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Imperial ontological (in)security: 'Buffer states', IR, and the case of Anglo-Afghan relations, 1808-1878

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**Abstract**

This article offers a new perspective on 'buffer states' – states that are geographically located between two rival powers – and their effect on international relations with a particular focus on the imperial setting. The paper argues that such geographic spaces have often been analysed through a structuralist-functionalist lens, which has in some cases encouraged ahistorical understandings on the role of buffer states in international affairs. In contrast, the article offers an approach borrowing from the literature on ontological security and critical geopolitics in order to access the meanings that such spaces have for their more powerful neighbours. The paper draws upon the case study of Afghanistan and Anglo-Afghan relations during the nineteenth century and finds that in this case, due to the ambiguity of Afghanistan's status as a 'state', and the failure of British policy-makers to establish routinized diplomatic engagement, Anglo-Afghan relations exhibited a sense of ontological insecurity for the British.

These findings suggest previously unacknowledged international effects of 'buffer states', and may apply to such geographic spaces elsewhere.

### **Keywords**

Ontological security, ontological insecurity, critical geopolitics, buffer states, Afghanistan, Anglo-Afghan relations, nineteenth century, empire, imperialism.

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### **Biographical Statement**

Martin Bayly is an LSE Fellow in Contemporary International Relations Theory at the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics. His current research concerns constructivist International Relations, imperial history, and Afghanistan. His recent publications include 'The 're-turn' to empire in IR: Colonial knowledge communities and the construction of the idea of the Afghan

polity, 1809-1838' (*Review of International Studies*, 2014). His first book, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge and Anglo-Afghan Relations, 1808-1878*, is forthcoming and under contract with Cambridge University Press.

## **Introduction**

Buffer states, it seems, are back on the agenda. Following recent events in Ukraine, the geopolitical peril of 'intermediaries'; liminal spaces; and spaces 'in between' has resurfaced, prompting a return to this perennial issue in great power management.<sup>1</sup> As Chay and Ross observed in their 1986 work, *Buffer States in World Politics* (1986) such states, defined as being geographically located between two rival powers, are often to be found the regions in which there is most turbulence. This remains the case today, demonstrated with examples such as North Korea, Eastern Europe, and Iraq. But in addition to this, from an historical perspective, the location of such states in areas in which the power of the imperial 'centre' was at its most tenuous, means that attention to 'buffer states' and imperial history highlights the enduring sense of paranoia with which empire views its peripheries. As Manan Ahmed (2011a: 60) observes '[t]o the centre of

any empire the frontier is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate’.

Despite this contemporary and historical importance however, the literature on buffer states in IR remains surprisingly thin. Existing works tend to emphasize the geopolitical role such states play in mediating great power rivalries, thereby drawing attention away from the buffer itself. In particular, there seems to be a serious deficit in literature that explores the meanings that such spaces have for their more powerful neighbours, especially imperial neighbours, other than as a functional intermediary. Drawing upon the example of Anglo-Afghan relations in the nineteenth century, this article argues for a new perspective on buffer states and their effect on international relations, with a particular focus on the imperial setting. The prevailing functionalist perspective within the IR literature obscures an alternative perspective on such states as more of a locational concept, than a definitive category; a perspective that reveals how their role can be determined by attitudes towards them as geographies of exception, violent geographies, or zones of contestation. This article argues that these representations can have a crucial impact on diplomatic exchange.

In order to address this deficit in the literature, the article draws upon a modified version of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1986; Huysmans, 1998; Kinnvaal, 2004; Mitzen, 2006a, 2006b; Steele, 2005, 2008; Zarakol, 2010) as well as contributions from critical geopolitics. Ontological security allows consideration of how security-seeking between actors is in part a search for cognitive stability and routinized behaviour, allowing for identity stability and the reduction of anxiety.<sup>2</sup> The article argues that in certain cases – including the example studied here - this routinized behaviour and this cognitive stability, can be hard to find, particularly when geographical spaces acquire certain meanings for powerful states and empires. *Cognitive instability* in such instances can be conducive to *ontological insecurity* (Giddens, 1986: 62; Zarakol, 2010). This may be a particular problem with buffer states, and as the paper argues, this can be particularly acute for empire.

The article utilizes as a case study the example of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century – widely seen as a classic 'buffer state' (Rubin, 1995). In contrast to much of the literature on this period which tends to focus on Anglo-Russian geopolitical competition for Central Asia, or the so-called 'great game' (Hopkirk, 2006; Dalrymple, 2013; Tytler, 1967; see also Becker, 2012), the article uses archival material to focus instead on Anglo-Afghan relations, highlighting the specific challenge presented to the British colonial polity in India by the Afghan 'buffer'

zone, which is often obscured by the more dramatic diplomatic histories. It is argued this period demonstrates a search by British diplomats for a routinized diplomatic intercourse with Afghan rulers, whether of an inclusive or exclusionary nature thereby providing a sense of cognitive stability. Afghanistan was not a recognized 'buffer state' during this period – indeed this term did not enter public discourse until the end of the nineteenth century (McLachlan, 1998: 89). Rather it was in the process of being constituted as such and this process entailed a great deal of instability.

A chief source of this instability derived from the British cultivation of a peculiar 'idea' of Afghanistan (Bayly, 2014). Framed by wider 'ideologies' of empire (Buzan and Lawson, 2013),<sup>3</sup> this concept drew on colonial knowledge; the historical experience of the first Anglo-Afghan War; and British experiences on the North West frontier of India. The article deals with each of these periods in turn in the case study section. It is argued that cumulatively these experiences amounted to the construction of a particular 'imagined geography' (Gregory and Pred, 2007), one that informed and disrupted Anglo-Afghan relations. Representations of Afghanistan therefore had a direct bearing on the perceived ability to engage in stable or routinized relations.

Going beyond the conventional buffer state construct in this case reveals the value in avoiding the assumption of the state as an 'ontological prior' (Ashley, 1984: 240; Agnew, 1999: 510), going beyond the 'territorial trap' (Agnew, 1994; Barkawi and Laffey, 2002), and the value of imperial history to IR more broadly. It further suggests that ontological security could benefit from greater ontological depth, including over the nature of 'statehood', in order to allow a more historically mobile attitude. Indeed, as this article argues, it was precisely the ambiguity (Browning and Joenniemi, 2013: 497-8) over Afghanistan's political and territorial status that exacerbated Anglo-Afghan relations throughout much of the nineteenth century.

Most importantly, for the purposes of this article, attention to *imperial* ontological security offers deeper insights into the identity dynamics that might underpin apparent security dilemmas. The expansion and delimiting of imperial frontiers was far more than a question of strategy, but evoked the very essence of imperial identity as defined against political communities that existed 'beyond' the boundaries of empire. Buffer zones can therefore be viewed as far more than a geopolitical playground for great powers, but as a site for the co-constitution of identity in itself (Pratt, 2008) and as a site for ontological security-seeking. Peripheries may not be as peripheral the existing literature suggests.



