TRIBAL AREAS AND THE IMPERIAL DEFENCE OF INDIA: A ‘BUFFER TO A BUFFER’ ON THE NORTH WEST FRONTIER OF BRITISH INDIA

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The word ‘frontier’ is a synonym for the word ‘quarrel. (Viceroy Lord Lytton)

Introduction

Tribal Areas located on the North West Frontier region (presently Khyber Pakhtunkhawa) is one of the most legendary and famous places on the world map which during the course of its history have seen a great deal of chaos, duplicity, deed, heroism, savagery, affection, fortitude and sacrifice. Tribal Areas due to its geographical location played an important role throughout the known history of sub-continent.

When the British annexed Punjab in 1849 it brought to them for the first time into direct contact with the Pakhtun tribes occupying and living the mountainous tract of the Trans-Indus region which mark the physical boundary between British India and Afghanistan. This particular area was one of the most ungovernable and hazardous among the British Empire’s many frontiers spread across the world.

The North-West Frontier of India was closely interwoven with the imperial defence of India: “the brightest jewel in the British crown” from any threat coming from the direction of North West Frontier. For the British, Tribal Areas was a strategic zone, a no man land, and served as a first line of defence for the protection of India. Various means and methods were adopted by the British to conciliate or force the tribes under their control.

In order to control and sway on the warlike tribes, the British devised a three-way strategy; i.e. inducement, pressure and armed intervention. On the other hand it is important to be aware of the fact that the topography and history of the region which is reflected in the Pakhtuns’ unique culture, and value system played a crucial role in the population’s response and there resistance to encroachment by the British in their territory and the confrontation that continued till the end of British Raj in India.

This paper would highlight and critically evaluate British strategy in the Tribal Areas which was considered as highly crucial to their overall military strategy to counter their opponents in this part of India.

The Struggle for India: Defending the Frontiers of India

India was one of the British distinctive and prize-worth possessions in the midst of its large and vast empire. Great Britain could not afford to lose India which was an emblem of British affluence, status and power. India’s prominent position was not only important due to its own riches and resources; but it was the kingpin from where British Empire developed political and mercantile relations with the states in Africa and Asia. The defence of frontiers of India and the safety and security of its routes was of immense significance. The British regime not only wanted to protect India from its western imperialist adversaries in the region but rather all the states situated in the neighborhood of India.

Closely intermingled with the question of the safety and security of India was the Tribal Areas or Tribal Belt on the borderland between India and Afghanistan on the North-West Frontier of British India. Birthplace of Pakhtun, which as a consequence of peculiar chronological and physical status have managed to safeguard and preserve an autonomous and independent way of life (Ditcher:1967). For generations the Pakhtuns resisted all those who craved to remove and

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3Also enunciate as Pashtoon and Pathan. For the sake of this research work I will use the term ‘Pakhtun’ but will use the original spelling in direct quotations.
disentangle them from their strategic location bestriding the natural gateways leading from Central Asia to the plains of India.

Termed as the “cross roads of Civilizations” by famous historian Arnold Toynbee the area due to its topographical location plays an important role in the history of the Sub-Continent. Throughout the acknowledged history the gleaming and dazzling resources of India had constantly enchanted the eager and avaricious eyes of sovereigns and conquerors. The inhabitants witnessed over centuries the ebb and flow of trade, migration and invasions over their territory.

The British came into direct contact with the Pakhtuns tribesmen after the occupation and annexation of Punjab in 1849 (Barton, 1939). The area was branded as a terra incognita, and the region was regarded by the British government in India as an isolated, remote and wild terrain (Poynder: 1896).

One of the significance of the Tribal Belt for the British in India was its key and famous passes, including the Khyber Pass, phrased as the “Monarch of Passes” (Robertson, 1979: 171, Leslie, 1966: 46-71) termed as potential ‘gate ways’ and therefore, of great strategic importance.

