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From Tribal Confederacy to National Coalescence

THE CREATION OF THE Durrani monarchy in 1747 triggered a dramatic turning point in the history of the vast region wedged between the rivers Oxus and Indus. After the Achaemenid period, multiple states rose and fell on the territory of what is now Afghanistan. New polities would emerge on the ruins of collapsed empires, build up to a critical size (sometimes briefly exceeding the limits of the parent entity), and then split up, as a result of succession disputes, external pressures, scarcity of resources or other reasons, into smaller principalities which would in turn expand, only to disintegrate again. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Afghan state was quintessentially a loose confederation of chieftaincies, or ‘localised autonomies that come to recognise the superior authority of one of their own in a grouping of small polities’,¹ which emerged on the periphery of two great but moribund empires: the Safavids in Persia, and the Moghuls in India. In the century and a half that followed, this primitive construct, in contrast to so many similar and contemporaneous princedoms in northern India and Central Asia, not only failed to dissolve, but also evolved a governance system that possessed many of the trappings of the modern state. When King Amanullah proclaimed Afghanistan’s complete independence in 1919, his country had internationally recognised boundaries, a standing army, a centralised bureaucracy and more or less regularised systems of justice and taxation. Moreover, Amanullah felt confident enough to declare that his mandate to rule stemmed from the ‘Afghan nation’. Why did the Afghan monarchs succeed where their colleagues in Kashmir, Turkestan and Tibet failed? Did a modern ‘nation-state’ emerge in Afghanistan as a ‘natural’ result

of social development? How far did its capacity to prescribe rules of social behaviour go? What were the grounds for its acceptance by the general populace? These are important questions to be addressed for the initial period of Afghanistan's existence as a distinct political entity.

The Land and People

Afghanistan has existed as a recognisable political unit since the middle of the eighteenth century. Prior to this, of course, the country did not have any national cohesion or a political identity as Afghanistan. The very names 'Afghan' and 'Afghanistan' were first chronicled as late as the tenth century AD;² some authors trace them as far down as the third century AD, although apparently without sufficient grounds.³

At the dawn of modern times, the territory of what is now Afghanistan was inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups which, apart from the Muslim faith, had little in common. In the period preceding the Durrani Pashtun ascendancy in 1747, the ethnonyms of 'Afghan' and 'Afghanistan' denoted a particular *ethnie*⁴ – the predominantly nomadic Pashtuns – and a particular locality where they resided: the western frontier mountains of the Subcontinent (the Suleiman range).⁵ They gradually moved to the valleys and plains, subjugating, assimilating and otherwise interacting with the ancient sedentary population – the Tajiks, concentrated in Kabulistan, Ghazna, Logar, Zabulistan and Helmand.⁶ The morphological dichotomy between the Pashtuns and the Tajiks was and remains the most potent social divide in Afghanistan, while claims to the effect that 'the Pashtuns and Tajiks, who combined constitute most of the inhabitants of Afghanistan, have always shown a united front to all invaders and helped to preserve Afghanistan' are questionable.⁷ Certainly, the two communities had never acted in unison before the emergence of the modern Afghan state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Apart from Pashtuns and Tajiks, the Indo-European population of Afghanistan in pre-modern times also comprised Nuristanis, Baluchis, Heratis and other smaller ethnic groups. The major Turkic peoples of Afghanistan included Uzbeks, Turkmens and Qizilbash. Hazaras and Char-Aimaqs represented communities of mixed Turkic-Mongolian-Iranian stock, whereas Brahuis belonged to the subcontinental pre-Aryan anthropological type and spoke a Dravidian language. Small groups of Arabs, Jews, Armenians, Panjabis and others made the ethnic mosaic even more complex. The astounding ethnic diversity is reflected in the fact that as many as 30 languages may have been spoken in Afghanistan.⁸ Babur Shah, describing the Kabul province in the beginning of the sixteenth century, commented

that ‘nowhere else does there exist such a variety of tribes and multiplicity of tongues’.⁹ It was only in the eighteenth century that ‘Afghanistan’ transcended the confines of a purely ethno-cultural term, as the Pashtuns became what Asta Olesen has called the main state-supporting group.¹⁰

In the absence of a strong state or sense of nationhood, social regulation was performed at the level of microsocieties – tribes and other distinct localised communities¹¹ that had mainly been dominated by Safavid Persia in the west and Mughal India in the east. Meanwhile, they were separated from Tsarist Russia in the north by Khanates, or local princedoms, most importantly those of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva in Central Asia; they were thus remote from Tsarist Russia and could not figure strongly in its growing imperial ambitions.¹² Nor could they be of much interest to Great Britain, for the latter had not as yet embarked on comprehensive colonisation of the Indian subcontinent.

Ahmad Shah’s Confederal and Imperial Entity

This picture, however, changed with the rise of Ahmad Shah Abdali to rule the Afghans. Ahmad Shah was a leading figure of the prestigious Sadozai clan of the Pashtun Abdali Durrani tribe,¹³ and a notable warrior and organiser, who had distinguished himself in the service of the Persian King, Nadir Shah Afshar. His Abdali tribal confederation, under the chieftainship of his father Zaman Khan, had ruled Herat prior to the conquest of the city by Nadir Afshar in the early part of the eighteenth century. In 1747, following Nadir Shah Afshar’s assassination, Ahmad Shah came to Kandahar and successfully assembled the rival Abdali and Ghilzai chieftains from roughly within the boundaries of present Afghanistan in a *Jirga* (traditional tribal assembly), which pronounced him to be their paramount chief, and formed a grand Afghan ethno-tribal confederation, with Kandahar as its capital.¹⁴ Despite the fact that Ahmad Shah’s authority was not at once recognised throughout Afghanistan, and he had to rely on both conquest and diplomacy to achieve it, this event was momentous: it amounted to the declaration of Ahmad Shah as the first monarch of the Afghan people in modern history. After assuming the title of Durr-e Durran (Pearl of Pearls), Ahmad Shah during the 25 years of his rule rapidly managed to free divided Afghan tribes from Persian and Mughal domination, to consolidate them into a macrosociety and to distinguish them as an identifiable independent political unit within an expanded territory of present-day Afghanistan. This macrosociety also incorporated the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Baluchis and Khorasanis, with whom Ahmad Shah sought to maintain ethnic peace and political alliance. By the end of his rule he had not only established a powerful

Durrani conquest empire, stretching from its north-westernmost point at Khorasan to the Ganges plain in the Indian subcontinent, but had also laid the foundations for a lengthy period of Durrani dynastic rule. Although his empire faced disintegration within 30 years of his death in 1773, his Durrani descendants continued, at first under the Sadozai clan and from 1826 under the latter's kindred Mohammadzai clan of the Barakzai tribe, to hold the reins of power, in one form or another, for two centuries.