## **Buffer states**

As Michael Partem observed in 1983, despite having been a widely employed term since the late nineteenth century, 'buffer states' have received remarkably little scholarly attention (although see Mathison, 1971; Prescott, 1967; Spykman, 1942; Schroeder, 1984). Perhaps the most comprehensive recent work is Chay and Ross's edited volume *Buffer States in World Politics* (1986), which defines buffer states as 'countries geographically and/or politically situated between two or more large powers whose function is to maintain peace between the larger powers' (1986: xiii). They identify three 'crucial elements' of buffer states: That they are small countries, in both area and population; that they are adjacent to two larger rival powers; and that they are geographically located between these opposing powers (1986: 1). Partem (1983: 4) adopts a similar definition, adding the condition that the buffer state is 'independent'. In her innovative study into 'state death', Tanisha Fazal (2007: 70), adopting this definition, identifies buffer states as a particularly moribund state formation accounting for over 40 per cent of 'state deaths'<sup>4</sup> since the eighteenth century; an attrition rate attributed to security dilemmas generated between the rival neighbours of the buffer state (2007: 17-18). Numerous examples are thrown up by these definitions, including Afghanistan,

Belgium, Cambodia, and Lebanon (Partem, 1983); Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Poland, and Korea (Chay and Ross, 1986). Meanwhile buffer 'systems' are identified in Southern Africa and Central America (Chay and Ross, 1986). Buffer states are perhaps more prevalent than is commonly assumed.

The common thread uniting these accounts is their structural-functionalism. In the existing literature, buffer states matter only to the extent that they determine, or are determined by, great power relations. This may be a result of the majority of works emerging during the Cold War. Both Partem (1983) and Chay and Ross (1986: 7) seek policy outcomes from their analysis, the latter for example, asking whether buffer states are 'still a valid force in international relations in terms of preventing hostilities between major powers?' However, perhaps due to the heavy weight of positivism that informs these studies, the historical evidence does not necessarily match up with the assertions made. By focussing on the rival powers, there is a tendency to suppress the agency of the buffer state itself which is often simply cast as the passive or submissive subject of great power rivalries rather than an active player in those foreign policy decisions. In addition, there is a tendency for these models to either deliberately, or implicitly essentialize a series of categories rendering the analyses somewhat ahistoric.

For example, in determining which states are valid for her investigation, Fazal (2007: 17) defines 'membership in the interstate system' from 1816-1919 on the population criteria of 500,000 or more and the diplomatic criteria of receipt of diplomatic missions from both Britain and France, or conclusion of a treaty of commerce, alliance, or navigation with Britain or France.<sup>5</sup> Not only does this definition ignore the inexact process of judging population figures at the time, particularly within non-European states,<sup>6</sup> it also carries the dangerous assumption that states only began to exist once European diplomats made the effort to engage with them, implying the superiority of European diplomacy over centuries of non-European diplomatic exchange. More to the point, according to Fazal's data set the treaty that heralded Afghanistan's membership of the international states system was signed in 1809. Yet this treaty was redundant within weeks as the Afghan 'state' collapsed. No further diplomatic exchange of any official nature occurred until 1837.<sup>7</sup> A question might be raised therefore as to the status of Afghan 'statehood' during this period, including British understandings

These works often also carry a presumption as to the fixity of territorial boundaries. As the case study below suggests, this is a dangerous presumption. Quite apart from the indeterminate geographical location of boundaries, particularly in areas in-between imperial interests, there was disagreement

amongst the British as to the appropriate measure of political authority at this time (Hopkins, 2008; see also Branch 2012). Afghanistan's borders, for example, were not fixed on all sides till the 1893 Durand Line Agreement.<sup>8</sup> The territorial ambiguity central to Afghanistan's case – and that of others – is overlooked in the geographic assumptions within functionalist approaches, despite this being a major source of instability between the rival powers.

Finally, both Partem's (1983) stipulation that the buffer state must be 'independent', and Fazal's (2007) stipulation of state death as those instances where a state's sovereignty (defined as control of foreign policy) is lost to another power, are problematic. As Edward Keene (2002) has shown, European colonialism during the nineteenth century was often justified by a legal provision for what was termed 'divided sovereignty', in other words, the sharing of sovereign authority within one state. Whilst this was not truly achieved by the British in Afghanistan until 1882, the *possibility* of its application provides depth to the analysis of what the British were attempting to achieve in this region. Fazal's data records the post-1882 period in Anglo-Afghan relations as one of state 'resurrection' for the Afghan polity following the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). However, under the provision of divided sovereignty this period in fact marked the beginning of British control of Afghan foreign policy under the new

ruler Abdur Rahman Khan. This was negotiated by treaty and is therefore, according to Fazal's definition, in fact a moment of state death. The provision for 'divided sovereignty' further complicates the picture with regards to imperial relations with frontier regions and 'buffer states' in a manner that traditional functionalist approaches find difficult to capture.

When it comes to buffer states, the research is stacked firmly in favour of functionalist/positivist outlooks. This has encouraged a degree of theory-induced ahistoricism and has contributed to the obscuring of Anglo-Afghan relations at this time. As George Lawson (2012: 204) might describe it then, in these studies history is recalled as 'scripture': 'a predetermined site for the empirical verification of abstract claims'. In order to address this misreading of history and deepen the analysis of the role that buffer states have played in international relations, this article turns to ontological security as a theoretical tool offering a more fruitful analysis, but this first requires some clarifying comments on how we ought to use this tool, particularly in relation to empire.

### **Ontological (in)security and empire**

Ontological security proposes that states seek not just physical security, but security of the self (ontological security) in the form of their own identity, and as such seek to define themselves in terms of both their own actions as well as those of other states, and their respective identities. As discussed below, in terms of analytical value, ontological security offers much, yet its most effective application to the case study demands an appreciation of the structure and operation of British imperialism in South Asia, and clarity on how theoretical concepts apply. From a theoretical perspective, this helps to avoid theory-driven assumptions and responds to calls for greater specificity within this subfield (Lebow, forthcoming). From an analytical perspective, and for the purposes of this article, this greater clarity shows how ontological security can surface relations between the 'buffer state' and the neighbouring power, assuming that the periphery of empire is a site for ontological security seeking. In a wider sense, this further highlights how ontological (in)security may be particularly acute for empire. These points of clarity fall into three broad categories: routinization, statehood, and identity.

Ontological security emphasises the importance of *routinization* in state relations, as a means of building basic trust systems, and providing a vehicle for the reflexive monitoring of self-identity (Giddens, 1984). The institutions for such routines may derive from a variety of institutional or organizational forms (Mitzen, 2006b: 343).

They may relate to external relations and intersubjective criteria, driven for example by diplomatic routines (Mitzen, 2006a; 2006b; Browning and Joenniemi, 2013) or more internal, self-regarding actions such as moral reflection (Steele, 2005; 2008; Zarakol, 2010). In addition, the character of these routines may be amicable or antagonistic (in the case of diplomatic routines), or self-congratulatory or self-critical (in the case of internal reflection). The important point is that where ontological security is secure, repetition of such routines will allow a sense of cognitive stability, a 'cognitive cocoon' (Giddens, 1991: 38; Mitzen, 2006a: 273) perpetuating relationships of friendship or enmity (Mitzen, 2006b; Browning and Joenniemi, 2013), or feelings of selfhood and self-worth (Steele, 2005; 2008; Zarakol, 2010; Kinneval, 2004). Crucially, cognitive *disorder* may result from situations in which stable routinization cannot be achieved. In such situations identity reaffirmation may be harder to achieve, and ontological *insecurity*, manifested in various forms of heightened *anxiety*, may result: a 'deep incapacitating fear of not being able to organize the threat environment, and thus not being able to get by in the world' (Mitzen, 2006a: 273); the impression of chaos (Huysmans, 1998); a collapse in basic trust systems with others (Giddens, 1984); or an inconsistent or discontinuous sense of 'self' (Steele, 2005; 2008; Zarakol, 2010; Kinneval, 2004).

