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ANGLO-RUSSIAN RIVALRY TO 1830

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CHAPTER I

EARLY THREATS TO THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA

> ...The ships of the English swarm like flies; their printed calicoes cover the whole earth, and by the side of their swords the blades of Damascus are blades of grass. All India is but an item in the ledger-books of the merchants, whose lumber rooms are filled with ancient thrones!—whirr! whirr! all by wheels!—whiz! whiz! all by steam!...
>
> The Pasha to the Traveller in Kinglake's *Eothen* (1844)

> ...Of His Majesty and the Royal Family and many other circumstances connected with England they spoke with a knowledge that surprised me, and once observed that English sailors and Beloche soldiers were the best in the world. They knew the character and fall of the Emperor Napoleon, but were ignorant of his death. Of vaccine inoculation they had heard by report, and when I explained its advantages they declared their intention of establishing it in Sinde, and requested me to assist them with the means of doing so. Among other subjects I told them of the grand discovery of steam engines; but in this, and respecting the revenues of Great Britain they evidently considered I was making use of a Traveller's privilege...
>
> From a conversation between Dr James Burnes and the Emirs of Sind, in *Narrative of a Visit* (1829)

When Dost Muhammad Khan of Kabul returned home in April 1843, he came fresh from one of the 'lumber rooms' of 'ancient thrones' maintained by the Honourable East India Company. He had been a comfortable and well endowed guest of the Governor General for two years and a few days from the date of his surrender at Kabul.[1] He did not rush back to Kabul the moment he was released in November 1842; he knew too much about Afghan politics for that. He took his time. He visited Lahore, capital of his late enemy the Maharajah Runjeet Singh, and the Sikh Durbar received him, we are told, with the honours due to an Afghan prince.[2] He had to conciliate the wild tribesmen who dominated the mountain passes between Peshawar and Kabul. He had to make sure that the factions at Kabul were truly ready to have him back, and he had to promise favours here and there to smooth his way back to the throne from which he had been plucked in 1839.

The two years of enforced residence in British India had worked

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a change in Dost Muhammad Khan. He now appreciated the full extent of British power in the world; he had come to understand that his 'hosts' were for the time being the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, that the Russians might have more men and a greater expanse of national territory, but that the British, more than any other people, had engines and engineers, innumerable ships and guns, and an unlimited self-confidence. They accepted no bounds and no barriers to the advance of British influence in the untamed regions of the earth. Yet, by a strange paradox, these conquerors were not primarily intent upon territorial aggrandizement. They worshipped one God; they were people of the book; but their god of every day seemed to be an idol called Commerce. Dost Muhammad Khan could recall the words of the Simla Manifesto of 1 October 1838. Lord Auckland stated that his government originally entered into treaties with the Emirs of Sind in order, 'by opening the navigation of the Indus, to facilitate the extension of Commerce, and to gain for the British nation in Central Asia that legitimate influence which an interchange of benefits would naturally produce'. It was impossible to dismiss these men as meddling infidels. Dost Muhammad could respect them and be wary of them. He could even feel friendly towards individuals. Lord Auckland's sister and Lord Auckland himself had treated him kindly and with consideration. At the Queen's Birthday Ball in Calcutta in May 1841 they had taken the trouble to amuse him and his suite in a place apart, where they would not have to watch those prancing, red-faced officers and their shameless, half-naked women.[3]

But now Dost Muhammad was re-entering his own country. He must reign and he must rule in a land where the British and their sepoys had killed and been killed. On the journey from Jalalabad to Kabul he could see the rotting corpses of one battle and the bleaching bones of another, freshly exposed by the melting of the snow. In Kabul itself he would be shown the signs of Britain's vengeance for the massacre of an army and the murder and mutilation of a British envoy. The great roofed bazaar of Kabul, 'the architectural pride of Central Asia',[4] was now in ruins. The fortress at Ghazni, barring an invader's route from Kandahar to Kabul, had been blown up and burned by General Nott's sappers and miners in the previous September. Many Afghans were still mourning their dead and nursing their wounds, having paid the

