CHAPTER - 1

POLITICAL CONNECTIONS

The period beginning with 1837 upto 1907 may be considered as an important phase in the Russo-Afghan relations as it has been marked by many ups and downs in Afghanistan's foreign relations. With the emergence of two expansionist - European powers - Tsarist Russia and Britain in Asia, Afghanistan, turned into the centre-piece of the 'Great Game' played by the two powers during the nineteenth century. During this period, Afghanistan's position was largely shaped by the considerations of the Anglo - Russian rivalry which made it difficult for the Afghan political leadership to maintain a balance between the pulls and pressures of the two mighty empires. As Russia started consolidating her position in Central Asia, the British government viewed it as a direct threat to the north and north-west frontiers of India. This threat perception deepened due to Russian attempts to develop direct political relations with Afghanistan. Russian overtures to the rulers of Kabul were viewed with extreme suspicion by the British, who feared the possibility of Russian advance towards India. Though some Russian Generals and publicists talked about the Russian march towards the northern frontier of India as a
means to pressurise the British, the latter actually desired to extend their influence up to Afghanistan and beyond in Central Asia without in any way getting involved into any direct clash with Russia.

In order to counter the supposed Franco-Persian threat to India and Afghanistan, the British signed a treaty of mutual defence with Afghanistan in 1809. 1 Subsequently, the British worked out a policy of opening up Central Asia to British commerce through the navigation of Indus as a means to repel "both the Russian commerce and Russian political influence in Kabul, Khiva and Bokhara and substituting it with that of their own." 2 The Russian government was equally concerned with the activities of British agents in Samarkhand and Bokhara because they considered Central Asia within their own logical and natural sphere of influence, as was India for the British.

In the year 1837, Persia at the instigation of Russia, laid a siege to Herat on the west, creating difficult situation for Afghanistan. While as the Afghan ruler, Dost Mohammad was engaged with Shah Shuja, Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab had occupied Peshawar and had also driven out


Sultan Mohammad and his brothers to Jalalabad. 3 As a result of these debacles, Dost Mohammad sought support of Lord Auckland, the British Governor-General of India against the "Sikh aggression". In his letter to Lord Auckland, Dost Mohammad proposed that the Indus should constitute as a boundary between the two States and offered in return for this concession to abandon his rights on Kashmir in favour of the Sikhs. 4 Brushing aside the Afghan ruler's proposals, Auckland replied that it was not the practice of the British government to interfere in the affairs of other independent States. However, he assured that he would request Maharaja Ranjit Singh to restore the government of Peshawar to Sultan Mohammad, who happened to be the most bitter foe of the Amir of Kabul. At the same time, Auckland notified his intention to depute some emissaries to the Amir's court for discussing matters of commercial interest.

Alexander Burnes was deputed by Lord Auckland to lead a mission to Kabul to discuss commercial matters with the Amir of Afghanistan. Burnes mission reached Kabul on September 21, 1837 and in a meeting with the Amir, Burnes handed over a letter of the Governor-General which described the mission as purely commercial. But the real purpose of Burnes mission was

to find out ways and means for checking the Russo-Persian
advance in the west, establishing friendly relations between
Dost Mohammad and Ranjit Singh, making new arrangements with
Afghanistan, and dissuading the Amir from insisting too much
on the recovery of Peshawar. The Governor-General had
authorised Alexander Burnes to hint at "the possibility of
using good offices for settling the dispute between the Amir
and the Sikh Chiefs". 5 But the Amir was more interested in
going Peshawar back and for this purpose he insisted on
British material and political support. However, Burnes had
no authority to make any such promise of assistance as the
Amir desired. With the Persian and Russian designs posing a
threat, "the Governor-General of India and his advisors had
become so much obsessed with this danger that in their
anxiousness to obtain a pledge from Dost Mohammad Khan to
withstand the intrigues of these two powers and to extend his
support to Herat in the event of a Persian attack, they
simply did not care to pause as to what Dost Mohammad Khan
desired in return". 6

The British asked Dost Mohammad Khan to cut off his
links with Russia and Persia before British India could use
their good offices in his favour. Dost Mohammad Khan tried
to impress upon Burnes saying that he was not keen to

5. Bilgrami, n, 2, pp. 78
6. Bilgrami, n, 2, pp. 80-81
conclude any treaty with Persia and Russia other than that with the British. Burnes, on his part, only held out to the Amir vague assurances of sympathy and goodwill of his government. Alexander Burnes in his letter to Lord Auckland, emphasized Dost Mohammad’s favourable attitude by quoting his own statement that "the Afghans had no sympathy with Persia, and if Herat fell into the hands of that kingdom, of which there now appeared a great probability it was time to unite their strength or to take measures which would place the resources of Kabul and Kandahar in one hand". 7

In the meanwhile, as advised by Shah of Persia and the Russian Ambassador at Tehran, Count Simonich, Sardar Meherdil Khan of Kandahar arrived at Kabul with the aim of frustrating the designs of Alexander Burnes, the British envoy and align Dost Dost Mohammad with Persia and Russia against the Sadozai rulers of Herat. Meherdil Khan advised the Amir to ask Burnes for "a written commitment on the part of the British Government to protect Kabul and Kandahar against the Persian designs, and also exercise influence against Ranjit Singh to give up all the Afghan territory he had annexed with the British connivance; and if the British could not give them such a guarantee, the Amirs would have no alternative but to

align themselves with Persia and Russia". 8 He assured the Amir that both Persia and Russia were ready to extend support unconditionally to get Peshawar back.

Alexander Burnes did try his best to save the situation inspite of the fact that he had not been vested any power to counter-bargain the promises of Russia and Persia or to negotiate a deal with the Amir. He even suggested Lord Auckland to use his influence to bring about a rapprochement between the Sikhs and Afghans in the interest of peace and security of the British empire. But Auckland and his advisors did not want to dishonour the wishes of their firm and old ally Ranjit Singh and so in his letter dated January 20, 1838 to Dost Mohammad, Auckland distinctly refused to accept practically everything that Burnes had negotiated with the Amir. He stated that "Peshawar must remain with Ranjit Singh".9 Given the failure of the Burnes' mission and lack of any firm and clearcut British policy towards Afghanistan, Dost Mohammad was disappointed which led him to make friendly overtures to Russia and Persia.