In the beginning of the British rule, the issue of Tribal Areas was considered as administrative, native and not as strategic, and the British officers were primarily concerned with law and order, safety and security of the subjects in the settled districts from tribal raids and to establish a modus vivendi with the tribes. Sana Haroon rightly observed that ‘tribalism was an internal, provincial concern, separate from the imperial consideration of frontier building.’(Haroon, 2007: 7)

But this state of affairs in the Tribal Areas ended by the steady advance of Czarist Russia in Central Asia. The Russian forces took one Muslim Khanate after the other and reached the border of Afghanistan. This new development greater than before enhanced the significance of the border tribes and their control as vital ‘gate keepers’ of the British Empire in India,(Banerjee, 2000) and thus Tribal Areas became ‘indivisible parts of a single Imperial question’(Alder, 1963: 115). J.W. Spain argued that after the Russian domination of Muslim Khanates in Central Asia “Peace and progress on the Frontier was of little concern…Security was the all-important objective. Tribal territory in the hills was a marchland which must be dominated.”(Spain, 1963: 115)
34) After the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-80, the old notion of administrative frontier was replaced by a new defensive frontier to be called as the “Scientific Frontier,” which in its broader sense means “to set up a military and political buffer against Russian aggression,” (Stewart, 2005: 14) and therefore, not only keeping stability and peace on the Pakhtun border land with Afghanistan which was a tactical and strategic compulsion, but also a necessity to have a barrier against Afghanistan, as part of the “ring fence” strategy of the British Empire (Brobst, 2005). Mortimer Durand, the famous frontier officer acknowledged the importance of the tribes for the defence of India, put forward radical and comprehensive new frontier policy. He said that tribes who held the major itineraries and passes must be controlled and to turn the area an active defensive barrier by the establishment of closer relations with tribes (Alder, 1963).

General Fredrick Roberts who had a vast experience in the region believed that if the British could get the support of the Pakhtun tribes it would be a paramount significance in their struggle against the Russians and hoped of “transforming that great natural obstacle, which has hitherto been a barrier against ourselves, into a barrier against one enemies,” and “nothing will strengthen our military position more than to open out the country and improve our relations with the Frontier tribes.” (Montagu, 1924: 589-99)

The British Government in order to strengthen its hold on the tribes took two important decisions; first in 1893 to draw a scientific border between British India and Afghanistan signed the famous Durand Line Agreement. According to Lord Curzon the Durand Line agreement gives “Great Britain not a single or double but a threefold Frontier: the administrative border of British India; the Durand Line, or Frontier of active protection; the Afghan border, which is the outer or advanced strategical Frontier.”  And secondly, the creation of the new province named as the North West Frontier Province in 1901 was to secure closer

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4 Secret Notes on the Central Asian Question and the Coast and Frontier Defences of India 1877-1893, Memorandum on the present position in Central Asia. 13th June, 1887, pp. 105-6. L/MIL/17/14/80.

5 Text of the 1907 Romanes Lecture on the subject of Frontiers. Text of the 1907 Romanes Lecture on the subject of Frontiers. http://www.dur.ac.uk/ resources/ibr/ resources/ links/curzon. pdf. (Online) February 3, 2010. The British government in India considered four different and widely separated lines. The Indus River advocated by Lord Lawrence (1863-1868) which resembles roughly to the western boundary of the Province; the Durand Line of 1893; and the “scientific frontier” from Kabul through Ghazni to Kandahar.
and more immediate supervision of the strategic area. Henry Green one of the strong enthusiasts of forward policy considered tribesmen potential source of defence against an attacking army. ‘Such races, I consider’, he said ‘one of the best defence that we could have in the rear and flanks of an invading army.’

The tribes were a great factor in the defence of the North-west frontier of India. The diplomatic wrangling between Czarist Russia and Great Britain during the 19th century resulted in the creation of Afghanistan as a buffer state. The British in order to strengthen its defensive lines created a no man’s land, a second line of defence and a buffer to the buffer in the shape of Tribal Areas (Ahmad, 1993).