Ahmad Shah's rule was, by nature and practice, essentially a charismatic accretion on traditional authoritarian-tribal rule, with the political and military ascendancy of the Abdali Pashtuns revolving around the unchallenged position of Ahmad Shah as the paramount leader.¹⁵ It had neither clear legal-constitutional bases nor an elaborate, institutionalised administrative and security apparatus which could provide for what could resemble a governmental system in the modern sense of the term. Nor did it have an ideological-philosophical commitment to the transformation of Ahmad Shah's confederation into a viable unit in the emergent system of nation-states, which had begun to take root in Europe following the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, and to proliferate elsewhere.

A fusion of the Islamic ideas of 'divine right' and 'divine rule' (as embedded in the tradition of the Sunni majority in Islam – the dominant sect in Afghanistan) with the hierarchical tribal codes of leadership and submissiveness of followers, backed by a multiethnic and tribal army that Ahmad Shah created, accounted for the core operative mechanisms of political legitimacy.¹⁶ Whereas the Islamic idea that the leader is the main reflection or vice-regent of God and ought to be accordingly respected furnished the intangible but necessary theoretical grounds of justification for the leadership, tribal traditions and coexistence with major ethnic groups of the country provided the practical social framework within which the leadership could give concrete expression to its rule and actions.¹⁷ The leadership utilised such ideas and codes, in combination with the use of several other variables, to legitimate its position and enforce the supremacy of the ruler. The other variables, most importantly, included: crude force as the prime factor in the acquisition of legitimacy in a traditional society; and inter- and intra-tribal consultations and cross-tribal marital linkages and alliances, governed by the principles of 'accommodation and rule' and 'reward and punishment'. In this respect, two other factors also figured very crucially. One concerned the skill of the ruler in managing his relationships with the other tribal chieftains, whose varying positions in the power structure of the confederation ultimately determined the ruler's success or failure. The other related to the ruler's shrewdness in pursuing methods of governance which

helped ensure not only that the chieftains would remain content, in terms of both material gains and exercise of traditional authority, with their respective positions; but also that tribal followers of each chieftain would receive enough tangible benefits to secure their loyalty to their chief and through him to the central leadership.

Ahmad Shah, who has come to be recognised as wise and prudent,¹⁸ provided for these factors largely through a two-dimensional policy of multiethnic-tribal accommodation, and military expeditions and conquests. His policy of accommodation turned on the formation of a fairly loose 'supra-tribal council' of the major Durrani Sadozai Khans (or chieftains), which acted as a consultative body to him; and an army, whose central command was mostly in the hands of Sadozais but whose units, divided along tribal and ethnic lines, were made up of both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns such as Tajiks and Hazaras, with each unit assigned a specific fighting task.¹⁹ It also involved the allocation of some of the important administrative posts to leading figures from other than his Abdali tribe. This was so despite the sectarian religious differences between the Pashtuns, who were mostly Sunnis, and a number of Shi'ite non-Pashtuns, particularly Khorasanis and Hazaras. Indeed, the inclusion of Khorasan in his domain, and the need to acquire the loyalty and obedience of its people, played a significant role in prompting Ahmad Shah to pursue a non-hostile accommodationist attitude towards not only the Khorasanis but all of his non-Pashtun subjects. For this and, of course, reasons of personal safety, he even went so far as to employ the Qizilbash ('Redheads'), who have historically functioned as a suppressed Shi'ite micro-society in Afghanistan, as his bodyguards – a practice which was continued by his successors, until the reign of Amir Sher Ali Khan (1863–1866).²⁰

His policy of military expeditions, which gave a militaristic character to his rule and resulted in the rapid expansion of his confederation into a conquest empire, saw his army units continuously on the offensive, especially at a time when the Persians and Sikhs of West Punjab were weak and suffering from internal malaise and divisions. Two factors more than anything else motivated Ahmad Shah in this respect. One was his claim to be a defender of Islam and the constant urging from some Indian Muslim leaders, especially Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, that he defend the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent against Hindu hegemony.²¹ Another was the consideration that the more the Afghan tribal militias were engaged in offensive operations, the greater the chances of their units and commanders becoming persistently preoccupied with warfare, proud of their conquests and, above all, engrossed in the pecuniary gains which war booty brought them. Hence, they remained

divided as separate units, and void of the impetus needed to pose any real threat either individually or collectively to Ahmad Shah's central authority.

Thus, Ahmad Shah was able to establish an autocratic and yet reasonably charismatic popular imperial rule. While skirted by divine claims, his rule was in reality grounded in his unique personality, the supremacy of his own tribal Pashtuns and a skilful manipulation of flexible accommodation of non-Durrani Pashtuns and non-Pashtun ethnic groups and sub-groups, as well as offensive warfare. In this context, Ahmad Shah's rule was neither overtly 'Pashtunist' nor obviously discriminatory in its treatment of non-Pashtun subjects.²² Consequently, it was in many ways consensual and mirrored to an appreciable extent the heterogeneous nature of his Afghan domain. Ahmad Shah's success in binding together different tribal and ethnic peoples, irrespective of their sectarian, linguistic, cultural and territorial differences, within an Afghanistan entity, and in leading them to coalesce within a collective framework under a single leadership and central authority, set the foundations for the emergence of modern Afghanistan.²³ As a result, this exalted Ahmad Shah to the position of *baba* (the father of the nation) and *Mu'assis* (founder) of present Afghanistan in history on the one hand, and left the stamp of personal rule imprinted on the Afghan psyche, giving rise to a recurring element in the development of Afghan politics on the other.²⁴

Inter-Dynastic Power Struggle

The foundations laid by Ahmad Shah could not ensure the development of a viable process of political change and social stability in the long run. Three main factors and perpetual interactions between them undermined those foundations and came to influence the evolution of Afghan politics substantially over the next two centuries.

The first of these factors concerned the very structure of Ahmad Shah's rule and the nature of Afghan society. His confederation had, all along, a tenuous existence. It was very weak in its structure. Its core was made up of four major Abdali or Durrani tribes: Popalzai (to which Ahmad Shah's own Sadozai clan belonged), Barakzai (which produced the Mohammadzai clan that assumed the reins of power from the Sadozai from 1826), Alikozai and Achakzai.²⁵ On the periphery of the confederation was the Abdali's rival tribe, the Ghilzai, with which Ahmad Shah succeeded in forging an alliance that did not last for very long after his death, although this initial alliance proved instrumental in depriving the Ghilzais of any access to paramount leadership in the long run.²⁶ In the past, the Durrani clans had been engaged in intense rivalry and blood feuds, not only with the Ghilzais, but also among themselves. The central bond that held them together was Ahmad Shah's

charisma and sensible policies in regulating and controlling tribal relationships within his confederation.

