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary & the Ottoman Empire) and the attendant humiliation of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. Internationally the Bolsheviks were considered dangerous but containable, so long as the White Army could continue to harass and eventually defeat Lenin's Red Army.

The British Empire, in 1919 was territorially at its greatest extent. But from a manpower perspective questions were raised in London over Britain's capacity to hold onto the new extensive territories absorbed into the realm as a consequence of the defeat of the Central Powers. Furthermore, World War I had culled a generation of young British and colonial men and as a consequence the taste for combat for King and empire had waned considerably.

In Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman's eldest son, Habibullah Khan succeeded his father. But unlike his father, Habibullah had no real interest in pursuing permanent relations with Britain. Indeed during World War I, Habibullah, while technically keeping Afghanistan neutral but 'British orientated', sought and received technical assistance from the Central Powers. Turkish advisers brought into Afghanistan agents who sought to stir up trouble for the British along the unstable and vulnerable North West Frontier. With the bulk of British-Indian forces deployed to the European theatre of combat, the North West Frontier was an open door through which havoc could be raised.

But Turkish trouble in Afghanistan was fairly contained and small-scale. After the war, Habibullah had dreams of joining the great powers at the Versailles Peace Conference and of regaining Afghan independence as a reward for his 'neutrality'.

But the British Viceroy was not kindly disposed to Habibullah's ambitions and in the midst of his negotiations with the Afghan Emir, the Emir died at the hands of an assassin. April 1919, and Habibullah's third son, Amanullah Khan seized power after struggling with his uncle for the position of Emir.

The following month, Amanullah, sensing vulnerability in the British position in India, and wanting to revoke the 1879 Gandamak Treaty, decided to take military action.

In May, Amanullah mobilised the 50,000-strong Afghan Army, along with some 80,000 tribesmen and launched a surprise attack on British India.

Russia's Bolsheviks, in spite of their own problems with the White Army, provided military assistance to Amanullah in the form of small arms and ammunition. They also sent up to one million gold rubbles to help the Emir.

The British, after initially conceding some ground, counter-attacked, rolling back the invading Afghans, and taking the fight into Afghanistan itself.

Airpower proved a decisive element in the British counter attack. Kabul was bombed and retreating Afghan forces were harassed from the air.

The three-month war ended in August 1919. The outcome of this brief war was that the contentious 'Durand Line' that separated Afghanistan from British India was affirmed as the proper border between the two states. The Afghans received full independence from Britain and could resume the conduct of their own foreign policy. Amanullah continued to serve in the capacity of Emir of Afghanistan until 1929 when an uprising against his rule in Jalalabad spread to Kabul and most of his army deserted. He abdicated and ended his days in Switzerland, dying in exile in 1960.[vi]

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 1979-89

In one of those unique turning points in history, the jousting for influence in Afghanistan between the Russians and the British that started off in the early 19th Century eventually culminated in Russian control of the beleaguered country in the late 20th Century. By this stage Russia, now ruled for 56 years by a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship, was a mature global military power of the first order, armed with the panoply of modern weapons, nuclear and conventional.

After World War II, another great power displaced the British in the West – the United States.

As was the Cold War propaganda at the time, the Americans feared that Russian control of Afghanistan was a step toward their ultimate drive into Pakistan and a warm-water port for the Soviet Navy. The truth of Russia's motivations to invade Afghanistan was, however, more complex.

The Soviet Central Asian republics were Muslim and ethnographically similar to the patchwork of ethnic and sectarian groups inhabiting Afghanistan. Since the 1950s, worried about the security situation within its Central Asian republics, Moscow encouraged warm relations with Kabul, providing the Afghan government with significant amounts of cash and equipment – for civilian and military use.

Meanwhile in early 1979, the US position in the Gulf region changed abruptly due to the Iranian Revolution. Iranian religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, threatened to spread Shiite religious fervour into neighbouring countries. Soviet Secretary-General Leonid Brezhnev was alarmed by this turn of events. Should the Iranian Revolution's

reach extend over the borders of Iran, the Soviet position in Central Asia would be jeopardised.

Geostrategically, the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty altered the balance of power against the USSR in the Middle East.

Wedged between what was at the time seen as the threat posed by Iran to Central Asia and an improvement of the American position in the Middle East due to Washington's courting of Sadat's Egypt, (a former Soviet client), the Politburo needed a 'strategic win'.

In April 1978, an opportunity presented itself to the USSR.

The Saur Revolution, led by local communists, unleashed a wave of political instability in Kabul, ending with the assassination of the Afghan President, Mohammed Daoud Khan. Out of the chaos arose Muhammad Tariki who assumed the country's presidency, the prime ministership and the position of secretary general of the Marxist PDPA, creating the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Irrespective of their communist credentials, neither Tariki nor his political ally, Hafizullah Amin, were exclusively loyal to Moscow. Their terms in office as Afghan president cut short by assassination. Followers loyal to Amin killed Tariki. Soviet Special Forces killed Amin prior to Moscow's invasion of the country in December 1979; Amin replaced by Soviet loyalist, Babrak Karmel.