**Tribal Administration**

The British in order to control this sensitive and strategic part of India introduced a policy which was based on pressure, persuasion and armed intervention. As part of this policy the British created an administrative set up different from *Settle Areas* for dealing and developing relations with the inhabitants of Tribal Areas. The administration of the Tribal Areas under the British rule was simple and short in one way but arduous, difficult and puzzling in another way. The uniqueness and weirdness of Tribal administration was primarily credited to its buffer-zone position and status. The British Government in order to counter Russian influence in the region made Afghanistan as a ‘buffer state’ between the two imperialist powers, but after demarcating the Durand Line in 1893 as a border between Afghanistan and British India, the later was forced to make another buffer zone in the shape of Tribal Areas as a *buffer to a buffer* between the Afghan border and settled districts under the British control, and managed under a legal system (Hussain: 2000).

The British created agencies a system of indenture and interaction for developing relationships with the different tribal groups in the Tribal Areas. The agency was entrusted to a Political Agent who

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6 The famous newspaper of the 19th century ‘The Edinburgh Magazine’ acknowledged Pakhtun’s geo-political significance and wrote ‘the tribes are necessary to us as guardians of the passes; but they must be brought to hold them for us, not against us...[and] to make the tribesmen aware that we can subdue them if we wish...’ (The Future of Our N.W. Frontier,” Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine, 162:986 (December, 1897), pp. 830-33)


8 The first Agency which the British established in 1878 was the Khyber Agency, followed by the Kurram Agency in 1892, Malakand in 1895, and by 1896 two other agencies were also created
was very powerful man with unlimited authority. Endowments in the form of grants, and force, in the form of punitive expeditions became the tool of the system of reward and chastisement. The British justified their Tribal administration by saying that the legal system of the settled districts was not suitable to ill-informed and ignorant populace hardly accustomed to written law. Moreover, the British very cunningly made the impression that the British were not against their freedom or to obstruct their day to day life. The fact was that the British wanted the economical and effective administrative arrangement that would allow them the ultimate control of the Tribal Areas which would not require the kind of administration that was present in the rest of British India (Embree: 1977)

Furthermore, the British established a chain of fortresses, army cantonments, built strategic railway system and roads up to very remote and inaccessible areas, to challenge local insurgencies and foreign aggression, such actions shows their strategic interest in the area.

The British tried to accomplish the subordination of the Pakhtun tribes by coercion, deception, temptation, bribery, and divide and rule policy. The British adopted the policy of ‘might is right’ and in essence it was a ‘purely military rule’ based on dictatorial and authoritative administration (Andrews, 1937). J.W. Spain further highlights this point in these words:

The British tended to hold the Frontier apart from the rest of India as a unique and exclusive region, this peculiar and strange form of administration devised by the British for the Tribal areas has no parallel elsewhere. The British used the area as a training ground for colonial officials and a practice area for experiments in imperial government (Spain, 1954: 27-40).

In short, during the British rule, the techniques of control and administration reflected strategic interest and administrative rationalities rather than any conscious efforts to civilize, the “uncivilized” community in the highlands of the North West Frontier of British India.

namely North and South Waziristan.
British Imperial Strategy and Frontier Wars

During the course of the British rule in India, the imperial army in order to crush the spirit of resistance of the tribes was persistently and relentlessly busy in a succession of difficult military operations in the Tribal Areas. These military operations were characterized as operations to subdue uprisings, also known as the campaigns of subjugation and annexation, or to overthrow a dangerous enemy. Such campaigns varied generally in scale and magnitude. These military campaigns in the Tribal Areas were dubbed as butcher and blot, tip and run (Coen: 1971) burn and scuttle, (Khan, 2008) were also known to some military officers as frontier warfare, tribal warfare and trans-border warfare (More man, 1998).