This made Ahmad Shah's style of rule highly personalised, with its durability and operational capacity dependent very much on *ad hoc* rather than institutionalised mechanisms for generating change or securing continuity. As a consequence, while Ahmad Shah succeeded in creating a central authority and an identifiable entity of 'Afghanistan', this was not the same as constructing a strong state based on the institutionalisation rather than personalisation of politics and horizontal integration rather than vertical federalisation of the microsocieties within a legal-rational framework. In other words, the kind of system of governance and political entity that he generated centred very much upon the existence of a charismatic, skilled leader like Ahmad Shah himself, and lacked the capacity to be institutionally self-generating and self-propelling in the absence of such a leader.

This meant that, at his death, Ahmad Shah's confederation lost its nerve centre, confronting it with a serious power vacuum. Ahmad Shah's successor, one of his older sons, Timur Shah, who was Governor of Herat in the later years of his father's rule, tried to fill the vacuum by largely continuing the policies that he inherited. He initially appeared successful in holding the Durrani Empire together to a considerable extent. However, he did not have the same leadership attributes as his father, which presented him with mounting difficulties in sustaining as firm a hold as his father on the levers of tribal authority and relationships. His rule was soon beset by challenges from within his own sub-clan, and revolts from other tribes and ethnic groups, particularly the Ghilzais, Khorasanis and Sistanis, forcing him to transfer the capital from Kandahar to Kabul during 1775–1776. Although he overcame most of the challenges and revolts, and concluded a treaty with the Emirate of Bukhara strengthening his authority south of the Oxus or Amu River, destabilising actions stemming largely from inter- and intra-tribal and ethnic rivalries continued to undermine his rule, especially from 1780 until his death in 1793.²⁷ This destabilisation increased under the rule of his son, Shah Zaman (1793–1800), despite his success in maintaining the Afghan Empire within more or less the same boundaries as he had inherited.

The second factor stemmed from the practice of unlimited polygamy within the ruling family. A deeply entrenched tradition in the Islamic world, the practice was based on a ruling in the Qur'an that a man is allowed a maximum of four wives and an unspecified number of what may be termed 'concubines' from among the women who are left 'unprotected' and need 'guardians'.²⁸ The practice had become widespread in the historically patriarchal Afghanistan²⁹ since the country's conversion to Islam in the eighth

century. Before the reformist, monogamous King Amanullah (1919–1928) issued a decree against ‘concubinage’, limiting polygamy to only four lawful wives, the Qur’anic injunction had been abused among Afghans, especially by men of power and influence.³⁰ Rulers from Ahmad Shah to Amanullah’s father, Amir Habibullah, as well as nobles, had allowed themselves to take into morganatic marriage, in addition to four wives, any woman whom the Afghans called *surati* or, more correctly, *suryati* (‘bed-wife’).

They entered into this type of marriage for a variety of reasons. Some of the more important ones related to the man’s desire to have blood relations with another clan, tribe or ethnic group for the purpose of alliance or counter-alliance, or to secure a male heir or to obtain extra loved ones.³¹ The position of the concubine, however, was essentially as legalised as that of the wife. Her children were neither illegitimate nor (particularly in the case of sons) automatically barred from inheriting the title, status and wealth of their father, although the extent to which this was enforced depended on the mother’s shrewdness and the degree of influence that she carried with her husband in particular, and within the royal or clan power structure in general. The continuous pressure from the wife’s tribe was also a factor to be counted.³² The only thing differentiating a concubine’s male offspring from a wife’s son was that the latter, especially if he was from his father’s first or favourite wife, conventionally took precedence over the former.³³

Such polygamy, in the case of rulers and nobles, produced numerous brothers and half-brothers as well as power-brokers within and outside the royal family, with competing claims to the throne and other power positions.³⁴ This provided a perpetual and self-generating source of political and social tensions, conflicts and power struggles within successive ruling families and their supporting nobilities, which proved to have a lasting and devastating impact on the development of Afghan politics. Although Ahmad Shah prevented rivalry between his sons by promoting Timur Shah, from his first wife, as heir apparent, the same could not be said about the latter. While leaving behind many sons³⁵ who were full and half-brothers, most of them capable of claiming a right to the throne, Timur Shah failed to designate any one of them as his heir. In the absence of a clear leadership succession procedure, the assumption of the throne by Zaman Shah, Timur Shah’s fifth son by his favourite wife, who belonged to the East Pashtun tribe of Yusufzai,³⁶ with the help of a leading Barakzai figure of Kandahar, Payenda Mohammad Khan, set in motion a sequence of power struggles between him and his brothers that caused not only a series of turbulent royal successions among them, but also plunged Afghanistan into a long period of intra-ruling family and intra-tribal conflict which led to the ultimate demise of the Sadozai dynasty.

The third factor undermining political stability was the European powers' rivalry over Afghanistan. Germinated in the last years of the eighteenth century as part of the Anglo-French confrontation within the wider framework of the Napoleonic wars,³⁷ it gave way to Anglo-Russian competition by the 1830s. Even then geostrategic factors remained relatively marginal to the fortunes of Afghanistan. The country had first and foremost to face internal dissent. Fragmentation of power and civil wars ravaged Afghanistan almost incessantly between 1801 and 1834; the main external threats in this period came not from Russia and England, but from Afghanistan's immediate neighbours.

Major Power Rivalry

Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, all the world powers' designs over Afghanistan were fuelled by paranoid considerations of 'security' without much substance behind them, as the country was still too remote from existing spheres of influence.³⁸ The rivalry with regard to Central Asia took off in earnest following the Crimean War of 1853–1856. Russia's Committee of Ministers, during its two sessions in November and December 1857, for the first time spelled out the importance of a policy of influence towards Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand, but did not mention Afghanistan.³⁹ The dogfight over that country between Russia and Britain made little sense until the age of mature imperialism, from the 1870s to 1890s. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the British were still preoccupied with the piecemeal subjugation of India, and Russia had just begun feeling its way through the steppes of Central Asia. Hundreds of miles still separated the two expanding empires. The spirit of rivalry and periodic outbursts of bellicose public opinion in the metropolises on the issue of Afghanistan were the result of misperception and general lack of information on both sides.⁴⁰

Tsarist Russia's concerted drive southwards, launched in the mid 1860s, was justified by several sets of arguments, typical for any colonial power at the time: (1) geographical, that is, Russia must have safe borders preferably delineated by the ocean; (2) *Kulturträger*, or the civilising mission of the 'White Man';⁴¹ and (3) economic – opening new markets for Russia's exports. Additionally, the Tsarist administration sought to counter rival colonial activities around its imperial domain.⁴² As the British colonisation of the Indian subcontinent gained momentum and the British became assertive in protecting their new colonial outlay on a region-wide basis, and as the Russians sought safeguards partly against this development and partly in pursuit of their own ambitions, the growth of a serious Anglo-Russian rivalry in the region became inevitable.