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heavy price for their triumph over British arms in the winter of 1841–2. It was fitting, among tribes long accustomed to the rituals of revenge, that the British forces returning to Kabul in the summer of 1842 should be known as an army of retribution. Dost Muhammad, on his return, saw how heavily his people had paid, and we need not wonder why he held his country aloof from British India for so long thereafter. It should not surprise us that he appointed his son, Muhammad Akbar Khan—the murderer of Macnaghten—as his vizier, or chief minister, as soon as he was re-established in the Bala Hissar at Kabul. Eleven years later the marquess of Dalhousie could only describe Anglo-Afghan relations as 'sullen quiescence on either side, without offence but without goodwill or intercourse'.[5] The only departure from that state of affairs had occurred in 1849, when Dost Muhammad, hoping perhaps to revive his claim to Peshawar, momentarily allied himself with his old enemies the Sikhs against the British. Subsequent events, including the annexation of the Punjab, made him more receptive to the diplomatic overtures made by Dalhousie's government in 1855. He never again quarrelled with British India, and in return the British made it a rule not to meddle in his internal affairs. The rule did not long survive him, but that is another story.

Why should the British in India have meddled in the affairs of nations beyond the Sutlej and the Indus in the first place? To find the correct answer to that question we do not need to go back as far as the early history of the Levant Company, whose charter of 1592 authorized trade with India overland through Ottoman territories. But it is useful to remember that the voyagers and venturers of the sixteenth century, the 'master o' the *Tiger*' and his like,[6] started the commerce that eventually led Britain into Central Asia. The merchants with their 'ledger-books' acquired armies and navies, generals and governors general, territory and taxes. For a few years after the conquest of Bengal some of the worst Englishmen in India did their worst, plundering, and jobbing, and profiteering their way into early graves or to wealth and purchased honours in England. The Regulating Act of 1773 included clauses designed to prevent any repetition of the 'flagrant errors' of the recent past. The Government in London now shared control of Indian affairs with the East India Company. Then in 1784 Pitt's India Act effectively subordinated the Company to the

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Crown. A Board of Control consisting of six Privy Councillors—and including at least two ministers of the Crown—was established with the right to issue orders to the Company's servants in India. The Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company became in time a forwarding agency for instructions from the president of the Board of Control. From 1793 onwards the president received a salary and functioned to all intents and purposes as a Secretary of State for India, often with a seat in the Cabinet. From 1812 onwards he invariably held a seat in the Cabinet.

The period of the consolidation of government control over Indian affairs coincided with the onset of new fears of invasion from the north-west. Every threat to Britain's communications by land and sea with India loomed as a menace to her Indian Empire. Now that the American Colonies had become independent, India was doubly precious to the British Crown. King William IV expressed a widespread and enduring feeling in October 1836 when he urged upon John Cam Hobhouse 'the necessity of watching the western frontier of India', and added: 'Now this is a fine country, but it is nothing without its colonial possessions, especially India.'[7]

To many Englishmen in the confident years after Waterloo, India was the badge of greatness. But there was a radical minority which rejected the general attitude. William Cobbett had written in April 1808:

> There is a constant, never-ceasing war in India. There is not always actual fighting; but there are always going on preparations for fighting; what right, in God's name, what right have we to do this? How is it possible for us to justify our conduct, upon any principle of morality?...[8]

Cobbett also hated Nabobs, but he was already out of date. India in the first quarter of the nineteenth century became a jewel in the imperial crown, a living proof of Britain's world power and of her military and maritime supremacy. It demonstrated her capacity for just and efficient government. A few thousand British officers and men ran and supplemented a native army which kept eighty million people under control. Some simply relished the glory of this feat, like latter-day Romans. But others were beginning to see the inevitable result of Britain's moral and educational

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impact upon India. The nation as a whole was inheriting grave responsibilities from the merchants, and by 1833 the Company was ready to wind up its commercial activities and devote itself to administration. In the House of Commons debate on the Bill which brought about that change, Macaulay said:

> ...To have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens would indeed be a title to glory all our own. The sceptre may pass away from us. Unforeseen accidents may derange our most profound system of policy. Victory may be inconstant to our arms. But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverses. There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. These triumphs are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws.[9]

Whether one viewed India as a colonial possession pure and simple, like King William, or as a looter's paradise, like Cobbett, or as a field for the propagation of British enlightenment, like Macaulay, the fact remained that India was now a place where the national prestige was at stake. The defence of such a prize would justify the taking of great risks, as it did in the First Afghan War. Meanwhile, the existence of the empire in India was profoundly affecting British foreign policy, and the distance and difficulty of communication between London and Calcutta were creating a distinctively Indian foreign policy which sometimes led statesmen to think of Britain as two powers, one European and one Asiatic. In certain circumstances it might become possible for Britain to have an ally in Europe who was at the same moment an enemy in Asia. Moreover, an Asiatic power could act boldly without the inhibitions of sophisticated European states. Much would depend on the personality of the Governor of Bengal at the moment of crisis. Would he take arms against a sea of troubles, or would he stay still within his existing frontiers and let trouble come to him?