For British military men frontier fighting represented a special type of military operations, requiring explicit maneuvers and tactics such as confidentiality, promptness and forceful military operation which were quite different from the warfare conducted in the plains of India because the tribemen were very experienced and skilled in guerilla fighters. According to Jules Stewart, “The Pathan revealed themselves as a different sort of adversary from the native fighting forces the British had encountered east of Indus. These tribesmen of the hills were not easily bought off, much less converted to the cause of the Raj, and they certainly were not to be subdued for long by force of arms.” (Stewart, 2005, 11-2, Wolsely, 1888: 689-703)

To keep the colonial might and deterrence in the Tribal Areas, the British had to display both military capacity and consistency in their operations. Interestingly, the British put forward the notion that the military operations they were conducting were more humanising and civilising in nature rather than punitive and the justification was that “anarchy and civilisation cannot march peacefully side by side.” (Mills, 1996, 4, Macmunan, 1978, Jablonsky, 2000: 1-25) For the British, the tribes were security risk to the trade routes into Afghanistan and danger to the border areas and to the Punjab.

On the other hand, the tribesmen, who as part of its common life, were inured to the use of arms and lived by the Pakhtun code of

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9 The British took refuge behind the excuse that their policy towards the tribes was aimed to protect the defenceless people of the settled areas and districts who were attacked by these tribes. The British used brute force against the Pakhtun tribes and justified their brutalities.
life, popularly known as *Puhktunwali*, which commanded, vengeance and reprisal for any damage or injury to his own or the honour of his tribe or clan. (Lovett, 1984) The destruction of lives and property often exacerbated conflict. As a result clashes happened frequently between the tribesmen to defend their freedom and the British troops to establish order and British prestige.  

The tribal raids were inspired and motivated partially due to financial reasons and partially due to the extreme jingoism of the tribes against alien control of their territory. Writing for *The United Services Magazine*, Churchill added ‘Great and expensive forces, equipped with all the developments of scientific war are harried and worried without rest or mercy by an impalpable cloud of active and well-armed skirmishers.’ (Russeland Gilbert, 2006: 159, Spiers, 1992) Tribal warfare wielded important impact on the organisation, training and equipment of British Indian army and their ability to confront not only the Pakhtun revolt but external aggressions.

These military operations, moreover, helped the army to train its forces, for its grandiose military operations in support of a forward policy into Afghanistan. In this regard Philip Mason mentioned that tribal warfare provided British Indian troops with ‘perhaps more sustained practical experience of colonial warfare than in any other part of the British Empire.’ (Mason, 1975: 337, Rajit, 2003).

In order to maintain peace in the border areas and to strengthen their military position, the British applied a policy of intimidation and pressure against the tribesmen such as fines, blockades and retaliations in the shape of military operations. Furthermore, the British stationed infantry, cavalry regiments and artillery in every district for prompt

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10 Although tribal society lacked any formal and prescribed military organisation but the tribesmen had a well established tradition of tribal organisation that constituted a military confederacy for them any external and peripheral threat and danger would result to form a *lashkar* (war party) whose character and nature reflected the social and political organisation of tribal society.

11 British military expeditions were time and again hampered by difficult landscape, limited intelligence, and climate, frequently over immense distances, endemic diseases, climatic extremes and scarcity of water and food, severely complicating the transport, supply and administration of imperial troops; these difficulties, threatened the maneuverability of the field forces. In contrast to imperial troops, tribesmen were very well familiar and acquainted with the local topography, resources and were particularly well adapted to fight under such difficult conditions. (see C.C. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, pp. 53-4).

actions to stop tribal infiltrations and to keep internal security in the border areas.

This method and technique was to a certain extent effective but slow and hard to enforce due to the proximity and propinquity of the administrative districts and the Tribal territory as it meant little to the people on either side of the line (Caroe, 1958).