VITKEVITCH MISSION TO KABUL, 1837

Mohan Lal, the Indian Assistant who had accompanied Alexander Burnes to Kabul, informs us that Dost Mohammad had

written letters to the Shah of Persia and the Russian Tsar Nicholas which were delivered by an Afghan envoy at Orenburgh in May 1836. The letter to Tsar Nicholas sought to initiate friendly dialogue between Afghanistan and Russia. Attaching great significance to this letter, the Governor of Orenburgh, V.A. Pervosky, sent the Afghan envoy along with his own Aide-de-camp, I.V. Vitkevitch to St. Petersburgh. In the letter, Dost Mohammad had expressed his desire to develop close contacts with Russia in the same manner as Mohammad Shah had done earlier. He pleaded for Russian support against the Sikhs, by stating that the Sikhs who were allies of the British, would overpower him and that the British, under the guise of merchants would destroy the trade between Moscow, Bokhara and Kabul. 10 In this way, Dost Mohammad made open overtures to Russia in a bid to secure support against the Sikhs, after having failed to get the same from the British.

Responding to his urgent request for help sought by despatching a trusted emissary, Haji Hussain Ali, Count Simonitch, the Russian Ambassador at Tehran sent Vitkevitch to meet Dost Mohammad at Kabul. Vitkevitch was requested to personally deliver letters from Tsar Emperor of Russia and Court Simonich which were in reply to the letters sent by Dost Mohammad to Russia. 11 Count Simonitch informed the Amir

11. Foreign Deptt. Political. 9 May 1839. No. 826. (National Archive, New Delhi)
about the illness of Haji Hussain Ali, who had therefore to step at Moscow and that a good physician had been attending to cure him as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{12} Count Simonitch requested Dost Mohammad to treat Vitkevitch "like myself and take his words as if they were from me". In case at Kabul you will allow him often to be in your presence and let my master know there about your wishes that anxiety may be removed.\textsuperscript{13} Simonitch lamented that the great distance was hampering the continuance of correspondence with Kabul, but he expressed his readiness to "respect and serve your friends to show my friendly opinions towards you".\textsuperscript{14} In token of his friendly gestures Simonitch also dispatched several gifts including gold and silver cloth that were especially acquired from Russian Imperial stores for presentation to Dost Mohammad, the Amir of Kabul.\textsuperscript{15} The British Political Agent at Ludhiana, Capt. Wade was informed by D.B. Lord (then in Afghanistan) that the Russian envoy Vitkevitch presented 10,000 Budkis (Russian currency) to Dost Mohammad and had also assured him of Persian and Russian support in taking Herat.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{16} Foreign Deptt. Secret 16 May 1839, No.67 See letter from D.B. Lord to E.M. Wade, Political Agent, Ludhiana dated December 1838.
According to Burnes, Captain Vitkevitch was authorised to "offer money to the Amir of Kabul to wage war against the Sikhs." Count Simonich, the Russian Ambassador in Tehran, had desired the Afghan ruler to treat the envoy "with consideration and entrusted with his secrets." Speaking both Persian and Turkish languages quite fluently, Vitkevitch who had also travelled in Bokhara, was a natural choice for being sent to Kabul. Though he worked as an Aide de Camp to the Russian General Commanding at Orenburg, he had given out his name as Omar Beg to facilitate his movements in Afghanistan. Vitkevitch arrived at Kabul in December 1837. Obviously Vitkevitch's task was to frustrate Burne's intrigues in Kabul and bring the Amir closer to Russia. During the course of his discussions with Dost Mohammad Khan, Vitkevitch assured him that the Russian troops could move from Bokhara and drive the Kafir Sikhs from the territory of the Afghans. When this information reached captain Wade, who was then a British political agent in Ludhiana, wanted

18. Ibid.
19. Foreign Deptt. Political 30 October 1837, Nos.33-34. (National Archive New Delhi),
his government to be ready to face a joint Russo-Afghan advance towards Peshawar. 21

Vitkevitch also handed over the letter of Tsar, which had expressed satisfaction over Dost Mohammad's offer of friendship. Tsar wrote: "... in a happy moment the messenger of your Highness, Mirza Hussain, reached my court, with your friendly letter... it flattered me very much, and I was satisfied with your friendship to my everlasting government. In consequence of this, I shall always feel happy to assist the people of Kabul who may come to trade into my kingdom". 22

Dost Mohammad who was disappointed over the British response to his proposals, entered into serious negotiations with the Russian emissary, Vitkevitch who in turn promised to offer the Amir money and assistance against the Sikhs. Besides, he gave assurances of Russian support to the Barakzai brothers and proposed to visit Ranjit Singh on their behalf. He also drew up a draft treaty between the Kandahar brothers and Shah of Persia, which was forwarded to the Russian ambassador in Persia.

In this manner British relations with Dost Mohammad deteriorated further, as they considered it necessary to support Maharaja Ranjit Singh if Afghans were supported by

21. Ibid. See Note by Captain. Wade dated 8 July 1838.
Russia in their advance towards Peshawar. Lord Palmerston who was one of the foremost advocates of a 'Forward Policy' believing in the inevitable meeting of the Russian and the British frontiers in Central Asia, had already taken over charge as the British Foreign Minister in 1835. 23 The responsibility of relations with Persia had also been transferred from India to the Foreign Office in London. On the other hand, Russia had succeeded France as the bugbear of the British administration in the east. It was in this backdrop of events that on October 26, 1838, Palmerston sent a lengthy note to Count Nesselrode, the Russian Foreign Minister Petersburg, severely criticising the activities of the Russian agents in Afghanistan, 24 and pointing out that this was contrary to the assurance given to Britain in 1837. 25 However, Nesselrode, replied in a friendly tone saying that "the mission of Vitkevitch was purely commercial and it did not contain the smallest design hostile to the English government, nor the smallest idea of injuring the tranquility of the British possessions in India. 26 The Russians refused to accept that they had advised their envoy in Persia to

26. Ibid.
encourage the Shah for invading Herat. They even agreed with the British that such adventures on the part of Persian Shah were "unreasonable and hazardous". 27 As a result of diplomatic negotiations, Russia recalled her ambassador from Persia and directed his successor to maintain purely commercial relations with Afghanistan. When Captain Vitkevitch sought an audience at St. Petersburgh with Nesselrode, it was refused. Instead, Nesselrode disclaimed any knowledge of this Russian emissary who was now alleged to have been engaged in some unauthorised intrigues at Kabul and Kandahar. 28 Disappointed by this behaviour of his former employer, Vitkevitch committed suicide which caused serious setback to the establishment of bilateral relations between Russia and Afghanistan.