In the meantime, the once powerful Durrani Empire lay in ruins. In 1818, it disintegrated into three major principedoms – Kabul, Kandahar and Herat – plus scores of lesser principalities. The Persians, under their new and assertive Qajar dynasty, were trying to remove Afghan control over part of Persia and Herat. The Sikhs, under their charismatic leader Ranjit Singh, threw off Afghan domination in the wake of the Battle of Nowshera in 1823, rapidly expanding influence in the traditional Afghan lands. In the evolving Anglo-Russian competition, the British supported the Sikhs, and the Russians encouraged and assisted the Persians to move against the Afghans as part of wider competition between the two imperial powers, placing Afghanistan in the midst of intense pressures from powers around it. This helped set in motion processes which eventually led Russia and Britain to regard Afghanistan as strategically vital in their confrontation. Whereas the British came to see the country as a defence line for their colonial interests, to the Russians it was considered a gate to British interests beyond Turkestan. The Anglo-Russian competition for political control of Central Asia, which before the end of the nineteenth century evolved incrementally into what Rudyard Kipling called the ‘Great Game’ between the two imperial powers,⁴³ developed three salient features.

First it unleashed an extraordinary chain of actions and reactions, unparalleled in modern history, aimed at the securing of regional domination. On the one hand, it prompted the British to manipulate the Afghans as a resisting force against possible Russian ambitions in the direction of the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf. On the other, it motivated the Russians to become more assertive in their desire, first of all, to tighten their influence in the Central Asian territories lying between Russia proper and Afghanistan. This in turn increased British determination to do whatever possible to prevent the Russians from expanding *beyond* the Amu River and threatening British colonial interests. To this end, the British eventually developed what became known as the ‘forward defence policy’,⁴⁴ which was religiously advocated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Lord George Curzon, the most resolute defender of British colonial power. To Curzon, Afghanistan, along with Persia, Transcaspia and Turkestan, had grown to be ‘the pieces on a chessboard upon which... [was] being played out a game for the domination of the world’⁴⁵ – a game which survived the Bolshevik Revolution and continued even to influence Anglo-Soviet relations until the end of the Second World War.

Another salient feature was that neither Britain nor Russia thought it beneficial to colonise Afghanistan. This was for two reasons. First, total subjugation of the country by either side would have placed the two powers

on a course of full military confrontation, which neither side seemed to wish to risk. Second, Afghanistan then had none of the *immediately exploitable* economic and mineral resources that might have made it sufficiently attractive to make colonisation worthwhile.

Third, the relative independence of central control and warlike nature of the tribes made conditions highly unfavourable to foreign invaders. In both the first and second Anglo-Afghan Wars, the British lost only one of the set-piece battles, but the writ of their puppet amir ran only, and even then not always, where their troops were, and they could occupy only main centres such as Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar. During each war, a British general election, in August 1841 and April 1880 respectively, resulted in replacement of a pro-‘forward policy’ government by one opposed to it. The new governments, of Robert Peel in 1841 and William Gladstone in 1880, each dismissed the Governor-General/Viceroy who had ordered invasion, and after achieving some face-saving victories, the Anglo-Indian forces returned to India.

These experiences eventually convinced both British and Russians that it was in their interests to transform the country into an effective ‘buffer’ zone, separating Russian imperial domain from British colonial possessions.⁴⁶ However, the only way the rival powers could enforce a buffer status on Afghanistan was for each one of them to make sure that it had sufficient influence in the country to pre-empt any moves by the other. This predictably led to their quest for individual spheres of influence in Afghanistan, with the British attempting to be dominant in the region south of the Hindu Kush range, which bisects Afghanistan in the middle from east to west, and the Russians trying to maintain influence in the region north of the range. At the same time, both sides endeavoured either to have a friendly government in Kabul or to check the power of the Kabul government by allying themselves with regional and tribal leaders in what they regarded as their respective zones of influence.⁴⁷ Needless to say, for the absolute majority of Afghans, regardless of their identification with a particular ethnic group, both the British and the Russians were first and foremost *kafirs* (unbelievers) against whom *jihād* (holy war) ought to be waged.

These factors of structural state fragility, polygamic animosities and major power rivalry interacted to the lasting detriment of the Afghan macrosociety. They precipitately created the type of internal conditions and external pressures that rapidly undid Ahmad Shah’s confederation and plunged Afghanistan into a chronic state of disorder and violent conflicts which lasted intermittently for most of the nineteenth century. As in-fighting rooted in polygamy broke out among Timur Shah’s numerous sons, particularly after Zaman Shah’s rule, Afghans lost their confederative unity. They

fractionalised once again into hostile microsocieties along the lines of their long-standing ethno-tribal, linguistic and sectarian divisions. These groups proclaimed individual autonomous or semi-autonomous territories in conjunction with the neighbouring countries. As a result, at times the domain of an Afghan ruler became confined either to Kabul or another major city, giving rise to city-state rule in the country.⁴⁸

This was followed by a steady but forceful British campaign to limit and manipulate Afghan rulers. It had two objectives: to expand the security perimeter of their Indian colony and eventually confine Afghans within as limited a territorial base as possible; and to secure a foundation for *long-term* anti-Russian influence in the country. The British sought to achieve this by forging alliances and counter-alliances with competing southern tribes, their leading figures and various full and half ruling Durrani brothers and throne aspirants; and by acting as 'kingmaker' among them.⁴⁹

Despite two major British military thrusts into Kabul, resulting in the famous Anglo-Afghan wars of 1838–1842 and 1878–1880, which both ended with British withdrawal, by late in the century the British had succeeded in fixing Afghanistan, by and large, within its present eastern and southern boundaries. To legitimise their actions, they forced several treaties and agreements upon weak and dependent Afghan rulers. Perhaps most damaging of all were two: the infamous Treaty of Gandamak, signed in 1879, under which British India gained practical control over Afghan fiscal, defence and foreign policies; and the demarcation of the 'Durand Line', concluded in 1893. The Durand Line, drawn by a British Commission and named after its head, the British Indian Foreign Secretary, Sir Mortimer Durand, was the line arbitrarily determining Afghanistan's present eastern and southern frontiers and it demarcated British and Afghan responsibilities in the Pashtun area. Since it ran through and split several Afghan Pashtun tribes, the Durand Line was rejected by most Afghans then and became the basis for what subsequently developed as a thorny border dispute between Afghanistan and British India and, after 1947, Pakistan.⁵⁰