During the military expeditions it became very difficult to recognise and identify an objective as no established government, capital city or towns existed in Tribal Areas which could make the task of the troops easy to achieve a comprehensive victory and therefore secured a durable peace with the tribes and henceforth the military punished the tribes by destroying their villages, hamlets, water reservoirs, buried the reserves of food and crops or by temporarily occupying of an area till starvation, or the need to sow crops forced the tribesmen to pay fines in the shape of money or arms (Moreman, 1998, Leslie, 1966: 46-71). Robert Nichols is of the opinion that the British used disproportionate force against the tribes in the Tribal areas (Nichols, 2001). Interestingly, these military operations produced much discussion in British Parliament; some in the colonial administration condemned and criticized such ‘indiscriminate slaughter’ while other appreciated the policy.

Many British military officers acknowledged the military skills of the tribesmen, in General Andrew Skeen opinion ‘all in all are probably the finest individual fighters in the east, really formidable enemies, to despise whom means sure trouble.’ (Skeen, 1978: 20) General Sir George White, was of the opinion that it was militarily unreasonable that the British Raj in India would allow on its borders ‘of the most turbulent and finest fighting material in the world, unrestrained by civilised government and fired by fanaticism’. (Colvin, 1897: 845-68)

Major-General William Lockhart also acknowledged the fighting capabilities of the Pakhtun tribes by saying “The enemy…for the most part skilled marksmen, exceptionally active and well armed and expert in guerrilla tactics.”

Lord Montagu argued that ‘The Frontier was the
The British Raj in India also considered the tribes a valued source of conscription in the imperial army as Lord Northbrook in a debate in the House of Lords reminded the British Peers that one of the contributing factors of British Tribal policy was using these Border lands as a recruiting ground for Indian army (Bruce, 1900). The watch and ward of the Tribal Areas needed a high state of military readiness and as a result fighting in the tribal Areas became a distinctive type of colonial warfare planned according to the land, tactics and resistance of the tribes. This state of affair continued till the end of the British rule in India.

Conclusion

Tribal Areas due to its strategic location played an important role in the British overall strategy to counter any threat to India coming from the direction of the North West Frontier region. Tribal Areas was judged by the British purely from military point of view. The British government in India believed that maintaining peace and stability along the border with Afghanistan was a strategic necessity. In order to control and to have their sway on the tribes in the Tribal territory the British introduced a peculiar form of administration which was totally different from the rest of India. The British very skillfully exercised their authority through their Political officials with the help of a strange administrative structure.

Moreover, the British government in India launched dozens of military operations against the tribes having both local and imperial dimensions. For the British Tribal Areas was a bulwark against an aggressive power, a buffer to a buffer, between British Raj in India and Afghanistan, a base to fulfil their imperial designs in Afghanistan and beyond. Tribal territory was a place of administrative experiments and the area served as a training ground for the British imperial army. The British strategy in the Tribal Areas was to advance and promote their imperial designs, because the ultimate aim of the British policy was the “security of India.”

Presently, the Tribal Belt has become once again on the spot line due to the war on terror launched by United States of America. The area has witnessed colossal damage both in men and material. Prudence and
wisdom is required to get out of this quagmire, otherwise, bloodshed and mayhem would continue in this unfortunate land inhabitant by Pakhtun race, which as a consequence of its geo-strategic location are being treatment in this fashion by the civilized world. Ironically, whether the people of the area liked it or not they will be part of this new Great Game played by the big players of the world in this part of the world. Looking at the present turmoil in the region, let me add the prophetic statement of Professor Arnold Toynbee “History is certainly being made in this corridor…and I am sure a great deal more history is going to be made there in the near future - perhaps in a rather unpleasant way, but anyway in an important way.”(Toynbee, 1961: 161-69)

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Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia, University of Peshawar, 1992).
In 1897 the British were confronted with a formidable revolt in their turbulent North-West Frontier of India. On 25 August they lost the historic and strategically important Khyber Pass to the attacking Afridi tribesmen. The loss of the Khyber was seen as a humiliating defeat and a heavy blow to British prestige. In order to recover this prestige and exact reparations from the Afridis, the British sanctioned the punitive Tirah campaign—one of the biggest and costliest expeditions in colonial warfare. Drawing upon original evidence, this article revisits the fall of the Khyber to examine the ci