The application of this concept of routinization to imperial relations raises pertinent points for the notion of imperial ontological insecurity. Firstly, the expansion of empire in South Asia was not spearheaded primarily by diplomatic means. Rather, it was frequently ad-hoc and disorganised, often based on the entrepreneurial actions of private traders and mercenaries – complicating the identification of a diplomatic corps. These ‘entrepreneurs’, on the leading edge of imperial expansion, were aided by international legal provisions justifying the private appropriation of unoccupied lands defined as those areas in which the standards of nationhood (and later the standards of ‘civilization’) were not met (Keene, 2002; Gong, 1984; Anghie, 1999). This is not to say that formal diplomatic exchange was non-existent, but where such missions were conducted, they were coloured by a crucial distinction between European and non-European diplomacy often couched in terms of ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ states; a dualism that emerged in parallel with the growing influence of Liberal thought on Victorian imperial thought, and one that became increasingly important throughout the nineteenth century (Bell, 2006; Pitts, 2005). This was more than simply offensive colonial stereotyping. Victorian international jurists in particular increasingly viewed ‘uncivilized’ states as ‘unequal sovereigns’ exempt from the dictates of European international law as applied to ‘civilized’ states (Anghie, 1999; Gong, 1984; Pitts, 2007; Simpson, 2004). Key to this was the perceived incapacity of non-



European states - particularly Islamic states - to maintain relations of diplomatic reciprocity and mutual respect (Pitts, 2007). The theory and practice of imperial relations therefore militated against the establishment of regularized, institutionalised, diplomatic intercourse between European and non-European states, aside from those of a necessarily hierarchical nature in which the supremacy of 'European' diplomacy was presumed (Simpson, 2004). Arguably this contributed to diplomatic disorder and anxiety at times of crisis.

The amorphous structure of British imperial rule presented an additional challenge to routinization and cognitive stability. In contrast to the Spanish and French empires, British imperialism was based on a varying tradition of 'devolved authority and local systems of association' (Burroughs, 1999: 170). The imperial centre's relations with populations abroad were therefore 'multiple, diverse, and changing' (Barkawi and Laffey, 2002: 122). There was, in short, no such thing as a model of imperial 'government'. On the frontiers of colonial authority this diverse and decentralised form of rule was at its most tenuous, and most parasitic upon local networks, collaborators, and elites (Bayly, 1996). This fostered a perpetual sense of paranoia and anxiety regarding the entire northern fringes of India from Burma in the east, to Afghanistan in the west. Frequently this anxiety and cognitive unease would manifest itself in the form of 'information panics', as metropolitan

administrators scrambled for knowledge and information on supposed intrigues and conspiracies (Bayly, 1996).

The irregular structure and practice of colonial government in South Asia links to a second area of clarification concerning the ontological security approach in the imperial setting, relating to the historical ontology (Hacking, 2002: 53) of the state; this applies to the colonial state as well as Afghanistan itself. In the existing literature ontological security potentially presumes two state actors without problematizing the state as an historically contingent category (Bartelson, 1995; Skinner, 1989; Spruyt, 1994). As suggested above, the category of 'state' is of doubtful utility when considering the British colonial polity in India; indeed its very incoherence was a constant source of anxiety to British officials. More to the point, as Duncan Bell has noted, to Victorian political theorists the 'state' was a 'multivalent concept' and simply one of many 'often interchangeable terms [such as] "commonwealth," "nation," "government," "body politic," political union," "sovereign," and so forth' (Bell, 2007: 98-99). The precise constitutional and political form of empire in South Asia was a debate that would remain unresolved.

In terms of the functional institutions of the state, even at the level of *haute politique* foreign policy decision-making in India was divided between London and

Calcutta, further complicating the identification of a diplomatic 'corps' and at times contributing to a sense of disorder and perhaps 'anxiety'. The decision-making process was defined by a constant centre-periphery exchange mediated by so-called 'men on the spot'. These individuals - Governors, Proconsuls, and Viceroys - played a key role in the information flow back to London and in the interpretation of directives, frequently acting in a semi-autonomous manner (Burroughs, 1999). As such, whilst in London the tendency was to reflect on policy towards Afghanistan in terms of grand strategy and European affairs, in India policy-makers were more focused on regional affairs. Partly in recognition of this, as early as 1829 the President of the East India Company Board of Control, Lord Ellenborough, proposed to the then Prime Minister Wellington that 'the Indian Government should be authorized to act as an Asiatic power, ignoring the effect of its actions on Britain and Europe, if the Russians moved towards Kabul' (Norris, 1967: 32). As such, the routines that informed ontological stability in Europe were distinct from those in South Asia, leading to frequent disagreements over the best course to take. Whilst these divisions were alleviated with the transition from the rule of the East India Company to the Crown in 1858, as well as with the rise of communications technology (Bell, 2005; 2007), the distinction retained some influence - a further contribution to a discontinuous sense of 'self'.

The concept of Afghan 'statehood' was equally contested (Bayly, 2014). Aside from the confusing habit of colonial officials to use the terms such as 'state' and 'nation' interchangeably the Victorian account of the state, as Bell again points out, encompassed far more than an instrumental-functional set of institutions, often embodying 'pronounced moral or metaphysical dimensions' (2007: 98). This was frequently described in terms of certain 'conditions of statehood', defined by sovereignty, understood broadly as 'autonomy in decision-making over key aspects of domestic and international affairs, and the recognition of this autonomy by other states'. The state was also 'in some sense regarded as natural ...; it covered an easily identifiable and contiguous territorial space; and it was thought to require a high degree of social and cultural homogeneity, often phrased in the language of nationality and race' (Bell, 2007: 99). As such, neither the colonial polity in India, nor Afghanistan qualified as a 'state' in commonly accepted parlance. Appreciating the disaggregated format and multifaceted content of 'statehood' allows a more historically sensitive application of ontological security in the imperial setting, but it also highlights how identity construction for colonial officials with regards to peripheral states rested upon a multiple and fluid political forms – once again, contributing to cognitive unease and 'anxiety'.

Crucial to the argument presented in this article is connecting ontological security to the construction of geopolitical space and 'buffer states'; this is particularly pertinent given the vagaries of the Victorian account of the state. As critical approaches remind us (Wright, 1947; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Gregory, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 1998; Gregory and Pred, 2007; Debrix, 2008), geopolitics is in part the study of the 'spatialization' of international politics 'in such a way as to represent a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas'; a process frequently carried out by 'core powers or hegemonic states' (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 192; Ó Tuathail, 1996). Absent a coherent concept of the Afghan state and encouraged by the activities of European explorers, cartographic practice, the later exclusion of European officials from the country, as well as the historical experience of the Anglo-Afghan War, colonial officials constructed a particular vision of Afghanistan as a territory. Such representations often reflected what Simon Dalby (2007) has termed a 'geography of danger', wherein Afghanistan was cast as an 'in-between space' or 'black world' (Paglan, 2007: 244-6; Stewart, 2005) rather than a knowable domain. Although cartographic practices at the time presented Afghanistan in territorial terms, the precise geography was vague. This imagined geography was a crucial part of the spatialization of the region, contributing to a wider *cartographic* anxiety evident in the manner in which the region was described.