Though the exchange of the envoys between Russia and Afghanistan upset the British, Lord Auckland, the Governor General of India was not prepared to attach the Sikhs for the same of Dost Mohammad. Finally on February 21, 1838 Burnes received letters from Auckland which clearly started that the Governor-General did not accept Dost Mohammad’s proposal, that Peshawar must be left to Ranjit Singh and that the dismissal of Vitkevitch must be demanded. With this final reply negotiations between Kabul and British-India broke off.

27. Singha, n.24, p.4
Both the British and Indian governments now used Vitkevitch's mission as a pretext for unleashing a war against Afghanistan, alleging that "Dost Mohammad's contacts with Iran and Russia threatened the security of British India". London and Calcutta agreed to the despatch of an Anglo-Indian expedition to relieve Herat. It was now decided to replace Dost Mohammad with someone who would accept British advice and also accept Maharaja Ranjit Singh's occupation of Peshawar. Such a person was available in Shah Shuja, who was in exile in India since 1816 and who was ready to play this role. It is against this background that the first Anglo-Afghan war (1838-42) was imposed on Afghanistan. Dost Mohammad was defeated and Shah Shuja was installed as the new Amir of Afghanistan by the British. But the first Afghan war did not bring much benefit to the British and it proved to be disastrous. Shah Shuja who was mere a puppet in the hands of British, was not acceptable to the Afghan people. The British army left Kabul in 1841 and while retreating the army, British mission including Burnes and Macnamghten were killed. Shah Shuja was also murdered in 1842 and his son Fateh Jung fled from Afghanistan. Dost Mohammad Khan returned to Kabul in 1842 in a bid to regain the position from which he had been driven out. As a result,

once again Afghanistan reverted to its original position while the British interests in Central Asia remain threatened as before.  

KAUFFMANN'S OVERTURES TO SHER ALI

Whereas Lord Auckland's Forward policy met a disastrous end, his successor Ellenbrough decided to withdraw the British army from Afghanistan. Russia too had met the same fate in Khiva. In pursuit of new policy, Dost Mohammad was allowed to "resume his interrupted reign in Kabul". He then began consolidating his dominions. He annexed Afghan Turkistan in 1850 and Kandahar was incorporated within his dominions in 1855. Finally by signing an alliance of perpetual peace and friendship with the British Indian Govt. on March 30, 1855, he openly aligned himself with the British. Later while signing the Peshawar treaty of 1857, Dost Mohammad exclaimed: "I have now made an alliance with the Government and come what may I will keep it till death". That he kept his word, became evident from his refusal to receive the Russian envoy Khanikoff in January 1858.

30. Singhal, n.24, p.5
33. Ibid, p.123.
34. Ibid.
As the Amir of Afghanistan Dost Mohammad continued to rule till 1863 AD when his younger son, Sher Ali was designated as his successor. During the twelve years which elapsed from 1842 to 1854, the general state of relations between British India and Kabul was, to quote Dalhousie, "one of 'sudden quiescence on either side, without offence, but without goodwill or intercourse". 35

However, with the death of Dost Mohammad in 1863 AD, there ensued a period of uncertainty in Afghanistan with rival factions struggling for power. Throughout this period of internecine struggle between Sher Ali and his brothers, the Government of India, presided over by Lawrence, maintained an attitude of strict and scrupulous neutrality, which has been termed as a policy of "masterly inactivity" 36 Although Sher Ali made repeated requests to British India for aid, it was refused. In the words of the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Derby, the British "policy of entire abstinence from interfering in the affairs of Afghanistan" was thought to be "both possible and safe". 37

In the meantime, Abdur Rahman Khan, (the elder half brother of Sher Ali) sought refuge in Russian Turkistan and

35. Singhal, n.24,p.6.
soon developed friendly contacts with the Governor of Russian Turkistan. He was presented with a robe of honour and also given the title of Mir Afghanee.38 During his stay in Russian Turkistan for more than ten years he was paid pension by the Russian government. By that time, Russian policy was also to maintain cordial relations with Afghanistan as Russia was making its headway towards Central Asia, and during this process no negative reaction on the part of Amir was noted. It is also evidenced by the fact that the Amir Sher Ali turned down a request from the Amir of Bokhara for help against the Russian incursions. In 1864 Russian authority was further extended to the boarders of Kokand Bokhara and Khiva. Tashkent was annexed in 1865 while the new province of Russian Turkestan was created in 1867. Bokhara too, was made a 'subsidiary ally' of the Tsar and in 1868 Samarkand was occupied. With the creation of Russian Turkestan, Russian Governorate General of Turkestan was setup and General K.P. Von Kauffmann was appointed as its first Military Governor. The Russian Foreign Minister, Gorchakov in his famous memorandum circulated in 1864 announced the intention of the Russian government to stop its advance before the limits of Afghanistan. Following this intention,

38. Foreign Deptt. Political A May 1866, Nos. 210-211. (C. Allison to Viceroy of India dated 16 May 1866). (National Archives New Delhi).
General Kauffmann pursued his forward policy in Central Asia with much vigour besides engaging himself in friendly communications with Sher Ali, the new ruler of Afghanistan.

The Russian expansion in central Asia however, caused grave concern to the British who feared for the security of the Indian empire. This fear was particularly aroused "as the situation with regard to Afghanistan was rendered especially delicate by reason of its uncertain boundaries". Therefore, in 1869, Lord Clarendon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the Glastone cabinet, suggested the Russian ambassador Baron Brunnow to recognise some territory as neutral between the possessions of British and Russia. The Russian ambassador gave a positive reply by stating that his government would treat Afghanistan as entirely beyond the sphere of Russian influence. The question of Afghanistan was further discussed in detail in a tete-a-tete between Lord Clarendon, and the Russian foreign minister, Gortchakov, at Hidelberg in September, 1869. Gortchakov told Clarendon that Amir Sher Ali was at perfect Liberty to expand his dominions which formerly belonged to Afghanistan, but he must not come into collision with the Amir of Bokhara or commit acts which might

40. Ibid, p.150.
be interpreted as hostile to the interests of the Russian empire". The British agreed and assured to dissuade Sher Ali from any attempts to extend the limits of the kingdom held by late Amir Dost Mohammad, and also to avoid all risks of friction with Russia or Bukhara. When negotiations on the issue still going on, General Kauffmann, had begun a correspondence with Sher Ali which caused anxiety to both the Amir and the then Governor-General of India, Lord Mayo.

