CONCLUSION

With the ascendance of the rival European powers - Britain and Russia in Asia, Afghanistan gained importance in international politics due to its geographical contiguity to both the British and Russian empires in Asia. The rulers of Afghanistan found themselves in a tricky situation as Britain and Russia were expanding towards Afghanistan from two opposite directions. Whereas both Britain and Russia were playing intrigue and counter intrigue for promoting their imperial interests in Afghanistan, the Afghan rulers vainly tried to play the two powers against each other in order to maintain their independence. Thus we find Amir Dost Mohammad making friendly overtures to the Russians seeking their support in his proposed expeditions against the Sikhs, after he had received a firm refusal for such help from the British Governor General of India, Lord Auckland. The Russians responded promptly by despatching Vitkevitch mission to Kabul alongwith letters of goodwill from the Tsar emperor and the Russian Foreign Minister for the ruler of Afghanistan. There is reason to believe that Vitkevitch was assigned the task of minimising British influence in Kabul and frustrate Brune's attempts to increase the same. But the Russians quickly disowned responsibility for Vitkevitch's proceedings in
Kabul after England made a protest. Similarly when Sher Ali, the succeeding ruler of Afghanistan got dissatisfied with the passive British attitude towards him, he turned towards Russia for active assistance. He was already maintaining friendly communications with the Russian Governor General of Turkistan, Kaufmann, who had taken enough care not to support the exile Afghan leader Abdul Rahman’s attempt for a coup. Feeling agitated over Lytton’s overbearing attitude towards him the Afghan ruler Sher Ali received a high power Russian mission led by Stoleitov in 1878. At the same time he refused to receive a similar British mission, which finally resulted in the second Anglo-Afghan war (1878-80).

Notwithstanding Stoleitoves friendly offers, and Sher Ali’s urgent appeals to the Russian Governor General of Turkistan, Kaufmann for military assistance, the Russian government did not allow itself to be involved in the Anglo-Afghan Conflict. And the Afghans lost the war and Yakub Khan was installed as the new Amir by the British. By virtue of the Anglo-Afghan treaty signed at Gendamak on May 26, 1879, the British assumed control over Afghanistan’s foreign affairs. Sometime later Abdur Rahman Khan returned to Afghanistan from his exile in Samarkand and after
negotiations with the British Indian Government became the new Amir. Abdur Rahman was astute enough to use the Anglo-Russian contradictions to consolidate his authority over the whole of Afghanistan. His rule witnessed hectic negotiations between Britain and Russian over the demarcation of the northern frontier of Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman's wise policy also helped in the peaceful resolution of Panjdeh crisis in 1885, and in the eventual Anglo-Russian understanding on the north-eastern border of Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman did not allow his long association with the Russians during his stay in Samarkand to come in the way of his friendly relations with the British. At the same time, he steered clear of any involvement in the hostilities between Russia and the Central Asian Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which had sought his support. It was during his rule that the northern and north-eastern frontiers of Afghanistan bordering the Russian territories, were defined and settled. The Pamirs Boundary Agreement of 1895 virtually marked the beginning of the end of Anglo-Russian and Russo-Afghan tensions on the question of Afghanistan. Abdul Rahman's successor, Habibulah too followed a cautious policy of equidistance between Britain and Russia.
Sandwitched between the two rival European powers, Afghanistan was drawn into the vortex of Anglo-Russian rivalry. The British pursued a policy of extending commercial and political influence in Central Asia with an object of substituting Russian commercial and political influence with their own. They viewed the Russian advance in Central Asia as a threat to the British hegemony in Asia. Moves were therefore, set afoot to bring Afghanistan under the British influence. On the other hand, the Russians considered Central Asia within purview of their own logical and natural sphere of expansion, as India was for the British. In order to effectively counter the British moves, the Russians tried to make their presence felt in Afghanistan, so as to preclude the former from interfering into the latter's zone of operation. Russia was, however, content to allow Afghanistan the role of a buffer between Russian possessions in Central Asia and the British Indian empire. The Gortchakov declaration of 1864 that Afghanistan was outside the Russian sphere of influence, was followed by the subsequent agreement with the British on the delimitation of northern boundary of Afghanistan adjoining Russia. That is why Russia cold-shouldered the Afghan requests for armed assistance against the Sikhs and the British during the first
and second Anglo-Afghan wars. Not only that, Russians did not use the presence of Abdul Rahman in Russian territory for more than a decade, for grinding their axe in Afghanistan. Instead they opted for maintaining good neighbourly relations with the Afghan rulers at the same time consolidating their hold over their possessions in Central Asia. It was towards the end of the 19th century that the frontiers of Afghanistan were defined and demarcated by several boundary commissions as a result of Anglo-Russian negotiations. Finally the Anglo-Russian convention was signed in 1907 under which Russia undertook to consider Afghanistan as outside her sphere of influence and agreed to conduct relations with Afghanistan through Britain.