In 1798, when Napoleon led his army into Egypt[10] and set his sights on India, the new Governor of Bengal was the Earl of Mornington, not a man to sit still and await aggression. Tipu Sultan of Mysore had just invited into his territory a small French force to help him against the encroaching British. In the north Zaman Shah of Kabul was trying to restore the Afghan Empire to

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its former greatness—a course of action which could lead him into conflict with Persia, the Punjab, Sind, or the British.

All these threats faced Mornington during the first few months of his term as Governor. Nelson saved him much anxiety by destroying the French fleet at Aboukir Bay[11] and bottling up Napoleon's army in Egypt. Mornington, who received the news of the invasion of Egypt in October, first determined to neutralize the actual French threat on Indian soil. Tipu would not relinquish his alliance with the French, and on 4 May 1799 he died in the rubble of his fortress at Seringapatam, defeated by an army which contained a contingent led by the future duke of Wellington.

But there was still a potential menace from France or Afghanistan, or both together. Mornington instructed the Governor of Bombay to cultivate good relations with the Shah of Persia and the Emirs of Sind, with a view to checking French and Afghan ambitions. The Governor of Bombay deputed merchant diplomats from Bushire for this task. In Sind there ruled a family of parvenu Baluchi princes, the Talpuras. Four brothers shared power in Hyderabad, having ousted the Kalora family in 1783. They were probably no worse than any previous rulers of their neglected country, but the British found them grasping and oppressive. Indeed the British in India, who periodically squeezed advantages out of them and their descendants from 1800 onwards, eased their conscience with the thought that anything must be better for the people of Sind than subjection to such masters.

Since 1757 Sind had been in theory subordinate to the Kingdom of Afghanistan. During the early years of the Talpura supremacy the emirs paid their annual tribute, and in 1786 Timur Shah recognized their leader as Governor of Sind, but the payments ceased when the Sindians found that they could defy Timur with impunity. In Afghan eyes, nevertheless, Sind remained under Afghan suzerainty.

In 1798 Zaman Shah, more forceful than his father Timur, was pressing his claims for tribute from Sind, and the usurped Kalora family was plotting to recover its lost dominions. The British merchant diplomatists therefore found a receptive audience when they proposed the establishment of closer relations between Sind and British India. The result was a commercial agreement, signed in the spring of 1800. Now, as later, Britain could not let any other power control, with or without Ottoman approval, her communications

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with the East. Now, as later, Britain could not afford to neglect the ancient invasion routes into northern India. But the French threat did not last long, and Wellesley[12] was not disposed to quarrel at the end of 1800 when the principal Sind emir, Fath Ali, curtly terminated the commercial agreement which had been concluded in the period of danger. By that time Wellesley could afford to relax. Zaman Shah's threats had caused Fath Ali to send the British merchants packing, but Zaman's downfall now gave both Fath Ali of Hyderabad and Wellesley breathing-space again. For the time being neither the British nor the Afghans thought of pressing their attentions on Sind. The Afghans, for their part, were deep in dynastic quarrels, and the British were negotiating treaties with Persia as a better long-term guarantee against both French and Afghan ambitions. The Commercial and Political Agreements between Britain and Persia were signed at the beginning of 1801.[13] A few months later the French threat receded even further. Thanks partly to British naval and military action and partly to the obstinate resistance of the Egyptians, the French expeditionary force had to evacuate Egypt. During the remainder of his term as Governor General, Wellesley had his hands full in India itself. Of the Treaty of Bassein, concluded on the last day of 1802, it has been said:

> The treaty unquestionably must be accepted as giving the British the Empire of India, for it reduced the head of the Maratha Confederacy to a position of complete inferiority, and, in matters external, of absolute subordination, to the British.[14]

By the end of 1803 the British under Wellesley had pacified all but Holkar among the Maratha leaders. While they were so engaged the pattern of external relations was changing again in the north-west. In 1801 the Persians had to surrender Georgia to the Russians, and in the following year they took advantage of Afghan divisions to annex the province of Khorasan, which had previously paid tribute to Afghanistan. This was to be a recurring pattern. A Russian success against Persia would be followed by a Persian thrust against Afghans and Turcomans.