In view of the Anglo-Russian understanding on Afghanistan, Russians did not use the presence of Abdul Rahman Khan in Tashkent to stage intrigues against the British supported Amir of Kabul, Sher Ali Khan. In fact, General Kauffmann was reported to have explained this position in his letter to Sher Ali Khan that "Abdul-Rahman Khan's presence at Tashkent had been permitted from mere feelings of hospitality, towards the unfortunate, but not from any intention of supporting him as rival to the Amir. Kauffmann also expressed the desire of the Russian government "to cultivate the same friendly relations with Sher Ali as existed between England and Russia". Earlier,

43. Ibid.
Kauffmann had made it clear to Abdul-Rahman, who had sought Russian support for his claims to Afghan throne in exchange of which he had offered to increase Russian influence there, that Russia was determined to abstain from all interference with the internal affairs of Afghanistan and any negotiations with him would be useless. The British Ambassador at St. Petersburgh, Buchanan was confident that Russians "would again decline categorically both his offers and requests and declare to him that he can only be granted an asylum in the territories of Russia on condition of his abstaining from intrigues and political projects, for the realization of which he will also be told that he must not in any way reckon any on assistance from Bokhara."  

Though the British Indian government found solace in Kauffmann’s refusal of assistance to Abdul Rahman and that Amir Sher Ali Khan had not - "given any cause for dissatisfaction", it felt embarrassed over the exchange of correspondence between Kauffmann and Sher Ali. But Kauffmann’s gesture of refusing assistance to his rival Abdul

45. Ibid.
Rahman, must have obliged Sher Ali to maintain the minimum possible friendly contact with the neighbouring power. On his part, Kauffmann assured Sher Ali to keep him informed of the Russian success in Central Asia, apparently to convince him of the Russian might. Kauffmann had also informed Sher Ali about the Russian victory at Kulda, at the same time "to dissuading Sher Ali from any misadventures in Bokhara territory". 47 In reply, Sher Ali sent his congratulations to Kauffmann for Russian success at Kuldja and also promised "not to deviate from the arrangements about Bokhara, made through friendly correspondence". 48 Kauffmann did not confine himself to writing letters on non-political matters. In February 1872, the Russian Governor General of Turkestan informed Sher Ali about the departure of his nephew, Sikandar Khan, from St. Peterburgh for his native country after having spent four years in the Russian Imperial Service. 49 Kauffmann used the occasion to request the Afghan ruler to reinstate Sikandar Khan "in his former position and to be put in possession of his ancestral possessions", 50 and also to

48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
have the honour of entering your Highness "service". 51 Kauffmann made a personal request to Sher Ali on behalf of his nephew to "receive and regard him with your royal favour". 52 To continue this friendly correspondence, Kauffmann wrote to the Amir a long letter in the winter of 1873 describing the subservience of Khanate of Khiva to Russia and release of slaves including 400 Afghan nationals from Khiva. 53 Sher Ali in his reply which was sent in January 1874 congratulated Kauffmann upon his great military success and also wrote a separate letter in which he declared that Abdullah Jan had been nominated his heir apparent. 54 Since Kauffmann was then out of Tashkent, the acting Governor-General of Turkestan sent congratulatory letter to Sher Ali on the nomination of Abdullah Jan. He further wrote: "I wish perpetual possession of your kingdom by you and your heirs, and hope that after your death Sir Abdullah Jan will follow your example and make himself an ally and friend of the emperor. 55

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
54. Percy Sykes, n.3, p.98.
As already stated, the Russian authorities including General Kauffmann never used the presence of Abdul Rahman at Tashkent to destabilise the political situation in Sher Ali's kingdom. Both Gortchakov and General Kauffmann had assured the British that if "Abdul Rahman Khan was discovered entering into any illicit correspondence dangerous to the peace of Afghanistan he would be instantly removed from Samarkand and interned in the interior of Russia."^56 On his part Sher Ali was satisfied about Kauffmann's promise that "no officer of His imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Russia will make any inroads into Afghanistan, nor will any assistance or counsels be given to its enemies."^57

With the passage of time, Sher Ali, the Amir of Afghanistan became increasingly dissatisfied with the passive British attitude towards him. Though Sher Ali had at first sought the counsel of the British Indian government regarding the replies that he should send to Kauffmann's letters, he had ceased to do so later. He was even reported to be holding meetings with the persons through whom Kauffmann used to send his letters. In this manner the non-political formal correspondence between the Russian Governor-General of Turkistan and Sher Ali developed into closer friendly relations. The cordiality of their correspondence" grew with


the increased estrangement of his relations with the British and the Russians". 58

Earlier in 1872-73 the ruler of Kabul had sought British help to settle the Afghan - Iran boundary dispute concerning Siestan with the British. Having failed to satisfy Afghan desires, the Amir opined that "English look to nothing but their own interests and bide their time. Whosoever's side they see strongest for the time, they turn to him as their friend. I will not waste precious life in entertaining false hopes from the English and will enter into friendship with other government". 59 The Anglo-Afghan relations got further estranged when the Afghan Prime Minister, Nur Mohammad Shah, met the Viceroy at Simla in 1873. and proposed to enter into an alliance with the British in India binding on both the parties. He was told that his fears of Russian advance were groundless and the Anglo-Russian agreement had rendered the occurrence of such a contingency more remote than ever. He was, however, assured that the British would maintain their settled policy in Afghanistan, "if the Amir followed their advice in external affairs" 60. The overall outcome of the discussion at Simla

60. Anuradha Sareen, n.1, p.9.
convinced the Amir that the Afghan interests were only of secondary importance to the British.