The Russo-Afghan trade which was conducted by caravan traders and pedlars was an extension of Indo-Central Asian trade carried through Punjab, Kabul and Bakhara. The main entrepot of this trade was Bokhara where the products of Russia and Afghanistan were exchanged. For their daily requirements such as gold wire used for embroidery, snuff bones, padlocks, knives, copper, brass and iron wares, leather, needles, paper, cloth etc. Afghans depended on the Russian goods received overland through Central Asia. As against this, Afghans and Central Asian traders took supplies
of Indian tea, spices, muslin, indigo, shawls etc., for sale in Central Asia wherefrom these were also carried to Russia proper. The Russian interest in developing her border trade with Afghanistan is evidenced by the despatch of Vitkovitch and Stolietov missions to finalise commercial alliances with Kabul. There existed substantial trade contacts between the two regions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Notwithstanding the inhibiting influence of Anglo-Russian rivalry, the volume of trade between Afghanistan and Russia increased during Abdur Rahman's rule. This was due to a series of economic reforms introduced by him in his country. These measures included the abolition of a complicated system of tolls that was earlier in vogue in different provinces, creation of a caravan bureau which saw to the safety, supply and transportation needs of travellers and caravans. Besides he fixed a uniform tax on imports and exports. But with the Russian imposition of strict restrictions on imports of British Indian commodities in Russian Central Asia, the flow of Indian goods into Central Asia via Afghanistan declined by 80 per cent severely damaging Afghanistan's position in the Indo-Central Asian
trade. The absence of any treaty arrangements to regulate the Russo-Afghan trade also contributed to its decline. However, this bilateral trade scaled new heights after the conclusion of the 1921 treaty between Afghanistan and Soviet Russia.

Due to geographical contiguity between Afghanistan and Russian territory and cultural affinity between the peoples of two regions in terms of religion, customs, dress and food habits, relations between the two sides remained as strong as before. Bokhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva, Kabul and Badakhshan were the main centres of trade and Islamic culture. The Islamic centres of learning (Madrasas) in Bokhara attracted students from Afghanistan. Such titles as Chughtai, Beg, Sheikh etc., came to be used in Afghanistan under the Central Asian influence. Their cultural contacts developed further during the reigns of Dost Mohammad Khan and Sher Ali Khan, when the Afghan rulers and Russian authorities exchanged friendly letters. Besides the Afghans had free access to Russian territory and the same was true of Russian subjects in Afghanistan. As a result of close trade and cultural relations considerable number of Russian subjects particularly Uzbeks and Tajiks settled in northern
Afghanistan and got assimilated in the Afghan society. The decade-long stay of Abdur Rahman Khan in Central Asia and his cordial interaction with the Russian authorities there further cemented the friendly contacts between the Afghan nobility and their Russian counterparts. Their new exposure to Russian way of life and style of functioning of Russian officers enriched the experience of Afghans in social and political spheres. Trans border movement of people, their ideas and goods across the Oxus, resulted in a clear imprint of Central Asian society and culture on this side Oxus in Afghanistan and vice-versa.

The British viewed the Russian advance in Central Asia as a threat to their hegemony in Asia. Moves were therefore, set afoot to bring Afghanistan under the British influence. On the other hand, the Russians considered central Asia within purview of their own logical and natural sphere of expansion, as India was for the British. In order to effectively counter the British moves, the Russians tried to make their presence felt in Afghanistan, so as to preclude the former from interfering into the latter's zone of operation. Further, the Russians succeeded in transferring their confrontation with the British from Central Asia to
Afghanistan. It was only in late 1860s that Britain and Russia started negotiations over Afghanistan. Both sides reached an agreement in 1873 by which Britain secured the Russian assurance to treat Afghanistan as outside the latter's sphere of influence. However, soon after the problem of actual delimitation of the Afghan, Chinese and Russian frontiers in the upper Oxus region came to surface. Besides, the continuing Russian advance in Central Asia which brought them in proximity to Afghanistan lent urgency to the final definition of northern limits of Afghanistan. The Panjdeşh episode in early 1895 clinched the matter and in September 1885, both Britain and Russia signed a protocol laying down precisely the Russo-Afghan boundary from the Oxus westwards to Zulfikar. Now, the focus of attention shifted to the Pamirs area and with the conclusion of Pamirs Boundary Agreement in March 1895, all disputes concerning Afghanistan's borders were finally settled. The years that followed were marked by a gradual relaxation of the Anglo-Russian tensions. Yet bilateral relations over Afghanistan and Tibet continued to be clouded by mutual suspicious. In early 20th century Russia started pressing their demand for direct dealings with Afghanistan, which was resented by the
British who looked after the external relations of that country. Finally the Anglo-Russian Convention on Afghanistan, Tibet and Persia was signed in 1907, whereby Britain undertook not to occupy or annex any part of Afghanistan and Russia recognised the country as outside her sphere of influence.