In the face of such British hegemonic activities, Tsarist Russia, whose own creeping ambitions were partly responsible for them, did not sit idle. It pursued a concurrent campaign of its own, not only to maximise its influence in Persia and pressure Ottoman Turkey, both of which had also become the subject of British designs, but also to strengthen its position from the north in the direction of Afghanistan as part of wider regional bargaining.⁵¹ At a time when the Afghans were overwhelmed by domestic crises and British interventions, the Russians moved without much hindrance to nibble away virtually all of Central Asia between the 1830s and 1870s, thus extending

the Russian borders effectively to the north of the Amu River.⁵² The Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1873 reflected the changed strategic situation in the region: the two colonial powers had come to a direct contact and decided to settle their differences peacefully. British statesmen 'were willing to accept that Russian moves in Asia were guided by a legitimate desire to extend their commerce and to maintain the security of the Russian frontier',⁵³ whereas Russia explicitly stated that 'Afghanistan lay outside its zone of interest'.⁵⁴

In the late nineteenth century, St. Petersburg found it appropriate to strengthen further its position by determining and securing its borders with Afghanistan. Russian troops took Panjdeh in 1885 after overcoming gallant resistance by the Afghan forces. In the east, they forced the Afghans to evacuate the principalities of Shughnan and Roshan in the Pamirs in 1894 after a ten-year occupation.⁵⁵ While raising the spectre of a war with the Afghans and the British, this development nonetheless prompted the appointment of a conciliatory Anglo-Russian Commission to defuse the problem. Following much bargaining, the Commission found it expedient to relinquish the Panjdeh Oasis to Russia and determine Afghanistan's northern boundary largely along its present lines.⁵⁶ Although the matter was thus settled for the time being, Russian designs did not cease in northern Afghanistan, where the Uzbek, Turkmen and Kirghiz ethnic groups shared a common ethnicity, language and religion with Russian-controlled Central Asian peoples north of the Amu River. Nor was the dispute over the Amu River itself resolved – a dispute which lasted until 1941 when finally on the basis of an Afghan-Soviet agreement the *thalmeg* of the river was declared as the official border between the two countries. The brief Russian thrusts of the 1880s into Afghan territory were to be followed by two more: the limited and abortive Soviet intervention of 1929 and the massive Soviet invasion of late 1979.

The vicious cycles that the mutually aided domestic disorder and foreign interference and intervention produced fatally set back the Afghans from building and maintaining a national consensus. It is true that at times, despite all the odds, tribal Pashtuns exhibited considerable cohesion and resilience as a people in meeting foreign challenges, as they did successfully in the case of the two major British military expeditions.⁵⁷ But this was more on the basis of a unity generated by their common Islamic faith and tribal patriotism than anything else, and even then only in the face of a direct foreign intervention. Otherwise, for most of the nineteenth century, there was no national leader and modern governmental system or process of national integration and social-economic reform in the country. The Afghans existed very much within the bounds of their traditional microsocieties and sub-

components of such societies, each revolving around a tribal, ethnic or religious leader or a local hero. These leaders functioned under various titles, ranging from Khan to Sardar to Mir and Pir, and entered all sorts of alliances and counter-alliances, some of which were forged at the behest of foreign powers, especially Britain, in order to ensure their survival. Leaving the small polycentric nobility aside, the bulk of the population led an austere, harsh and agriculture-based existence within confined geographical localities, and remained by and large not only separated from one another, but also detached from the nobility. There was neither an active entrepreneurial group nor an effective intelligentsia, whose activities could permeate the microsocieties on a nationwide basis. The authority of many Afghan rulers rested largely on the support of one or several factions of the divided nobility, one or more of the local leaders and heroes, on outside, mainly British, backing, or on some combination of these forces.⁵⁸ Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, arguably the most knowledgeable British expert on things Afghan of his age, wrote in 1874:

Afghanistan never has had, and never can have, the cohesion and consistency of a regular monarchical government. The nation consists of a mere collection of tribes, of unequal power and with divergent habits, which are held together, more or less closely, according to the personal character of the chief who rules them. The feeling of patriotism, as known in Europe, cannot exist among the Afghans, for there is no common country... There is no natural or ethnical reason why Herat and Candahar should be attached to Cabul. Herat is inhabited by races entirely alien to the Afghans, by Jamshidis, Eymaks, and Hazarehs; while at Candahar, though the lands were parcelled out by Nadir Shah [Afshar] in the middle of the last century among the Durrani aristocracy, and their descendants still exist as a privileged class, the peasantry are everywhere of Persian, or Tajik, or Turkish descent, and have no community of feeling with the northern and eastern Afghans.⁵⁹

From the reign of Zaman Shah's successor, his brother Shah Mahmud, in 1800 to Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's assumption of the throne in 1880, seven figures proclaimed their sovereignty over Afghanistan. Of these rulers, who held the throne on average for a period of seven years each, four of them assumed the throne twice. They were Shah Mahmud (1800–1803 and 1809–1818), Shah Shuja (1803–1809 and 1839–1842), Amir Dost Mohammad Khan (1826–1839 and 1843–1863) and Amir Sher Ali Khan (1863–1866 and 1868–1879). While Shah Shuja ruled both times completely at the behest of the British, the last two, whose reigns were the longest among all rulers, pursued policies towards the British that could be characterised as both

accommodationist and mildly confrontationalist. Sher Ali Khan at times even became receptive to Russian overtures against the British. Of the two, nonetheless, Amir Dost Mohammad Khan's rise to power marked a turning point in the Durrani rule.

Dost Mohammad Khan's Rule

In contrast to his predecessors, Dost Mohammad was a Barakzai Durrani. His father, Sardar Payenda Khan, was a notable Barakzai Kandahari who had served as a powerful official in the courts of Sadozais; and his mother was a Qizilbash Shi'ite concubine from Kabul. Although he was Payenda Khan's youngest son, because of his mother's influence he was favoured by his father more than any of his brothers. While two of his half-brothers, Rahmdel Khan and Sultan Mohammad Khan, headed powerful families in Kandahar and Peshawar respectively, Dost Mohammad Khan had become, in the company of his father, active in the Kabul political arena. When his father was assassinated by Sadozais in 1818 and a power struggle broke out between the latter and the Barakzais, resulting in a savage civil war, Dost Mohammad Khan succeeded in wresting the throne from the Sadozais. He thereby inaugurated the rule of Barakzai Durrans, in particular their Mohammadzai clan, named after his ancestral figure, Mohammad.