However, the new government in Britain under Benjamin Disraeli, considered the problem of Afghanistan in the context of the Eastern Question, and so it wanted more active policy to be followed in Afghanistan. Lord Lytton, who succeeded Northbrook, as the new Governor-General of India in 1876, supported the reverted policy from conciliation to compulsion. He said, "Afghanistan is a state too weak and barbarous to remain isolated and wholly influenced between two great military empires .... It is our policy to cultivate on our north-western boundary a strong bulwark .... We do not covet an inch of (Sher Ali's) territory, we do not desire to diminish one iota of his independence. But we cannot allow him to fall under the influence of any power whose interests are antagonistic to our own". 61 Moreover, Lord Lytton was getting worried over the increasing Russian influence at the court of Kabul. The British news agents in Kabul reported that there was "continuous flow of correspondence between Kauffmann and the Amir Sher Ali and far exceeding the requirements of courtesy and its bearers were being regarded and treated by the Amir.

as agents of the Russian government". 62 The matter was actually brought to the notice of the Russian government in October, 1876 by Lord Loftus, who was then the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg. M.de Giers disclaimed any knowledge of Russian agent having been sent to the court of the Amir". 63 The Russians held that Kauffmann's letters were of "no political significance", as they were sent only once or twice a year as customary complements from one neighbour to another. 64 Despite Russian explanation, Lytton decided to tighten his grip over Sher Ali who was now asked to accept the British mission in Afghanistan, which the Kabul ruler refused to do. Sher Ali's reply that if he admitted a British mission then he would not be able to refuse a similar request for a Russian mission. This further embittered his relations with the British. On the other hand, Russian diplomacy was to make British government believe in the peaceful and friendly intentions of Russia and at the same time, rekindling in them a hatred against the Amir Sher Ali.

In this game of diplomacy, the Afghan ruler began to turn against the British and align himself with Russia. Thus, the Russian factor did contribute in sowing the seeds

63. Ibid, p.175.
64. Ibid, p.176.
of discord between the British and Afghans". 65 However, Lord Lytton persuaded Sher Ali to send an emissary to meet the Viceroy’s representative, Sir Lewis Pelly, in Peshawar. Sher Ali sent his Minister, Syed Nur Mohammad, whose anti-British bias since his earlier failure in 1873 was well known. They met first on 30 January 1877 and lastly on 19 February 1877. It was obvious that, "Sher Ali considered the British government bound, in honour and by contract, to afford him and his dynasty such military support as he might require, and was quite content with the present position". 66 But the Peshawar Conference failed to breach an agreement mainly because of the question of the establishment of British officers on the Afghan frontier to watch the events. As instructed by Lytton, Lewis Pelly told Nur Mohammad Shah that the British government did not wish to enforce any arrangements upon the Amir, but an essential condition for the improved relations was the reception of British officers on the northern frontier. 67 Lytton wanted any settlement on his own terms whereas Sher Ali desired to remain free. With the result, the Anglo-Afghan negotiations broke down, leaving enough room for the Russian manoeuvrings in Afghanistan.

66. Fraser Tytler, n.7, p.140.
STOLEITOV MISSION TO KABUL, 1878

The Afghan ruler had apparently no cause for any complaint against the Russians, as Kauffmann used to approach him on the basis of equality. But he felt irritated over the attitude of the British who treated him as their subordinate ally. Sher Ali openly gave vent to these feelings in the course of conversations with K.M.M.E. Effendi, a Turkish envoy in September, 1877. Whereas Sher Ali wanted to retain his friendship with the British, he was against allowing the British agents inside Afghanistan. But Lytton, who had forsaken the policy of 'masterly inactivity', was adamant on having the British agents stationed in Afghanistan to keep an eye on the Russian movements. It was in this atmosphere of deep mistrust between the British and Sher Ali, that Kauffmann accelerated his interest in Afghanistan. Kauffmann introduced Stolietov to Sher Ali through his letter saying, he was a dear friend of mine and who was held in regard by the Russian emperor for his services".68 The Amir was asked to pay great attention to the message and give a considered reply. The letter concluded with these words: "your union and friendship with Russian government will be beneficial to the latter and still

more so to you. The advantages of a close alliance with the Russian government will be permanently evident". Obviously, Russia was seeking to forge a friendly alliance with the ruler of Afghanistan and to outwit the British in this region.

An account of Stolietov's proceedings in Kabul had been published in a Russian newspaper "Golos" of December 8(20), 1875. The paper reported that Stolietov and his party entered Kabul on 29th July (10 August) 1878, and were lodged in the Balahisar palace. Next day Stolietov called on the Amir of Kabul riding on horseback and escorted by 12 Cossacks and a detachment of Afghan guards. The mission was cordially received in presence of high dignitaries by the Amir. And in the evening the arrival of the Russian mission was celebrated by display of fireworks and illuminations. The paper further reported that Stolietov and the highest Afghan Minister, Dabir-ul-Mulk, negotiated the terms of treaty of The Russo-Afghan friendship for several days. But the paper dismissed the British allegations of the conclusion of an offensive and defensive alliance between Russia and Afghanistan as a pure invention on the part of the British press. However, the paper admitted that in the treaty Russia binds herself to support the integrity and independence of Afghanistan."

69. Ibid.

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Obviously Stolietov had succeeded in weaning away Sher Ali from the British influence. In fact, Sher Ali sought his advise whether or not he should allow a British mission to Afghanistan, to which Stolietov replied that "the simultaneous presence of the missions of two powers which had almost hostile relations, would not be convenient". Subsequently, Sher Ali communicated his refusal to Lytton's proposal of sending a British mission to Kabul.

During his stay in Kabul, Stoleitov reviewed the Afghan troops and presented two letters one from Kauffmann and the other from Tsar of Russia to Sher Ali. In the course of his private interview with the Amir Stolietov is reported to have discussed a draft treaty, the terms of which are supposed to have been as follows:70

1. That the Amir should permit the location of Russian agents at Kabul and other places in his territory where it might be deemed necessary to locate such agents of Russian nationality and these agents be vested the powers of consuls.

2. That the permission be accorded for the location of Russian troops at four convenient points on the frontiers of Afghanistan and the Amir should engage to protect such garrisons.