The third area in which the ontological security approach requires greater specificity relates to identity assumptions. The labile and multiple nature of identity (Lebow, forthcoming, chapter 2) demands a methodological point of clarity. Amongst multiple narratives of identity it can be difficult to pin down a precise common understanding, yet as Steele (2008: 15-20) has shown this can be controlled somewhat, or at least specified to a greater degree, by focussing on certain 'spatial' and 'temporal' frames. What is being extracted in this article therefore, are the practices and justifications of limited policy communities who within a certain temporal frames can be described as expressing a discursive consciousness that had a particular policy impact (Steele, 2008: 11). At times, it is also possible to identify within these communities a discursive consciousness of 'anxiety' without unnecessarily anthropomorphizing the state. Accordingly, the following case study first focuses on a colonial 'knowledge community' (Bayly, 2014) informing British policy makers and diplomats regarding policy towards Afghanistan. The second section focuses more closely on those policy makers and diplomats, and their decisions after the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838-42). The third part looks at an emergent 'epistemic community' (Haas, 1995) of military and policy experts and their definition of the strategic situation on India's border with Afghanistan in the period preceding the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80). The

point is that the routines and identities that these groups expressed did not amount to *the* British concept of its colonial 'self', but rather one identity, and one set of routines amongst many. Importantly, the impact these 'spatial' and 'temporal' frames had on the justifications for observed behaviour give insight into the ontological insecurity that Afghanistan appeared to generate for the British.

It might be argued that in widening the field to varying identity constructs the approach lacks disprovability. It is worth saying that the argument does not seek to be too 'conventional' in its constructivism, in other words this is not theory testing, but rather using the approach or collection of approaches, to order this particular topic area and to shine new light on the phenomenon of 'buffer states'. In the following case studies, this more historically contextualized, and theoretically precise interpretation of ontological security provides a tool for analyzing British India's relations with Afghanistan. Rather than a sense of Russian 'threat' driving Anglo-Afghan relations, as a functionalist 'great game' narrative would presuppose, this approach surfaces an alternative dynamic, demonstrating the how the imperial periphery or buffer zone of Afghanistan generated its sense of anxiety and ontological insecurity for the British.

## **Case study: Anglo-Afghan relations during the nineteenth century**

*'Knowing the country': early European explorers and the first Anglo-Afghan war, 1809-1838*

In 1838 the Governor General of India, Lord Auckland, declared war on the Kingdom of Kabul, with the aim of unseating the ruler Dost Muhammad Khan for the preferred British candidate Shah Shuja. In conventional accounts the pretext to this decision was the arrival of a Russian envoy in Kabul. The wider geostrategic imperative was the fear of the imminent collapse of Herat, which had been besieged by the Persians from the end of 1837 till mid-1838. There was a fear – albeit a contested one – in Tehran and London that this would open avenues for Russian influence through Persian Khorassan, Herat, Kandahar, then through the Bolan and Khyber Passes onto India. For decision-makers in India however, the emphasis was on regional concerns – specifically the opening up of the Indus River to trade (Hopkins, 2008). The Sikh Kingdom of Ranjit Singh had been in a long-running armed dispute over the former Afghan territorial possessions of Peshawar, Kashmir, and Attock, and this had disrupted British trade ambitions in the region. When these disputes appeared insurmountable in a manner that would satisfy both sides, the British sided with their more trusted ally, Ranjit Singh – an alliance



that further offered the promise of commercial expansion. The First Anglo-Afghan War resulted in failure. The destruction of the British occupying force during a bloody retreat through the Khyber Pass in the winter of 1841 had a profound effect on the British perception of Afghanistan. The return of an 'Army of Retribution' in 1842, which exacted brutal revenge on Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul and all that fell in between, failed to heal a 'wound that rankled for fifty years' (Fraser-Tytler, 1967: 120). This failure has often been attributed to strategic blunders and British ignorance of Afghan culture, politics, society, and geography. However, such accounts have tended to obscure the growth of colonial knowledge on the 'land of the Afghans' prior to the 1838 intervention, and the role this played in framing British perceptions (Hopkins, 2008; Bayly, forthcoming; 2014).

The make up of this loose knowledge community was eclectic, and their purposes were mixed. Some were pursuing a particular nineteenth century ideal of masculine adventurism. Others operated through more official channels, the most significant of whom was Mountstuart Elphinstone, the first British envoy to Afghanistan who met the then ruler, the aforementioned Shah Shuja, at Peshawar in 1809. Though the treaty signed between the two countries was soon nullified by the collapse of Shuja's rule, Elphinstone's mission yielded masses of information

for the British on what had previously been, on official terms at least, *terra incognita*.

The intellectual progeny these figures varied. Elphinstone's methods were driven by a particular brand of 'Scottish orientalism' (Rendell, 1982): an ardent empiricism motivated by enlightenment principles and a curious Republican bent that led to frequent comparisons between Afghanistan's 'independent tribal republics' (Elphinstone, 1842) and the clansmen of the Scottish Highlands. Others, such as Charles Masson (1842) and Godfrey Vigne (1843), were animated by more classicist leanings, eager to explore the ruins of previous conquering empires, with a particular fascination with Alexander the Great. Meanwhile, Alexander Burnes (1835), whose quasi-official 1832 trip led to an officially sanctioned venture in 1837 to negotiate the status of Peshawar, is exemplary of the manner in which many of these explorers fell into a grey area between official and unofficial practice. Collectively their activities and their publications reflect what Derek Gregory (1994) has termed the 'world as exhibition' mentality of geographic exploration.

This epistemic imperialism was accordingly mediated by a European conception of what social 'science' looked like, and demonstrated an attempt at the crafting of a 'science of the concrete',<sup>9</sup> converting this *terra incognita* into a more familiar

'realm of possibility' (Stafford, 1999: 311), as well as delineating a cognitive order for future diplomatic engagement. Tribal groupings and their geographical spread were duly documented with categorizations encompassing patrilineal, ethnic, and dynastic descent. Groups were also distinguished by their confessional identities (Sunni or Shia), by the geographical nature of their territories (highlands or plains), as well by as their mode of subsistence. This latter category foregrounded a distinction between nomadic and settled populations. Whereas elsewhere in India, the term 'tribe' conjured up a sense of illegitimacy, Afghanistan presented an entire society build on such lineage structures. The nomadic population therefore provided an 'other' against which to pitch the 'other', thereby allowing the crafting of a particular 'civi-territorial complex' (Connolly, 1996) wherein the authority of settled communities was seen as superior to the nomadic populations as it implied a sense of land ownership. Territory and civilization were thus mutually reinforcing, creating a place and space: the 'land of the Afghans'.