Dost Mohammad Khan in 1836 adopted the title of 'Amir al-Momineen' (Commander of the Faithful) – a title derived from the Islamic institution of Khalifate – to emphasise the predominantly Sunni character of Afghanistan. He urgently wanted to achieve the unity of Afghans. In pursuing this end, he initially appeared quite successful, partly because he adopted a policy of *modus vivendi* towards the British, whom he regarded as the ultimate power capable of determining the course of events in Afghanistan. However, he was soon faced with treachery and intrigues from his half-brothers who operated from their own autonomous centres of power in Kandahar and Peshawar; a serious challenge from one of Timur Shah's sons, Shah Shuja, who had earlier ruled from 1803 to 1809, and was backed by the British as most amenable to their interests; and related and independent tribal revolts. Amid all this, the Persians, with Russia's encouragement, challenged the Afghan control of Khorasan and laid siege to Herat, while the Sikhs, then allies of the British, overran many of the eastern parts of the Durrani Empire and exerted pressure towards the north-west beyond Peshawar. With this also came the gradual imposition of British hegemony over the Sikhs⁶⁰ and subsequent dominance over former Durrani territory as far as Quetta and Peshawar.⁶¹ The British refusal to assist Dost Mohammad in recovering Peshawar from the Sikhs led him to receive a Russian officer in Kabul. The

British thereupon invaded in 1839, replacing Dost Mohammad with their client, Shah Shuja, and thus igniting the first Anglo–Afghan war. This foreign challenge provided a focus for the Afghans to unite, and their determined resistance was aided by three external factors to bring about British withdrawal.

The first was the ignominious failure of the first Russian expedition against the Khanate of Khiva in 1840. It reduced the British perception of a Russian threat to India and hence of Afghanistan's strategic importance for the time being. The second was that after Dost Mohammad's surrender in November 1840, his British captors gradually came to realise that deposing him had been a colossal error. The third was the change of government resulting from the British general election of August 1841. These factors combined to enable Amir Dost Mohammad Khan to regain the throne in 1842 and rule for another 20 years. The British intervention alarmed the Russians, prompting them to intensify their own hegemonic moves in Central Asia in the direction of Afghanistan.⁶² This development in turn caused the British to revive their 'forward defence policy' during the 1870s, with the aim of gaining a durable foothold of influence in Afghanistan.

The second lengthy period of Amir Dost Mohammad Khan's reign saw a semblance of stability and the relative strengthening of central authority. However, this consolidation was a temporary phenomenon, not rooted in a genuine consociational pact amongst Afghanistan's microsocieties. The ruling elite remained exclusionist and continued to be dominated by the immediate family of the monarch and a handful of Durrani chieftains. Ethnic inequality, favouring Pashtuns over other ethnic groups, persisted. The tax base of the state was extremely limited, since most Pashtun tribes were exempt from contributing anything to the royal treasury. Dost Mohammad Khan succeeded in bringing together most territories which had formed the Durrani Empire in the mid eighteenth century, with the exception of Peshawar and other Pashtun lands on the right bank of the Indus. He held them together by force; it is impossible to talk about a solid authoritative national government for that time: 'The organisation of the Amir's government mirrored, and formed an extension of, the existing relationship of power which had become entrenched during the Sadozai period... Because of the chronic lack of funds the Amir's administration resembled a series of makeshift arrangements, constantly putting his negotiating skills and claims of leadership to test.'⁶³ Not surprisingly, the period of relative stability in Afghanistan was once more seriously disrupted with Dost Mohammad's death in 1863.

Although Amir Dost Mohammad Khan had designated one of his younger sons, Sher Ali Khan, as his successor, the inherent problems of polygamic life once again prevailed.⁶⁴ Sher Ali's rule was immediately challenged by

his two older half-brothers, Mohammad Afzal and Mohammad Azam. In the ensuing power struggle Mohammad Afzal seized the throne and ruled from 1866 until his death in 1867, when he was succeeded by his brother Azam for one year before Sher Ali regained the throne in 1868.

Sher Ali Khan's Rule

During his second period of rule, Sher Ali, who assumed his father's title of Amir, proved more perceptive and innovative than any of his predecessors. He set out with vigour and zeal to create a professional army and organise a strong and effective central government based on what his father had left behind, somewhat along the lines of the modern meaning of the term; and to pursue such domestic and foreign policy steps as could both strengthen his authority and keep at bay the Anglo-Russian rivalry. His achievements were most notable in the following areas.

To a degree he revived the late Ahmad Shah's multiethnic accommodationist approach to government in an attempt to broaden his power base and create national cohesion. To this end, he not only set up a Council of Elders to advise him on state affairs, but also included people from diverse ethnic backgrounds in his administrative services. The Ghilzai tribesmen were particular beneficiaries from this policy change. He initiated a number of reformist measures, which at least on a modest scale provided some important bases for his successors in their efforts to achieve greater national unity and to modernise Afghanistan. They included the creation of a national army and a military school, which received students from different tribes and ethnic groups to be trained as an officer corps; the institution of a system for collecting land revenues in cash; a postal service; and the publication of a periodical, *Shams ul-Nahar* ('Morning Sun'). The latter came out irregularly and was different from the newspapers that had already begun to appear in Iran and Turkey: it served mainly as a forum for the government's policy announcements and views.⁶⁵ Furthermore, although favourably disposed towards Britain, he tried to avoid antagonising the Russians and played on Anglo-Russian rivalry to pursue what could be called a policy of 'mild neutrality' in his foreign relations.