70. An Indian Officer, Russian March Towards India, (1894), Vol.II, pp.73-74.
3. That the Russian government should be permitted to construct roads from Samarkand to Kabul via Katta Kurghan, Khoja Saleh and Balkh to Herat via the course of Oxus river, the plain of Andkin, Bala Murghab, Maruchak, Panjdeh and Firoz Koh, and also from Herat to Kandhar by the Garmsir route.

4. That when necessary the Kabul government would permit the passage of Russian troops proceeding to India by routes as might be considered desirable.

5. That telegraph wires might be set up between Samarkand, Katta Kurghan, Balkh, Kabul, Kandahar and other places where the Russian agents were stationed.

6. That when necessary Russian troops should be supplied with provisions and transport on payment of reasonable prices.

7. That if it became desirable that the Russian government should send an expedition to wage war in India, the Amir should furnish supply to the Russian troops on payment and that the Afghan government should establish agents at the capital of Russia and in Tashkent. In
return for these concessions the Russian side promised to help Afghanistan in the following manner:

a) To guarantee the continuance of the country of Afghanistan to the representatives, successors and heirs of the Amir in perpetuity, in accordance with the will of the last sovereign and legal rights.

b) In no way to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan or in administration of the country.

c) Always to afford assistance for the maintenance of peace in Afghanistan and against the external or internal enemies of principality.

d) To consider the enemies of the Amir as their own.

The rumours of such a treaty being negotiated between Sher Ali and Stoleitov caused deep resentment in the British circles. Lytton insisted on the reception of a British mission by Sher Ali at Kabul. When the mission was prevented by the Afghan troops from entering Afghanistan, Lytton started implementing his 'forward policy'. Whereas the
scenario for second Anglo-Afghan war was being created, General Stoleitov left Kabul. The Russian government formally informed the British that the Stoleitov mission was sent to Afghanistan "when there was tension between England and Russia. It is withdrawn due to improved relations, in future it will have no relation with that government." 71

On his return journey to Samarkand, General Stoleitov was accompanied by an Afghan envoy and his suit. The Afghan mission consisted of Mirza Magdazan, Minister of War, two Colonels and a Secretary. 72 They were received at Tashkent by the Governor-General Kauffmann, at his residence at Turkistan and given some presents like silver mug, silver goblet, silver cups, cigar case, cloth etc. Fearful of the imminent British attack, Sher Ali sent Moonshi Mohammad Hassan, the Dabirul Mulk of Amir to Russia to seek subsidy and arms was promised to the Amir by Stoleitov for fighting the British government. But the Russian Governor General of Turkestan, Kauffmann, did not find any ground for giving money or anything else to the Afghans. 73 The Russians refused to get involved in any way in the Anglo-Afghan

71. Count SchounoLoff to Salisbury, 7 December 1878.
conflict. Obviously in reply for his pleadings for aid Kauffmann sent a written communication to Sher Ali explaining his position, "you asked me to send as many troops as could be got ready, I have written to you a letter to the effect that the Emperor on account of your troubles had communicated with the British Government and that the Russian Ambassador at London had obtained a promise from the British Minister to the effect that they would not injure the independence of Afghanistan."74 He further clarified that it was now impossible to send military assistance. Instead the Russians proposed to Amir to come to an understanding with the English and make an agreement. It was under these circumstances that Sher Ali having failed to resist British attack fled towards north leaving his son Yakub Khan as Regent of Kabul. He soon died at Mazar-i-Sharif on February 21, 1879. Russians were quick to send congratulatory letter to Yakub Khan and also his condolences on the death of ex-Amir Sher Ali.75 In another letter General Ivanov, the Governor of Zarafshan Province reiterated the Russian

74. Foreign Deptt. Secret. S. November 1879, No. 140-151 (General Kauffmann to Amir Sher Ali received at Mazar-i-Sharif on 17th January 1879).
friendship with Afghanistan and wished an early end to war there.76

But Yakub Khan could not rule for more than ten months. The British after a swift campaign negotiated with Yakub Khan the treaty of Gandamak on May 26, 1879. By its terms the British agreed to protect Afghanistan against external attack, while it was stipulated that there were to be no direct communication by that country with other powers. But disorder broke out at Kabul in which the British envoy, Louis Cavagnari was murdered. Hostilities were reopened by the British and Yakub Khan abdicated as Amir. Abdul Rehman Khan who had been living in exile in Samarkand for the last ten years finding the political climate in Kabul suitable for his entry set out for Kabul. He soon entered into negotiations with the British on the terms of Anglo-Afghan alliance. Subsequently in July 1880 Abdul Rehman was formally acknowledged and recognized by the British government as Amir of Kabul. The new Amir bound himself not to allow any foreign interference other than the British in Afghanistan. Thus a new phase of political relationship between Afghanistan and Tsarist Russia began with the advent of Abdul Rehman Khan.

During his reign, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan did not allow his long association with the Russians during his stay in Samarkand to come in the way of establishing a workable relationship with the British. He secured the British consent to cancel the provision of the treaty of Gandamak on the presence of a permanent British resident in Afghanistan, but he pledged to conduct his external relations only through the Viceroy of India. Abdur Rahman tried to use Anglo-Russian contradictions to his benefit and to consolidate his authority over the whole of Afghanistan. His rule witnessed hectic negotiations between Britain and Russia over the demarcation of the northern frontier of Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman steered clear of any involvement in the hostilities between Russia and Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which had sought his support. Abdur Rahman’s astute policy helped a lot in the peaceful resolution of the ‘Panjdeh’ crisis of 1885, and the Anglo-Russian understanding on the north-western frontier of Afghanistan. The Pamirs Boundary Agreement of 1885 finally fixed Afghanistan’s modern frontiers. Throughout this critical phase, Abdur Rahman pursued a policy of utilising the Anglo-Russian rivalry for maintaining the independence of Afghanistan and to expand and consolidate his possessions in northern Afghanistan.