However, this body of knowledge remained patchy at best, a situation exacerbated by the lack of any formal system of collation or sequestering. Furthermore, such quasi-academic orientalism competed with a powerful 'imaginative geography' (Said, 2003: 49-73), a frontier mentality that swept across the northern borders of British territories in India, prompting a form of 'cartographic anxiety'; a fear of

what lay beyond driven, in part, by internal anxieties felt by policy makers in India. Crucial to this was the assertion that British authority within India rested on a perception of superior British power. As Governor General Lord Ellenborough noted in 1830: 'We dread ... not so much actual invasion by Russia, as the moral effect which would be produced amongst our own subjects and among the Princes with whom we are allied, by the continued apprehension of that event' (Whitteridge, 1986: 31). Driven by a particular brand of orientalist stereotyping that viewed 'native' populations as inherently capricious and 'intriguing', particularly in north India, many policy makers feared that rumours of British weakness would spark wider unrest, perhaps encouraged by radical elements on the frontier (Noelle, 1997: xxiii; Bayly, 1996; see also Kaye, 1857: 301). The British were falling into a familiar pattern of imperial paranoia (Ahmed, 2011a, 2011b).

In terms of ontological security, the growth of colonial knowledge on Afghanistan and the emergence of a frontier mentality shows that although the British did not see a 'state' in Afghanistan at this time there was an attempt at the crafting of a cognitive order that would inform policy and diplomatic engagement. Nonetheless, the disparate interpretations of Afghanistan 'place' did not cohere into a single political community under a single legitimate sovereign order. Rather, in the eyes of the British, Afghanistan's civi-territorial complex (Connolly, 1996) was only a

loose construct, dominated by the 'settled' communities, and obscured by a heterogeneous collective of tribes with varying allegiance to Kabul. To the British, Afghanistan lacked a single sovereign authority, was divided into semi-sovereign 'tribal republics' (Elphinstone, 1842), and lacked an agreed-upon territorial limit. Rather than driven by an attempted state 'monopoly', organized violence was often represented as unpredictable and driven a sense of inherent instability, warlike behaviour, irrationality, and what the British termed 'fanaticism' (Edwards, 1996; Stanski, 2009).

The outcome in terms of routinized behaviour was an uneasy policy of non-intervention. In 1837 Governor-General Auckland was lamenting the 'haze of confusion' that existed beyond Lahore.<sup>10</sup> This ambiguity worked its way into policy advice too. The prominent policy advisor Alexander Burnes, doubted the validity of an Anglo-Persian non-intervention treaty on precisely these grounds, asking 'in the first place, who are the Afghans[?] There are three Chiefships at present which may be classed under that head and two of them certainly have interests at variance with each other.'<sup>11</sup> Burnes' appointment had already been opposed on similar grounds with one official fearing that his 1837 mission to Kabul, which began ostensibly as a trade mission, 'must soon degenerate into a political agency,

and that we should as a necessary consequence be involved in all the entanglement [sic] of Afghan politics' (Kaye, 1857: 181).

As the siege at Herat continued however, this routine of non-engagement based on a presumption of anarchy beyond the frontier, began to break down. The British started to consider how they might consolidate a unitary order within Afghanistan to resist encroaching Persian influence, and the feared Russian influence behind it. In attempting to isolate a cognitive order the British drew on the disparate knowledge that they had of the region. This led to diverging policy opinions. Captain Claude Wade, a key policy advisor to the Governor-General proposed a crude policy of divide and rule, highlighting the ambiguities inherent in the construct that had been elaborated and the impact this was having on routinized interactions:

'Our policy ... ought not to be to destroy, but to use our endeavours to preserve and strengthen the *different governments* of Afghanistan as they at present stand; to promote among themselves a social compact ... Whilst distributed into several states, the Afghans are ... more likely to subserve the views and interests of the British Government than if we attempted to impose on them the yoke of a ruler to whose authority they can never be

expected to yield a passive obedience. Though undoubtedly weak, they would collectively be fully adequate to the defence of their country, when they have derived the advantages of *a more decided intercourse with our government* than at present exists' (Kaye, 1857: 306).<sup>12</sup>

For Wade, backing the existing ruler Dost Muhammad Khan, would simply turn the disenfranchised Sadozai monarchy (the tribal federation of Shah Shuja), against him (Dost Muhammad was of the competing Barakzai federation), and in turn against the British (Kaye, 1857: 306). In making this distinction, Wade was drawing on the policy advice of Burnes, whose own precepts of Afghan republicanism derived from Elphinstone.

With the arrival of the Burnes mission in Kabul in 1837, and the failure to negotiate a solution to the ongoing Afghan-Sikh rivalry over Peshawar, coupled with fears of Persian success in Herat, the imperative began to change. The arrival of a Russian envoy allowed a framing of the problem in terms of Afghan subterfuge with the British claiming Dost Muhammad Khan had demonstrated an aggressive policy towards the British by siding with Russia. In truth the replacement was already identified, with the exiled Shah Shuja providing an apparently easier choice for the British. As a member of the disenfranchised Sadozai, Shah Shuja

had spent a number of years presenting himself as a unifying leader, whose arrival was eagerly awaited by the fractious Afghan political community. He was thereby able to play into the hopes for stability – derived from colonial knowledge - that the British sought beyond their frontier. Shah Shuja offered the promise of regularized diplomatic exchange.

There was thus an intellectual history to British intervention in 1838, described here as a search for cognitive order through colonial knowledge, the fear of cognitive instability, and a lack of routinization as a result of this instability. Through paying attention to the discursive consciousness of this specific knowledge and policy community, a more historically sympathetic account can be provided; one that highlights the meanings that the British were developing with regard to the Afghan geopolitical space, avoiding presumptions as to the coherence of the Afghan state. Indeed, its very incoherence was something the British sought to alleviate through the erecting of a more stable political and geographical, and cognitive order.

*A violent geography after the First Anglo-Afghan War, 1842-54*



The failure of the First Anglo-Afghan War had a profound effect on British politics. The often self-serving debates and recriminations that circled in its aftermath served to warp the historiography, with the post-mortem beginning even before the 'Army of Retribution' had withdrawn. Governor General Auckland and his circle of advisors were heavily criticized for hijacking the decision-making process for their own paranoid 'Russophobic' ends (Kaye, 1857). As historians at the time sought lessons for the militarizing colonial state in India, defeat became attributed to a series of 'theoretically reversible political and administrative blunders' (Noelle, 1997: 38), directing attention away from the specifics of Anglo-Afghan relations.

An overlooked aspect to this history is the effect the experience had in sustaining an image among British officials of Afghanistan as a 'violent geography' (Gregory and Pred, 2007); an imperial variant on Simon Dalby's 'tabloid realism': the 'presentation of the world in terms of dangerous places and the ever-present threat of violence' (2007: 295; Paglan, 2007). To an even greater degree than before, officials began to 'essentialize, exoticize, and totalize (Agnew, 1998: 36) the Afghan geographical space. As two observers put it, 'a rugged, barren, and inhospitable [sic] country',<sup>13</sup> its snows 'dyed' by the blood of British subjects 'to which it is to be feared new victims have been added which has left their unburied

bodies to decompose and add pestilence to the mountain difficulties opposed to our advancing columns'.<sup>14</sup> As part of this essentialized geography the British viewed the Afghan opposition in unitary terms, ignoring the local grievances that motivated discontent (Johnson, 2011; Martin, 2011; 2014),<sup>15</sup> subsuming these under a totalizing narrative that viewed the Afghans as intrinsically violent, particularly towards the British.