Practically all Sher Ali's major innovations affected only Kabul and territories immediately adjacent to the capital city where he could project his power. Despite his vision and craving for reforms, the Amir remained hostage of traditional forces present in the country. He ultimately could not save his rule from the dangers inherent in the deep-rooted polygamic politics of the ruling family and Anglo-Russian rivalry. His decision to designate as successor his youngest son, Abdullah Jan, born from a favourite Kandahari

wife but who died before the succession time, alienated his older sons, especially Mohammad Yaqub Khan and Mohammad Ayub Khan. Yaqub Khan revolted against his father's decision and was imprisoned. These rivalries among the royals, together with the tribal uprisings that they ignited, markedly hampered Amir Sher Ali Khan's efforts at reform.⁶⁶

Sher Ali's conciliatory *realpolitik* attitude towards Russia, which was manifested in the conclusion of a defensive alliance between the two sides,⁶⁷ could not please the British, particularly at a time when the Russians had deftly reached the territory north of the Amu River and were in search of greater influence in Persia and Ottoman Turkey. This, combined with the decision of the hardline Benjamin Disraeli, who became Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1874, to make Britain more assertive against perceived 'Russian expansionism',⁶⁸ stirred the British to give practical expression to their 'forward defence policy'. When the British once again invaded Afghanistan in November 1878, external factors then again became dominant. Russia's successful war against Turkey in 1877–1878 appeared likely to give it access to the Mediterranean, astride Britain's west–east imperial line of communication. At the congress of Berlin in mid 1878, Disraeli succeeded in depriving Russia of most of its gains. The governor of Russian Turkestan, General Kaufman, meanwhile, assembled 30,000 troops, intending to invade India via Afghanistan in the event of war, and sent an envoy to Sher Ali, whom he convinced that Russia would come to his aid if the British invaded. When the British came, Sher Ali fled to the Russian border, intending to go to ask the Tsar personally for help. Had he done so, Kaufman would have faced at least dismissal for risking taking Russia to war with the British Empire, so Kaufman refused him entry. Sher Ali died in February 1879, and Yaqub Khan succeeded to the throne. To keep it, he signed the degrading Treaty of Gandamak in May, and a British residency was established in Kabul in July, whereupon the troops returned to India. In September the residency was sacked and its inhabitants massacred. A punitive force arrived in Kabul in October and inflicted a crushing defeat on tribal forces in December.

Ayub Khan also opposed Abdullah Jan's nomination as heir, but took a different path to his brother by fighting the British in the second Anglo–Afghan war. He emerged as a hero of the war, but was heavily defeated in August 1880. After the British left, Ayub seized Kandahar again, but was then defeated by Abdur Rahman's troops, and fled first to Persia, then to British India.

When the British punitive force arrived in Kabul in October 1879, Yaqub Khan was forced to abdicate. Britain's General Frederick Roberts took power in Kabul, hanged about 100 Afghans, including the mayor, for their part in

the massacre at the residency, smashed and dispersed tribal forces that attacked in December, then in July 1880 marched his force to Kandahar and heavily defeated Ayub Khan.

Abdur Rahman Khan's Rule

By then, the emergence of another Afghan ruler, who was to have an unprecedented impact on the course of Afghanistan's state-building, had provided the British with the necessary opportunity for a face-saving withdrawal.⁶⁹ This was Sardar Abdur Rahman Khan, son of Mohammad Afzal Khan and grandson of Dost Mohammad, who had lived in exile in Samarkand and Tashkent for 12 years after his defeat by Sher Ali (half-brother and arch-rival of his deceased father) in 1868. In February 1880, General Kaufman, believing him to be pro-Russian and expecting him at least to make trouble for the British, facilitated his return to Afghanistan.

He quickly marshalled the support of Afghanistan's northern Khans and Begs (Uzbek and Turkmen leaders) and marched to Kabul. In the absence of any other strong leader, the British found it advisable to support his claim to the throne. This was less of a gamble than it appeared. Abdur Rahman had seen Kaufman's incitement followed by betrayal of Sher Ali; 'the British, however, reasoned that [he], like the Afghan amirs before him would be neither pro-Russian nor pro-British, but militantly pro-Afghan.'⁷⁰ Following their experience with Dost Mohammad, they found him acceptable, provided he endorsed the most important point of the Treaty of Gandamak, namely that Afghanistan have no relationship with any other country except Great Britain. He agreed to this, became Amir, and the British left.

As it turned out, the British were not wrong in their reasoning. Abdur Rahman proved not only an Afghan nationalist, with a special distaste for the Russians, but also a man of great discipline, political will and foresight, capable of establishing absolute rule and solidifying Afghanistan within the structure of a modern nation-state. He identified the ethno-tribal heterogeneity of Afghans and the Anglo-Russian rivalry as major sources of Afghanistan's problems, and immediately sought refuge in Islam as the common chord among the majority of Afghans to consolidate his rule, centralise power and create national unity. He declared himself the Muslim ruler of all Afghan people and claimed divine sanction for his rule, thus becoming the first Afghan ruler strongly to invoke something akin to the divine right of kings as a source of political legitimacy.

He described his mission as to work for 'the welfare of the nation and... be devoted to the progress of [the Afghan people]... for the welfare and true faith of the Holy Prophet Mohammad'.⁷¹ While assuming the position of

champion of Islam and liberator of the Afghan lands, he attacked both internal divisions and foreign interventions. He accused local chieftains and landlords as well as religious leaders of using the people for their own individual purposes contrary to the true religious teachings and to the cause of national unity. He also scorned foreign powers as 'infidels' and aggressors, who constantly violated the faith, integrity and territory of the Afghan people.⁷² However, he combined all this with extensive use of brutal force as the main instrument to achieve his objectives. He spared nothing in attempting to force his subjects' obedience, to break up the local centres of power, to eliminate most of his potential and actual opposition and to foster a patriotic xenophobia among the people vis-à-vis Anglo-Russian encroachments. Meanwhile, he played on the salient dynamics of the Anglo-Russian rivalry to obtain considerable financial aid and arms from the British under various old and new agreements, and to keep the Russians at bay. In his efforts at state-building, his achievements were unprecedentedly substantial in three areas.

First, he built a very disciplined and capable army, and engaged in a process of what subsequently became known as 'internal imperialism'.⁷³ As part of this process, he rapidly expanded his control beyond Kabul by conquering most of the areas in the country that were either insubordinate or independent and out of reach of the central government, including 'Kafiristan' (the land of infidels) which he converted to Islam and named 'Nooristan' (the land of light); and by smashing the power of local leaders, and bringing the religious establishment under his guidance and authority.⁷⁴ Gradually drawing on the loyalty of his mostly Pashtun and some non-Pashtun followers, who were discreetly placed in important military and administrative positions, he physically liquidated thousands of his opponents; and brutally banished and suppressed many more, whom he perceived as potentially troublesome. For example, he resettled a substantial number of southern Ghilzai families in the areas north of the Hindu Kush and repressed the Hazaras in order to gain full control over them in the central highlands of Afghanistan.⁷⁵

Second, he initiated a number of substantive political, administrative, legal, economic and social reforms. Undoubtedly these reforms were limited in scope, and were in accordance with the Amir's perceived political needs and the resources available to him. Nonetheless, they did lay the basis for the institution of identifiable governmental, administrative and Islamic-legal systems.⁷⁶ Furthermore, they resulted in the introduction of some essential means of communications, light industry and commerce and in the strengthening of mechanisms for tax collection as well as of certain preliminary welfare services, health and education in particular. He employed some British technicians and experts to assist in establishing small industrial

projects, medical and educational nuclei and a printing firm. His most important industrial show project was a small-arms factory, known as *masheen khana*, which he built in Kabul.⁷⁷