Anti-communist rebellions broke out all across the country.

The brutality displayed by the Soviets in their attempt to crush the anti-government forces of the Mujahedeen eclipsed anything the British imposed on Afghanistan in their three Afghan wars. Resistance to the Soviet occupation was aided by American support of the anti-communist Mujahedeen.[vii] This US support proved critical in furnishing the weaponry necessary to bleed the Soviets. Also critical was the financial and spiritual support provided by Gulf Arabs and the logistical support of the Pakistanis.[viii]

After 10 years of heavy fighting, 14,500 Soviets & 18,000 allied Afghan government forces were killed; 53,700 Soviet soldiers were wounded. On the Mujahedeen side, 75,000 were killed and some 150,000 were wounded. One million Afghan civilians lost their lives; millions more fled the country or were internally displaced.

So What Are the Strategic Lessons from the Past?

Each successive invasion (British and Soviet) of Afghanistan pushed the country a little further back from its path to national modernity. The Soviets were quite decisive in this. They conducted a scorched earth policy in many parts of the country, leaving the squabbling Mujahedeen little workable national infrastructure to inherit following the Soviet withdrawal.

Pashtu nationalism has always manipulated, subverted and ultimately trumped foreign interests in the country. Pashtu nationalism is fractious, not monolithic, and while all

within the leadership group believe innately in their ability to govern, the competitive and sometimes violent nature of Pashtu politics leaves foreign interests few opportunities to find local allies to help pursue their agendas.

There is also the sub-text of Pashtu nationalism that spans Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pashtu tribesmen normally disregard the border separating these two countries and treat their brethren from either side of the Durand Line as Pashtu, not as Pakistani or Afghan. This simple fact complicates Islamabad's relationship with its Pashtu community, especially in areas adjacent to the Afghan border. They are not considered loyal subjects, rather potential insurrectionists, undermining Pakistani sovereignty. In order to keep this area under control, the Punjabi majority of Pakistan alternates between brutalising its Pashtu population and opportunistically championing Pashtu nationalism, so long as it is at the expense of neighbouring Afghanistan.

The major discontinuity we find in today's Afghanistan is that unlike the previous invasions (especially during the Anglo-Afghan Wars) where there were only two competitive foreign powers attempting to influence Kabul's direction, i.e., London and St. Petersburg, we now have a kaleidoscope of foreign interests, many of which are working at cross-purposes in Afghanistan.

Pakistan and India, the Central Asian Republics as well as Iran, are each attempting to coerce, buy influence or involve themselves at the sub national level. They exploit kindred ethnic and sectarian groups in Afghanistan, and in doing so, undermine and weaken the contemporary Afghan national government – itself a foreign imposed construct.

The fact the Americans and their NATO and non-NATO allies under the ISAF banner want to set a clear timetable for their withdrawal after 9 years of counter-insurgency, means that the countdown to Karzai's hold on power and relative internal stability has begun. Recently there has been talk that the latest round of ISAF attacks on the Taliban has weakened them considerably. It is hoped that this will force the Taliban to consider peace with Karzai and ISAF and bring 'moderate', 'pragmatic' Taliban into the Karzai governing elite.

Considering the complicated and diffuse nature of Afghan power, the many foreign players inside the country and their mutually competing agendas and claims on Afghanistan's future, it is unlikely that a post-ISAF Afghanistan will see a strong, stable regime under Karzai or any other pretender to the Afghan presidency. National institutions are underdeveloped in spite of the billions of dollars of foreign aid being ploughed into the country. The ruling elite is corrupt; Taliban sympathizers are still active within the army and national police – neither security outfit seemingly up to the task of maintaining Afghan sovereignty without heavy foreign assistance.

This war is far from over. Afghanistan was and will remain a strategically important country, an imperfect, fragile stepping-stone on the way to somewhere else. As such, Afghanistan will continue to confound foreign designs, however conceived and forcefully promoted, living up to its reputation as 'the graveyard of empires'.

***

[i] Kipling R., *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling*, The Wordsworth Poetry Library, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire, UK, 1994, p.x.

[ii] Brennan C. & Frame M., *Russia and the Wider World in Historical Perspective*, English Historical Review, Vol.115, Issue, 464, p.1324.

[iii] Noelle C., *State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)*, Curzon Press, London, 1997, pp.1-38.

[iv] Medlicott W.N., *The Congress of Berlin and After: A Diplomatic History of the Near Eastern Settlement 1878-80*, CASS, NY, 1963.

[v] Ewans M., *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in asymmetric warfare*, Routledge NY, 2006, pp.59-78.

[vi] Clements F.A., *Conflict in Afghanistan: A Historical Encyclopaedia*, ABC-CLIO Inc., California, 2003, p.247.

[vii] For more information see: (eds.) Saikal A., & Maley W., *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge UK, 1989.

[viii] For more information see: Hilali A.Z., *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, Ashgate Publishing Company, UK, 2005.