Initially this discourse sustained the call for retribution following the destruction of the occupying army in 1841. As one official declared: 'we have placed ourselves among a semi-barbarous people, their national pride and personal feelings were offended, and they have avenged themselves in their own way, by acts of great atrocity. But how are they to be punished?'<sup>16</sup> In placing the Afghans collectively beyond the pale of civilized discourse (Porter, 2009; Stanski, 2009), the British were also able to reclaim a sense of pride in the face of failure. As one historian remarked, '[w]e cannot rein wild horses with silken braids' (1857: 124).

Following 1842 such claims also buttressed arguments against any further engagement. The Governor General warned in early 1857 of 'the jealousy and hatred with which a large portion of the nation, and the most warlike, regard us',<sup>17</sup> with one advisor remarking that 'the hatred of the British by the Afghans is so

intense ... that there is but small chance of any great change taking place in that respect until after the death of nearly all the inhabitants ... who can personally remember our invasion of the country in 1838'.<sup>18</sup> The period from 1842 to 1856 marked the dominance of this particular sense of Afghan exception with relations marked by 'sullen quiescence on either side, without offence, but without good will or intercourse'.<sup>19</sup> This resulted in tense state of affairs and put a premium on accurate information on both sides of the frontier. When correspondence between the Kandahar governors and the Nawab of Bahawalpur, appeared to demonstrate plans for a 'holy war' against the British, the Chief Commissioner at Peshawar was able to pass it off as an attempt at manipulation, largely due to the Nawab's protestations that it was a forgery.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, frontier officers viewed such sedition as symptomatic of a wider conspiracy, with many officers believing an Afghan invasion to be merely a matter of time.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile in Afghanistan a Kabul newsletter painted a picture of panic and division as businesses closed and Kabulis fled in anticipation of a British advance.<sup>22</sup> In one instance, a dinner hosted by Dost Muhammad Khan was apparently broken up in disarray at rumours of British troops marching on Jalalabad.<sup>23</sup>

In effect the British were therefore attempting to routinize their interactions through a practice of non-engagement, but a perception of chaos indicative of

ontological insecurity prevailed (Huysmans, 1998), this was sustained by a violent geography which had deleterious effects on cognitive stability concerning the nature of Anglo-Afghan relations, and in particular on the capacity of British officials to organize the threat environment (Mitzen, 2006a: 273). This was in contrast to British engagement with other regional 'states', including Russia. Indeed a strong counter-argument to the 'great game' thesis during this period is the degree of Anglo-Russian cooperation over Persia and Afghanistan, as well as the states in between (Bayly, forthcoming). The failure of the British in Afghanistan was matched in Russian attempts to occupy Khiva which coincided with the First Anglo-Afghan War. As the Russian Emperor remarked to the British Ambassador, 'I perceive that you are precisely suffering under the same embarrassments which annoy me, that the extent of country you occupy renders it almost necessary that you should go further, and that you find it equally inconvenient to advance, to withdraw, or to remain in your present position'.<sup>24</sup> This shared imperialist outlook on the perils of the ambiguous cartography between them offered space for mutual understanding and routinization between the powers. The Emperor therefore suggested 'some general system of occupation ... grounded upon an actual state of possession which may be conclusive ... it appears convenient that we now understand our relative position, and what has hitherto been a closed subject may now be discussed openly between us'.<sup>25</sup>

Cooperation was also evident over the fate of a British officer who had been imprisoned by the Amir of Bukhara whilst exploring the Central Asian states north of the Hindu Kush,<sup>26</sup> as well as over the successor to the Shah of Persia with the British Foreign Office remarking in 1848 'our preference ... is not so strong as to induce us to ... depart from the understanding formerly come to with the Russian Government'.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Foreign Secretary Palmerston, instructing his envoy in Tehran, the Russian government were to be told that, 'British and Russian agents in Persia should act in unison' and 'H.M. Minister at Tehran will always be ready to enter into communication with the Russian Minister at Tehran, and to act in concert with him'.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst it would be a mistake to take the argument too far, such great power trusteeship contradicts the zero-sum presumptions of the great game narrative and underscores an important feature of this relationship. As imperial powers, the British and the Russians shared a discourse on so-called 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states (Gong, 1984) which gave Britain and Russia some common ground upon which to routinize their interactions with regard to these states. Some indeed took the argument further. For the European explorer Godfrey Vigne, Russian expansionism in Central Asia should be welcomed for it served to inflict 'the

penalty of adopting the semblance of humanity' on the 'savage plunderers and bigots of the Asiatic deserts', thereby doing the 'civilized world' a favour (1843: 468-9). Such narratives lent an air of familiarity to the Russian cause, describing their actions and identity in terms that the British could relate to, viewing as they did their own activities in Afghanistan, and on frontiers elsewhere, as motivated by similar imperatives. As such, and in contrast to the great game narrative (as well as the functionalist concept of buffer states which underpins it), British India derived a greater degree of ontological security from their putative rivals Russia than they did Afghanistan through the shared diplomatic routines and shared discourses of imperial, 'civilized' powers.

*Cognitive order through military science: The frontier and the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1863-1878*

The 1849 British annexation of Sind and the Punjab led to the establishment of the frontier of British India on the Indus river and in the mountains of what would become the northwest frontier province.<sup>29</sup> As early as 1851, the British Foreign Secretary expressed the belief that this had 'diminished the importance which was formerly attached to the question of Herat' and that the 'exertions' of 1837-38

would now not be necessary.<sup>30</sup> This sense of security provided greater definition to the limits of British rule, reducing the imperative for engagement beyond. Later changes in the structure and operations of the colonial state in India were also critical. The mutiny of 1857 marked a profound shift in the structure and character of British rule in India. The India Act of 1858 transferred control of British policy in India to the Crown and abolished the East India Company. Whilst policy decisions were still divided, this more coherent line of governing authority through the Viceroy created the institutional arrangements for a more 'imperial' character of rule and identity, one that British policy makers became increasingly comfortable with towards the latter stages of the nineteenth century.

This period also witnessed a wider cultural shift concerning the administration and conduct of the colonial state, as government departments marked a transition from operating 'on the basis of custom and personal relations', to the more "rational", disinterested procedures' of the 'liberal administrative state (Hevia, 2012: 35; Peers, 2006: 75-8). In India, the period from 1850-1870 marked a 'turning point' as the colonial state 'moved into a higher gear, fortified by a new 'scientific' and professional culture' (Bayly, 2004: 249). Beyond the civil service, the military too had been nurturing reformist zeal, partly brought on by the failures of the Crimean War (1853-56), resulting in a more professional creed. As

such, on the frontier the entrepreneurialism and intuition of old was giving way to a more centralized technocratic approach aided by new technologies including the telegraph and railway transportation. But with the perceived strategic importance of north India this was an approach in which the military played a key role.

