

Balochistan, the British and the Great Game: The Struggle for the Bolan Pass, Gateway to India

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The book traces the history and events of the nineteenth century in a sparsely populated desert area of Asia, Balochistan, an area (inhabited by the tribal Baloch people) and brings out the strategic importance attached to the Bolan Pass by the colonial British.

The author, a professor of military history with specialisation in oriental studies, has detailed the policy adopted by the British Empire to win over the local rulers and tribes of the region, primarily to ensure safety of their trade routes. The impact and influence of events in Europe, especially between Britain, Germany, Russia and France, as well as between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, have been covered as well.

Heathcote's book also discusses the role of the British officers posted in India in various civil and military assignments both under the East India Company as well as the colonial administration. The book also provides a brief introduction to civil administration in the Punjab and Sind provinces of India, which goes on to highlight the concern of the British rulers regarding a land threat to India. It also sheds light on the policy adopted to persuade, control and subdue the local warlords—by persuasion, awards, financial rewards and, where needed, by use of

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military power. The role played by elements of the British government in England, officials of the British Army and administration, and those executing their policies in India, has been highlighted by quoting from the correspondence of that period and the relevant treaties. Thus, the book is based on a considerable amount of archival and primary sources, which is certainly its USP.

The centrality of relations between British India and 'Khanate of Kalat', the largest province between Punjab and Iran–Afghanistan through which all the trade routes passed, forms the basis of the book. Chapter 1 covers the terrain of Balochistan as existing in 1790s, the Baloch people and their socio-economic practices. The harsh desert terrain had a few water sources, was sparsely populated and was governed by amirs (khans and sultans). The trade routes of *kafilas* (caravans) from India (Punjab and Sind) to Southern–Central Asia followed camel tracks via Bolan Pass (and a few via Khyber Pass). As the caravans were often raided and looted, 'protection money' was paid by the traders and merchants to the local tribes for ensuring safe transit. In case of their failure to provide security, punitive actions were initiated against the khans. The money recovered was used to compensate the traders.

To ensure peace in the region, the British government also gave grants to khans to maintain their forces and to provide assistance when needed. In case of local disputes, the khans sought British assistance in resolving them. Land tax and revenue too was collected by them, and a portion of it was paid to the British rulers. The khans also provided their troops to fight alongside and under the British.

Chapter 2 covers the impact of Russia–Britain–Iran–Afghanistan relations from 1798 to 1838 on the events in the region. As the main trade routes between Europe and India were by sea, Britain feared that these were rather vulnerable. Alternately, a land threat of Russia–Iran was also appreciated. Hence, the land route from India to Central Asia (via Afghanistan) was needed. Sparsely populated and passing through the deserts of Balochistan, the threat to caravans had to be negated. For this, the Bolan Pass (in Balochistan), and Quetta (east of it) as a base, gained strategic importance. As a result, the Khyber Pass was given low priority. The book reveals how the British started open negotiations with the Khan of Kalat, by sending expeditions and even positioning their officers with the local rulers to ensure an open land trade route.

The next chapter covers the British expedition of 1839 into Kalat. It narrates how the in-fighting between the Khan of Kalat and the

former Amir of Kabul (Shah Shuja-ul-Malik) was partially resolved by the British by restoring Afghanistan under the Durranis. However, the British captured Kalat in a military operation, in which Outram showed exemplary courage.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover the threat posed by the Dombki and Jakhrani raiders (inhabitants of Baloch Hills) to trade caravans being escorted by the British troops, heading up to the Bolan Pass, in the period between 1839 and 1840, and the insurgency in Kalat in 1840–41. Heathcote has relied upon diaries of British officers who participated in these occurrences and published material to narrate the events, especially the heroic deeds of the officers. The book also speaks about the family intrigues of the rulers and clash of personal ambitions of the local rulers. It also highlights the role played by John Jacob of the British East India Company, who besides leading troops also acted as an advisor and administrator, and whose contributions were recognised by naming the camp established by him after him—Jacobabad.

The next two chapters describe the importance accorded by the British government in London, and their representatives in India, to the creation of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). While the financial aspects of the reorganisation were debated, there were major differences between the policy adopted by the officers of the Punjab and the Sind provinces. While those in Punjab were content with administering the area under British control, those in Sind wanted to reach out to those around their periphery. Events leading to withdrawal of the British officers from Afghanistan in 1842 and the differences between the policymakers in London and the Government of India (in Calcutta), and the officers implementing the policy on ground have been highlighted well. The expedition led by Napier to capture Sind in 1843, including the Operations in Frontier and his advance to Traki ‘The Robber’s Cave’, has also been covered. At this time, the British also annexed Punjab from Ranjit Singh and carried out operations on the Upper Sind border, defeating the local khans. By 1848, they had extended their control from Dera Gazi Khan to Dera Ismail Khan, in which Jacob played a major role.

Chapter 8 covers the renewal of the ‘Great Game’ in Europe and its impact on India, Persia (Iran) and Balochistan. Though a major threat from Afghanistan was anticipated, the need to have a friendly ruler in Afghanistan and Balochistan was emphasised by London once again. Differences arose regarding whether to position troops in Afghanistan

or locate them at Quetta. As mail used to take two weeks to arrive from London to Calcutta, Jacob visited Kalat, promised an annual grant to the Khan and signed a treaty in 1854. However, the 1856 Persian invasion of Afghanistan created a new threat as it was reported that Russia was trying to base a military team in Persia. The 1857 revolt in India also created a crisis situation resulting in administrative changes. Also, Jacob's death in December 1858 created a temporary vacuum in the government.

The next two chapters discuss the civil wars from 1858 to 1872, the controversies between various officials and ministers, and the uprisings of the khans. Following an accord between Russia and Britain, the threat of a Russian invasion of India from Central Asia was reduced. Also, there were major differences between the policies of Punjab and Sind, as well as between Robert Sandeman, Robert Phayre and William Lockyer Merewether, all very important officers of the government, which weakened the British stand. Quetta was finally occupied in 1876, a decision which proved advantageous during the Second Afghan War in 1897. Finally, for ease of administration, Balochistan was merged with the newly created NWFP.

The end of the nineteenth century also saw a war between China and Russia, which further reduced the influence of Russia in the region. Finally, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 31 August 1907 (which settled differences on areas of influence between the two countries), relating to Tibet, Afghanistan and Persia, brought peace to the region. During World War I, Balochistan became target not of Russian but of German agents. The threat of Great Game had reduced considerably by this time.

Meanwhile, in India, Lord Kitchener decided that his reorganised Indian Army did not require special frontier forces and that the first line of defence—that is, the security of the areas under British control—should be provided by paramilitary units recruited from local inhabitants. These paramilitary forces were to be lightly armed and commanded by British officers on deputation. Regular army units were also to do a fixed tenure of deployment in the most threatened areas and provide assistance to friendly local rulers. This policy continued till 1947, when the sub-continent was partitioned into India and Pakistan and when the NWFP region joined the latter.

Balochistan, the British and the Great Game features a few maps and photographs, and it has a detailed and rich bibliography including copies of all related treaties. Heathcote has gone into the military actions during the period in great detail and needs to be complimented for describing

the events vividly. The book offers rich historical content on a very interesting phase of recent history, the remnants of which are visible in contemporary South Asia even today. It would interest students of military history but also those interested in geopolitics, South Asian studies and a lay though informed readership.