Third, he concurrently managed to exhibit a great deal of caution and aloofness in his foreign relations and to assure both the British and the Russians that a strong central government under his leadership would be in the interest of both powers, as it would prevent either from using Afghanistan against the other. Despite his acceptance of British control of Afghan foreign relations under the revised Treaty of Gandamak, and his personal preference for the British, he trod a cautious tightrope with the Russians. While highly distrustful of Russians because of his direct experience of their advances into Central Asia during his long stay in the area and their subsequent thrust into Shughnan and Panjdeh, he was eager not to antagonise them. This partly explained his decision to give in, though very reluctantly, to the Anglo-Russian pressure and allow them to fix Afghanistan largely within its present borders.⁷⁸

However, on the whole, as is evident from his autobiography – he was the first and last Afghan ruler to compile (or at least order) such a work – he neither felt easy about the Russian takeover of Panjdeh as a price for the Anglo-Russian Commission to demarcate the Afghan-Russian border, nor ever accepted the Durand Line as more than a line delineating the Afghan and British responsibilities in the Pashtun tribal areas. He contended that the line could not constitute a permanent border between Afghanistan and British India.⁷⁹ At the same time, he was convinced that many of Afghanistan's problems with the British could not be solved through dealings with the government of British India, but only through direct relations with London. However, he could not make London accept this conviction. The best he could ultimately achieve was to keep his government as distant as possible from the Russians and as restrained towards British India as permissible, for he saw this as a minimum requirement for ensuring the survival of his rule and of Afghanistan at least as a semi-independent state. Consequently, he even refused to boost his modernisation efforts by inviting either of the powers to help Afghanistan in exploiting its natural resources and participate in developing its economic infrastructure, even though British India was keen to extend its railway from Qalat and Quetta into Afghanistan.⁸⁰

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's rule was brutal and absolute, based primarily on coercion and backed by an elaborate spy network, which earned him the title of 'Iron Amir'.⁸¹ Similarly, his reforms were largely *ad hoc*, confined mainly to Kabul, and did not constitute a countrywide programme for change and development. And his foreign policy efforts could not counter the Anglo-Russian rivalry, in particular the creeping British advances, sufficiently to

enable him to achieve full sovereignty for Afghanistan in its domestic and foreign affairs. This still cannot deny the fact that he contributed more than any one but Ahmad Shah Durrani to the development and consolidation of the Afghan state. By the time of his death, the Iron Amir had 'created an Afghanistan that had recognised international boundaries, was politically unified, and governed directly by a centralised authority, within the framework of fairly well-defined and universally applied administrative and judiciary rules and regulations'.⁸² Ahmad Shah created the fundamentals for the modern evolution of Afghanistan as a political unit. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan took serious steps towards building the first modern state in that country. But how and at what price? A modicum of 'national cohesion' was maintained by instituting a single group (Pashtuns) as an overlord vis-à-vis all others, and not only in the political and military aspects; such issues as the sense of ethnic superiority amongst Pashtuns (promoted, *inter alia*, through marital praxis) and economic oppression⁸³ were great obstacles on the road to genuine national consolidation of Afghanistan, yet they formed the backbone of every Afghan monarch's policy, Abdur Rahman's in particular.

The problem of territories to the north of the Hindu Kush has been carefully avoided by Pashtun and western authors.⁸⁴ The Uzbek khanates of Balkh, Sheberghan, Andkhai, Qunduz, Maimana, Khulm and other smaller principalities had very little to do with Durrani monarchs. If anything, they were linked to the territories on the right bank of the Amu Darya, where rulers were of the same Chingizid stock. Ahmad Shah conquered Uzbek principalities between 1750 and 1752, but by 1756 they had already rebelled, and under Timur Shah they regained complete independence. Dost Mohammad and the ruler of Qunduz exchanged embassies, being peers, until the former launched a treacherous attack in the mid 1850s. The final showdown occurred under Abdur Rahman:

The military occupation of Uzbek-populated lands of today's Afghanistan by the Afghan troops, the atrocities committed by the conquerors, led not only to passive resistance of the local population (not just Uzbeks, but also Turkmens and Tajiks) which resulted in mass migration to the northern, right bank of the Amu-Darya, but also to numerous attempts at rebellions whose aim was to get rid of the enslavers' yoke through armed struggle.⁸⁵

Abdur Rahman practised methods just short of genocide. In the course of pacification of Kafiristan, 10,000 were killed and 16,000 forcibly resettled throughout the country, reducing the local population by half.⁸⁶ To make way for Taraki Pashtun settlers in Bamiyan, the indigenous Hazara population

was deported – ‘so thorough was this “ethnic cleansing” that not even the dogs remained behind’.⁸⁷ The *Powinda* allies of the Amir were encouraged to seize lands and pastures of the Hazaras, dooming the latter to poverty and starvation.⁸⁸ Thanks to Abdur Rahman, the anti-Pashtun elements in the historic memory of the indigenous population of Afghan Turkestan were greatly reinforced.⁸⁹

Despite its narrow popular base, the Afghan monarchy managed to survive and consolidate its gains. The only reason for that was, of course, the Great Game. While the British were annexing traditional Pashtun territories in the south, they were pushing the Amirs to pursue an expansionist policy in the north to deter the Russians. Abdur Rahman’s victorious campaigns in Turkestan were blessed, financed and equipped by the government of British India. When local resistance leaders (for example, Ishaq Khan in 1888) approached Russia and Bukhara for help, they were invariably denied on the basis of the 1873 Anglo-Russian agreement.⁹⁰

Abdur Rahman died of natural causes in 1901; but despite his having taken several wives, his death did not bring as turbulent a leadership succession crisis as the deaths of his predecessors had caused. He had established sufficient governmental structure and mechanisms of control to enable his heir and elder son, Habibullah Khan, though born of a Samarkandi concubine mother, to succeed him with relative ease and rule for the next 18 years. Generally, unqualified glorification of Abdur Rahman is hardly warranted. True, he was an outstanding personality, but he was a ruthless ruler, and it was only by terror that he managed to keep such a heterogeneous and conflict-ridden entity as Afghanistan together. Repression, isolation and reliance on financial assistance from abroad at the cost of sovereignty were his trademarks, not comprehensive modernisation and nation-building. The legacy of Abdur Rahman was an ethnically polarised Afghanistan. When it comes to the introduction of modernity to the Afghan society, Habibullah Khan was a much more successful, yet underrated, figure.