Reflecting this, the historiography of Anglo-Afghan relations at this time is often interpreted as primarily a debate over competing models of imperial defence, normally crudely summarized as the 'forward policy' and the 'close border' policy. In a wider sense this debate reflected how the growing cohesion of the colonial polity in the latter half of the nineteenth century was encouraging a binary geography (Agnew, 1998: 23) of 'our' territory and 'theirs', often springing from a particular 'heartland' or 'homeland' mentality (Farish, 2007; Anderson, 2004; Walker, 1993). Therefore, whilst these debates are often interpreted in terms of military 'science', they were also a constitutive effect of a greater sense of 'us and them', which found fertile ground in the preexisting colonial stereotypes of the Afghan 'other'. Behind this lay self-regarding reflections over the nature, morality, and identity of British rule in India. Thus in 1863 the Governor of Bombay, H. B. E. Frere considered the manner in which 'a powerful, regular, and civilized Government can habitually deal with inferior semi-civilized, and less perfectly organized Governments either within or beyond its own frontier.'<sup>31</sup> Two models



emerged: the 'English system', described as 'one essentially of moral force' (yet buttressed by physical force), and the 'French system', described as 'one essentially of physical force'.<sup>32</sup> Such contrasts highlight how the British were increasingly comfortable in their imperial identity and in turn how this identity was co-constituted against other imperial entities, and the imagined geography of the frontier itself.

At a more local level, the frontier security debate offered additional routines by which identities were established. A concern with geographic 'scientific' boundaries established a cognitive order for the British, allowing them to converse in a political language with which they were familiar (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011). With little current knowledge on what was transpiring beyond the passes of the frontier, the British instead focused on the passes themselves. Frontier defence could thus be reduced to a military problem – a 'scientific frontier' (Slagg, 1885) – rather than a more ambiguous set of problems relating to the coherence of the Afghan polity. This further served to bolster the binary geography that a cohering colonial polity encouraged.

By elevating the lawless, violent stereotype of the frontier populations British officials were able to reaffirm their moral status of exerting a 'civilizing' influence.

Once more these 'races', and those beyond the passes into Afghanistan were cast as beyond the pale of civilization. The closer ties the British reached with the mountain 'states' of Chitral and Dir in 1878 further emphasized this distinction.<sup>33</sup> With frontier engagement being the most significant routine with 'Afghans' at this time, the perception of Afghanistan became partially filtered through this experience. Afghanistan became vulnerable to British representations that cast it as an 'outlaw state' (Simpson, 2004), a logical extension of the violent geography that preceded it. The frontier officer Lieutenant General Sydney Cotton reflected this sentiment writing on the assassination of the former Peshawar Chief Commissioner, Frederick Mackeson, asserting that it 'was originated by the evil machinations of our enemies, the whole border of our territory were interested more or less in the transaction, and the origin of the deed might perhaps have been traced to Cabul itself, had it been considered advisable'. Cotton submitted that he 'scarcely ever knew an instance in which it could not have been discovered ... that a deep-laid plot had originated the disaster, the assassin being simply and solely the instrument in the execution of it' (Cotton, 1868: 10).

Throughout this period the perception of the Afghan polity was of a return to anarchy. Having finally consolidated his rule in the west with the capture of Herat in 1863, Dost Muhammad Khan died shortly after, sparking a five-year secession

struggle from which the heir-apparent, Sher Ali, emerged successful in 1868. As one observer put it, Afghanistan resembled a 'vortex of faithlessness and intrigue'.<sup>34</sup> Such views further inhibited engagement, bolstering a routine of non-intervention and non-recognition of successive claimants to the throne. In the midst of the violence frontier officers requesting advice from the Governor-General's office on the accepted protocol for the reception of exiled Afghan leaders were instructed that such 'refugees' were to be allowed 'no maintenance allowance'; must dismiss 'armed followers'; 'retain only a few servants'; and 'must live where ordered'. They were not to communicate with Kabul and were not permitted to leave British territory without permission.<sup>35</sup> This ardent non-engagement prevailed despite a threat by the then ruler of Afghanistan, Afzul Khan, that he would form an alliance with Russia in defiance of the 'inhospitable and ungrateful English' (Wylie, 1875: 46).<sup>36</sup>

Ahead of a summit between the Viceroy and the new Amir in 1869, debates erupted concerning the wisdom of British inaction, with some calling for subsidy payments in order to prop up the fragile polity and to counter any Russian ingress. A key debate also surrounded the question of stationing British agents within Afghanistan for the purposes of improving the woeful lack of information, stymied by the British perception that their 'native' agents within Afghanistan were

inherently inferior. Yet the outgoing Viceroy was opposed to this. Citing the likelihood of 'irritation, defiance, or hatred in the minds of Affghans [*sic*]', he proposed only to 'renew generally' the pre-existing treaty.<sup>37</sup> His successor, Lord Mayo adopted this course in the negotiations and was clear on what the Amir would not have: 'No treaty; no fixed subsidy; no European troops, Officers, or Residents; no dynastic pledges.'<sup>38</sup>

Once again, in contrast to the great game narrative, routines established with Russia appeared to offer a degree of cognitive ease with respect to Russian actions in Central Asia. A public memorandum, dispatched by the Russian Chancellor in 1864 once more framed the problem Russia faced with her frontiers in Central Asia as one of managing 'uncivilized' populations. In light of this, the Viceroy was moved to remark in October 1867 that 'Russia might not prove a safer ally, a better neighbour, than the Mahomedan races of Central Asia and Cabul. She would introduce civilization; she would abate the fanaticism and ferocity of Mahomedanism, which still exercises so powerful an influence in India'.<sup>39</sup> Despite continued Russian expansion, an indication from the Russian Emperor in 1869 that he viewed Afghanistan 'as completely outside the sphere within which Russia may be called upon to exercise her influence'<sup>40</sup> placated the fears of many.

This reluctance to commit continued up to the 1873 Simla conference at which the Amir Sher Ali impressed upon the British his fears of Russian ambitions. Based on their diplomatic exchanges with St Petersburg, the cabinet in London instructed the Viceroy to communicate to the Amir that they did 'not at all share his alarm', and considered that there was 'no cause for it'.<sup>41</sup> The British resisted the Amir's desire for a defensive pact yet pushed for a permanent representative at Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat, as well as influence over the Amir's foreign policy. Sher Ali rejected this proposal, as well as the financial and military support that came with it and relations began to deteriorate. As one official put it in 1877, 'Afghanistan is closed to us.'<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the rigid gaze of military science, there was no institution through which the British could establish a routine that would overcome their innate fear of Afghanistan's fissiparous and violent political tendencies. In a lecture delivered in 1875 the prominent Afghanistan 'expert' Henry Lumsden noted that 'the state of the parties in the country now is even more divided than it was at the close of [Dost Muhammad Khan's] life'. The Amir, he added, was facing 'a simple dismemberment of his kingdom ... this is the danger we have to confront. How to avert it with the efficient but, at the same time, unreliable material of the people themselves is the difficulty that now claims our attention.'<sup>43</sup> Lumsden's lecture

highlighted tensions in the manner in which the British continued to view Afghanistan as a policy problem, and the routines that informed this. On the one hand there was the view brought by military science concerning frontier defence and where best to place forward garrisons so as to ensure the best use of the passes. But alongside this was a consideration of the best *political* means to establish British influence over Afghanistan. Whilst the military debate offered a clear cognitive order, the political debate did not as it relied on inadequate political intelligence and was infected by a virulent representation of Afghanistan's politics as inherently fractious and violent.