It was during Abdur Rahman’s reign that the Russians occupied Merv in 1884, which unverved the British and also
the Afghans. They became worried over extension of Russian control towards the borders of Afghanistan. Now Abdul Rahman Khan and the British showed eagerness to settle the boundary of Afghanistan with Russia so as to prevent any mishap on the border. In the meantime Russian troops established a post at Pul-i-Khatun and also occupied the Zulfikar pass. Afghan troops had taken up their position at Panjdeh too close to the Kushka river.77 Both sides were thus poised for an imminent clash. General Komarov, the Russian Governor of Akhal oasis, marched with a strong Russian force and camped at Kizel Tepe. He asked the Afghans to withdraw "within your former lines on the right bank of the river Kushka,"78 which the Afghan General, Shamsuddin refused to do. The die was cast and on 30th March 1885 the Russians attacked the Afghan force and drove it out of Panjdeh. Thus the Panjdeh oasis, to which Afghanistan had no real claim was taken by Russia and the Anglo-Afghan prestige suffered a blow. Amir Abdul Rahman, who was then in India reacted in a cool manner. He attached very little importance to the loss sustained by the Afghans in terms of men, materials and prestige. The British recognised Panjdeh oasis as a part of Russia. In return, Russia promised to return to Afghanistan the Zulfikar region.


A protocol to this effect was signed in London on 10 September 1885. During 1886-88 the Russo-Afghan boundary was demecrated by a joint Anglo-Russian commission on the spot, to which Afghanistan also consented. Final protocol dealing with the Russo-Afghan boundary from the Hari Rud to the oxus was signed in 1887. This frontier settlement was respected by all parties concerned.

Once the Panjdeh episode was resolved, the communication channels between Russian and Afghan frontier officers were resumed. General Kuropatkin, the Russian Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Merv informed Sad-ud-din Khan, the Governor of Herat, by a letter dated 21 February 1891 that "with a view to the maintenance of peace and security and protection of Russian subjects against the interference of such evil disposed Afghans as yet not reduced to order, military posts have been established along the Russo-Afghan border. Two companies of the infantry regiment are stationed at Pule-Khatun to the post at Kushk." Kuropatkin therefore wanted the Afghan Governor of Herat to be informed of this so that there did not arise any misunderstanding on this score.

He also notified his intention to visit this frontier in March 1891 for inspecting the military posts and expressed

his desire to meet the Governor of Herat at the border. General Kuropatkin further assured him that he entertained "sincere affection for the people of Afghanistan and shall do utmost to protect them." However, in 1891 there arose some dispute between the Russian and Afghan frontier officers over the distribution of water from Kushka river to the Russian territory. The Russians wanted the Afghans "not to monopolise the Kushk water but to allow half of the supply to flow into Russian territory." Russia took up the matter of Kushk water with the British. The Russian government complained to the British that the Afghans had constructed "dams at four different points, and on their being destroyed the Afghans blocked the Kushk river above Chahil Dukhtaran so as to completely deprive the fields of the Russian cultivators of water." The Viceroy of India in a letter to Amir Abdul Rahman of Afghanistan dated 25 May 1892 pointed out that it was the violation of the Protocol of July 1887 and warned that if its provisions were not strictly

80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
observed by the Afghans, "serious consequence will result". In 1893 Russians attacked the Afghan post at Somatash. In order to settle once for all the north-eastern frontier between Afghanistan and Russia, negotiations between Britain and Russia started. The Russians insisted upon the Afghan withdrawal from Shingnan and Roshan, which lay north of the oxus. So, Lansdowne, the Viceroy of India despatched in September 1893 a mission led by Mortimer Durand to Kabul to apprise Abdul Rahman of these developments. Durand apprised the Kabul ruler the dangers involved in Russo-Afghan skirmishes which were due to his desire to retain the territory lying across the oxus. Durand succeeded in obtaining Amir's consent to his withdrawal from Shignan and Roshan and for retaining Wakhan. Finally an Anglo-Russian agreement was reached in 1895, by which Shignan and Roshan were given to Russia and a part of Darwaz was surrendered by Bokhara to Afghanistan. The sphere of influence of Britain and Russia to the east of lake Victoria was divided by a line which starting from a point on that lake near its eastern extremity followed a mountainous course up to the Chinese frontier. As such a narrow strip of Wakhan was created between the Russian and British Indian empires and it was made part of Afghanistan. The Pamir Boundary Agreement of

84. Ibid.
1895 marked the end of Anglo-Russian or Russo-Afghan tensions on the question of Afghanistan. In fact this agreement paved the way for the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907 on Afghanistan.

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan not only consolidated his dominion in Afghanistan by unifying the erstwhile independent and outlying provinces with Kabul, but he followed a cautious policy of equidistance with both the imperial neighbours - Britain and Russia. While he accepted British assistance in arms and money, he did not provide open access to British officers and shrewdly disallowed the British projects of extending railway and telegraph lines to Afghanistan. In 1900, when the British were preoccupied with Boer War in South Africa, the Russians tried again to enter into direct relations with Afghanistan. Russia sent a Memorandum on February 6, 1900 to the British Premier, Lord Salisbury. The Russian government stated that "the contiguity of frontiers, the construction of Trans-Caspian Railway, and a peaceful development between Russian dominions and Afghanistan had entirely modified the conditions under which it had been possible for St. Petersburgh to acquiesce in maintaining an abnormal situation by foregoing all direct relations with Afghanistan. The Russians believed that the time had come to take a definite step in regularising the
situation, and they wondered it indispensable that direct relations should be established with Afghanistan in respect of frontier matters. At the same time, they gave the British government to understand that these relations would be of a non-political character, as the Russian Government maintained their former arrangements with the British, and continued to regard Afghanistan, as being outside the Russian sphere of influence.\(^85\) The British Indian government was against allowing direct Russian relations with the Amir of Afghanistan. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India wrote to the Secretary of State for India, "A commercial agent would soon become a political envoy, thus control of Afghan foreign relations would soon disappear.\(^86\) Curzon strongly protested against the Russians seeking to deal directly with Afghanistan. Trade and frontier relations were deemed impossible without the stationing of Russian agents in Afghanistan - that being considered a political matter.

However, the Russians did not wait for the British reply or reaction. Under the direction of Russian Governor-General of Turkistan, the Russian political Agent at Bukhara V.Ignatief, contacted Amir's commercial agent in February 1900. He sent a letter to Amir Abdur Rahman Khan "as the

\(^85\) Foreign Deptt. Secret - F. May 1905, No. 154-78.