Another recurring feature of external relations in this period was a tendency on the part of the Sind emirs to make overtures to the British whenever they felt nervous about the intentions of their neighbours. In 1803 Shah Shuja, another of the grandsons of the founder of the Afghan Empire, ousted his brother Mahmud and

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became king of Kabul. Shuja soon renewed the pressure of Afghan claims on the Sind emirs, and for a time he exacted tribute again. The British would not lift a finger to help the emirs; they refused even to receive an envoy from Sind as long as their financial claims, arising from the rupture of October 1800, remained unsettled. Sind and Persia were alike neglected now that the French were far away and Zaman Shah was blind and powerless. The Persians, looking for help against Russian pressure, signed a treaty[15] with France in 1807, receiving a general as ambassador and officers as instructors for their army. Gilbert Elliot, first earl of Minto, who became Governor General in that year, quickly understood the danger. He did not see any immediate risk of invasion, but he wrote that 'many considerations denoted conclusively the extension of the enemy's views' to India.[16]

The French, as we have seen, had long since evacuated Egypt, where the Albanian Muhammad Ali was now Pasha and intent upon destroying the power of the Mameluke Beys.[17] In British eyes Muhammad Ali was far too ambitious. Not for the last time, by any means, in their imperial history, they extended support in 1807 to more tractable men, notably to the Mameluke Elfi Bey. A British expedition landed in Egypt in support of Elfi and other Mamelukes, only to discover that Elfi Bey was already dead. The expedition met with disaster, and British heads were paraded on Egyptian pikes in Cairo. Like the French before them, the British withdrew, leaving Muhammad Ali alone to develop his Egyptian estate, nominally on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan.[18] He was not unduly disturbed by his Ottoman overlord, however. In Constantinople the reactionary Janissaries had just weakened the Porte still further by substituting their nominee, Mustafa IV, for the mildly reformist Selim III.

But in 1807 British India faced a much more dangerous threat to its security than the ambitions and hostility of Muhammad Ali. After the Peace of Tilsit between Napoleon and the Tsar the British Government had to prepare for the possibility of a French and Russian invasion of India. Already Persia, in her weakness, was gradually yielding ground to the Russians on and around the Caspian. French influence was already strong at the Persian Court.

Accordingly, on 2 March 1808, the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company dispatched the British Government's instructions to Lord Minto. He was to take

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measures to prevent a hostile army from crossing the Indus, and he was to cultivate to the utmost of his power 'the favourable opinion and co-operation not only of all states and countries to the Eastward of the Indus, but also of the Afghan government and even of the Tartar tribes to the Eastward of the Caspian'. The states eastward of the Indus clearly included Sind and the Punjab; the Tartar tribes occupied the region which we now know as Turkmenistan. These instructions excluded Minto from treating with Persia, for the Home Government was sending its own envoy. But in April 1808 Sir John Malcolm, who had negotiated the treaties of January 1801, was already on his way from Bombay to Persia. The British Resident in Muscat, Captain David Seton, with a small escort of Bombay Native Infantry, set out shortly after Malcolm's departure and headed for Hyderabad and the court of the Sind emirs, for in March it had been discovered that the emirs were looking for alliance with Persia against their Afghan suzerain, and rumours had reached Bombay that the French (now so influential in Persia) had been making overtures to Sind. Later in the year Minto sent Mountstuart Elphinstone to Afghanistan and Charles Metcalfe to the Punjab.

Captain Seton's mission was to negotiate with the Sind emirs for commercial facilities and the reception of a British political agent in their country. He was to use the British claim for an indemnity (for losses incurred in 1800) as a means of obtaining concessions if necessary, and he was to make discreet inquiries about the plots and intentions of Persia and Afghanistan. Speed was essential if Seton was to forestall Persian initiatives, but Seton took his time, and a Persian envoy reached Hyderabad first. Poor Seton, unaware that missions would soon be on their way to Kabul and Lahore, and anxious to counter the extravagant promises of the Persian envoy, came to an agreement with Ghulam Ali and his family in Hyderabad. The East India Company would drop all claim to the indemnity and open factories (what we should call trading stations) at Tatta and Hyderabad. The Company and the Emirs would give each other assistance, and neither side would protect the enemies of the other. In other circumstances Seton might have been able to justify his action in going so far beyond his brief. He could have pleaded that the Persian envoy had promised Persian and French help to make Ghulam Ali Governor of Kabul and Kandahar—two of the principal cities of Afghanistan—in return

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