The culmination of this inherent tension was the absence of routinized engagement with Afghanistan beyond a reluctant commitment in the event of invasion by a foreign power. When a Russian envoy arrived in Kabul in 1878, the Afghan Amir refused to accept a British mission in return. This dispute sparked the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Defending the policy, including its legality, the prominent British official Henry Rawlinson wrote, 'it is mere affectation to pretend to apply the nice distinctions of European diplomacy to our relations with a barbarian Chief like Shir [*sic*] Ali Khan. To hold that he is an independent Prince, bound by no obligations to the British Government, and free to contract or refuse alliances as he pleases, is to ignore the true bearing of the case'.<sup>44</sup> Rawlinson's

argument placed Sher Ali beyond the consideration of diplomatic norms and was directly related to the representations to which Afghanistan had been subjected. Drawing on the ambiguous cartography of the Afghan polity he continued, 'in reality Shir Ali [sic] was only technically independent at any time, for Afghanistan is geographically and politically part of India'. Absent a regular routine of engagement, and a coherent concept of Afghan statehood, the British were unable to reflexively engage in their ambitions for the country.<sup>45</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Conventional accounts on buffer states in IR demonstrate a bias towards structural-functionalist arguments that result in a tendency to prioritize the rival powers over the perceptions they hold of the 'buffer state' itself. These accounts also often deploy anachronistic, ahistoric categories, particularly relating to the question of the statehood of the buffer. The result is a perception of two rival powers straining over an intervening state, a classic security dilemma in which neither wishes to provoke war, yet where both are weary of each other making strategic gains. By focusing on the identity aspects of buffer states, utilizing concepts drawn from ontological security, this article has shone new light on the

case of Anglo-Afghan relations during much of the nineteenth century and shown that there was more going on than a conventional account allows.

Whilst there certainly was Anglo-Russian competition over Central Asia, British policy towards Afghanistan was often driven by British perceptions of Afghanistan as a geographical space. In addition to fears of destabilizing Anglo-Russian relations, non-intervention was encouraged by cognitive disorder and anxiety brought about by confusion over the political community that Afghanistan represented, and by a particular 'violent geography' that took hold following the First Anglo-Afghan war. Routinization was sought through non-intervention and the cognitive order that was eventually found derived from a particularly militarist viewpoint in which Afghanistan and the frontier was converted into a problem of military 'science'. This frontier debate can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to achieve an ordered mechanism for engagement, yet it was only one debate amongst many, including those who advocated diplomatic engagement. In the wider context of Anglo-Afghan relations during the nineteenth century, ontological security of a conflictual or cooperative kind was very hard to achieve. As such ontological insecurity resulted, rendering British foreign policy decisions spasmodic and on two occasions, extremely violent.



Spaces in between rival states are an historical fact, yet the term 'buffer state' may only be one historical instantiation of such spaces. If these regions are stripped of their statist presumptions, defined less by functionalist ideal-types, and judged more in terms of their representational forms as 'zones of competition' or as 'imaginative geographies', then a more fruitful research agenda potentially opens up. Whilst this article has argued that empire may be particularly susceptible to ontological insecurity, it has further demonstrated that frontiers and buffer zones can be a site for ontological security-seeking. This has clear relevance to today in regions such as Eastern Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Indeed such zones may not be 'states' at all; they may be internal areas such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, the Puntland region of the Horn of Africa, Xinjiang Province in East China, or the Sahel region of North Africa. The interests at stake in such regions are not only geostrategic in nature, but identity-based as well. By policing these regions, surrounding states, or even distant actors may routinize their behaviours, or placate their fears; fears that are themselves a constitutive effect of the identities ascribed to such zones. But this in turn may have the unintended consequence of creating a culture of exclusion around them. Moreover this routine is potentially unstable when it promotes cognitive unease and thereby ontological insecurity.

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## **Notes**

1. See for example: Friedman G (2014) Ukraine: The Perpetual Buffer State. *Real Clear World*, 28 Jan. Available at:

[http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2014/01/28/ukraine\\_the\\_perpetual\\_buffer\\_state.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2014/01/28/ukraine_the_perpetual_buffer_state.html) (accessed 15 July 2014); Mearsheimer JJ (2014) Getting Ukraine

Wrong. *The New York Times*, 13 March. Available at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/getting-ukraine-wrong.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/getting-ukraine-wrong.html?_r=2)

(accessed 15 July 2014); CTV News Channel (2014) 'Ukraine Remains a Buffer State'. Available at: <http://www.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=301838> (accessed 15 July 2014).

2. As Giddens (1986: 375) defines it, ontological security is '[c]onfidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity'. See also Mitzen (2006a, 2006b).

3. Buzan and Lawson (2013: 621) refer to imperial 'ideologies of progress' but point out that these often had a 'dark side', including so-called 'standards of civilization', as discussed later.

4. Where state death is defined 'in terms of loss of sovereignty to another state' with a particular emphasis on control of foreign policy.

5. A definition based on the Correlates of War Project (COW) (2011).

6. In the case of Afghanistan figures were generally collected by European explorers, whose methods varied, but involved a fair amount of guesswork. See for example Conolly (1834: 2).

7. A commercial mission, turned political mission, led by Alexander Burnes, an East India Company official during which the territorial status of Peshawar and Afghan relations with the Sikh Kingdom were discussed, although no treaty was signed.

8. The western border with Persia and the northern borders with Russia were negotiated by treaty in 1873 (Ewans, 2010).
9. Borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss, quoted in Said (2003: 53).
10. IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, p. 120.
11. Namely Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. The interests at variance were between Kabul and Kandahar. The chiefs at Kandahar had threatened to back Persian moves on Herat. IOR MSS. Eur. E. 161 Correspondence III, No.9, Enclosure 4, Burnes to McNeil, 6 June 1837.
12. Emphasis added.
13. IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 641.
14. IOR//PS/3/12, W. H. Sykes, 21 June 1842, p. 568-9.
15. Archival sources include IOR/L/PS/18/A2; IOR/L/PS/3/11/Part Four, p.736-75.
16. IOR/L/PS/3/11, p.660-1
17. IOR/L/PS/18/A3, p.2.
18. IOR/L/PS/18/A3, p.5.
19. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, p.7.
20. IOR/L/PS/5/200, Lawrence to Elliot, 9 March 1849, p. 340.

21. IOR/L/PS/5/200, Edwardes to Lawrence, 15 February 1849, p. 342.
22. IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 25 May 1849, p. 108.
23. IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 52.
24. IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part II, p.396.
25. IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part II, p.396-7.
26. IOR/L/PS/3/10, p.499.
27. IOR/L/PS/3/27, p.180-1.
28. IOR/L/PS/3/28, p.104, p.269.
29. Known today as the Khyber-Pakhtunkwa province of northwest Pakistan.
30. IOR/L/PS/3/35, p.117-8.
31. IOR/L/PS/18/A4, p.1.
32. IOR/L/PS/18/A4, p.1-2.
33. IOR/L/PS/18/A18.
34. IOR/L/PS/18/A9, p.8.
35. IOR/L/PS/5/257, Green to Frere, 24 November 1864, p. 775.
36. The threat was rejected as a ruse by the Viceroy.
37. IOR/L/PS/18/A9, p.3. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, p.36.
38. IOR/L/PS/18/A9, p.2.
39. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, p. 30.

40. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, p.43.

41. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, p.50.

42. IOR/L/PS/18/A15, p.2.

43. IOR/L/PS/18/A9, p.8.

44. IOR/L/PS/18/A20, p.1.

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