\(^86\) Ibid.
first step towards establishment of direct friendly relations between Russia and Afghanistan”, 87 assuring the Amir of the Russian government’s friendship and good neighbourness. On his part, the Amir sent this letter to the viceroy of India who in turn forwarded it to the British government, which questioned the Russian government about attempts to enter into direct relations with Afghanistan, mentioning Ignatief’s letter as well as Russian military movement on the Afghan border. 88 At the same time, the London government warned St. Peterburgh not to enter into direct communications with Kabul. As a result, further negotiations on the matter were stopped at least for the time being.

In October 1901, when Habibullah succeeded his father Abdur Rahman, as the Amir of Afghanistan, a new chapter began in the history of Afghanistan’s relations with Russia and the British India. Since Abdur Rahman’s relations with the Viceroy of India were far from amicable. Habibullah wanted to exploit the opportunity provided by Russia’s continuing pressure for opening up Afghanistan for trade and commerce. It was thought to be the only way, to resist Lord Curzon’s moves for the revision of the Anglo-Afghan engagements, and,

thereby, "assert independence from British control". 89

At the same time Hubibullah, reiterated to Lord Curzon his friendship whereas Russia considered the arrangements of 1873 as still in force and recognised Afghanistan as entirely outside the sphere of Russian influence, they regarded the re-establishment of direct relations between Russia and Afghanistan concerning frontier matters as indispensable. 90

St. Petersburgh argued that the condition had changed since the conclusion of 1873 agreement, due creation in 1885 of a coterminus Russo-Afghan frontier as well as the completion of the Trans-Caspian railway. 91 In April, 1903 after a series of diplomatic meetings and communications, Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary, informed Benkendorff that it would be impossible to make any arrangements with regard to trans-frontier relations without the concurrence of the Amir.

After some time, friction arose between Russian and Afghan officials due to destruction of certain boundary pillars near Herat, and also due to a dispute in connection with water supply. The Russian Governor of Trans-Caspia sent a letter to Herat Governor concerning the matter of dispute but forwarded to the Amir for further action. 92 The Amir in

89. Ibid, p.244.
90. Singhal, n.24, p.168.
turn, communicated the letter to the Viceroy of India, assuring him that in frontier matters "he had no desire to hold written correspondence in any way with the Russian government but they should confer with Russia on his behalf". In the meantime, Indian government deputed H.C. Dobbs as political officer to Herat frontier for the restoration of certain boundary pillars there. Indeed, the sole object of the Indian government was to frustrate the Russian attempts at direct negotiations with Afghanistan. Russia was also warned that in the event of any frontier incident arising, owing to any attempt on the part of Russian frontier officials to force the Afghan authorities to enter into direct relations with them, "the responsibility, for any incident and its consequences must rest entirely with Russia". Russia on its part, repeated its desire of having direct communications with the Afghan authorities. It declared that such correspondence would have no political character and also gave an assurance that "they had not thought of establishing at present a representative at Kabul or indeed of sending agents of any to the Amir.  

94. Singhal, n.24, p.169.
In 1903, when the crisis between England and Russia subsided, Lord Curzon was on leave in England (April to December, 1904) the British decided to send a mission to Kabul under Sir Louis Dane, Secretary to the Government of India. Amir Habibullah, put Louis Dane in an awkward position by proposing to take advantage of Russia's involvement in a war with Japan. But it was not possible for the British government to go to war with Russia. The situation was further complicated when Amir refused to sign the treaty and "produced a draft-treaty of his own". 96 The British realised the mission's withdrawal from Kabul without any agreement might result in the Amir turning to Russia, so they could not afford taking such risks and agreed to the signing of treaty entirely on "Amir's terms". 97 This Anglo-Afghan treaty was signed on March 21, 1905, by which foreign relations remained in the British hands, while no objection was made to non-political relations on the Russo-Afghan frontier. This treaty proved to be a clear triumph for Habibullah and a repudiation of Curzon's policy.

The period that coincided with the signing of the 1905 Anglo-Afghan treaty, witnessed some important political changes both in Europe and Asia which prompted Britain and

Russia to come to an understanding on Afghanistan. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 was further renewed in 1905 which led Russia to make a deal with Great Britain. Russians feared that British government had some ulterior motives towards the Russian possessions of Central Asia. In 1904 England entered into an entente cordial with France which was a Russian ally after 1894. Meanwhile German menace rose in Europe and Asia. Japanese victory over Russia and the internal troubles within Russia were the determining factors which motivated Russia's new approach towards Great Britain. The British government also came across the uncertain behaviour of the Amir of Kabul and apprehended the growing strength of German fleet. It was felt desirable by the British and Russian governments to come to an understanding regarding Afghanistan. 98 Thus the Anglo-Russian Convention was concluded in 1907 between the two sides specifying their respective spheres of influence in Central Asia, Persia, Tibet and Afghanistan. Significantly, this convention placed the Afghan foreign policy as usual into the hands of British while Russia was to have freedom to deal with Afghanistan directly on matters of purely local and non-political character.

As the negotiations were conducted without the knowledge of the Amir, he took hardly any notice of the

letter sent to him regarding the signing of the convention. To a great extent he avoided the issue and even in an interview with the British agent on 11 February 1908, he stated that he had nothing to say about the agreement. But in March 1908, a report was received by the Government of India from its Consul-General at Meshed revealed that the Amir was determined not to allow any close intercourse with either India or Russia and so "it was doubtful whether he would give his adhesion to the convention. 99 Despite that he kept the terms of agreement as the others did because he had hardly any choice.

Thus the political relations between Afghanistan and Russia which had started with the overtures of Dost Mohammad Khan in 1837 could not last long. Although time and again Russian envoys and agents paid visits to Afghanistan and assured the Amir of Russian assistance in the time of need, the Russians could not afford to come into direct conflict with the British Amir Sher Ali had to pay a price for having refused to receive the British agents at Kabul. Yakub Khan was a weak ruler who found himself unable to maintain links with Russia. Abdur Rahman Khan and his successor Habibullah Khan too could not hold political connections openly with Russia. Finally the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907

declared Afghanistan outside the Russian sphere of influence. But the subsequent events proved that the former Soviet Union (Successor to Russia) was destined to build close strategic, political and commercial linkages with independent Afghanistan, finally leading to the climax of the Soviet armed intervention in Afghanistan in 1979.