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Afghanistan and the AfPak theatre of operations

Air Vice-Marshal B. H. Short, AM, RFD (Ret'd)¹



Bruce Short traces the recent history of warfare in Afghanistan from 1839 to the present day, putting the current conflict there into its historic perspective. He concludes that there is little prospect of stability in the country or in adjacent Pakistan after the scheduled withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force in 2014.

Key words: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, al-Qa'ida, International Security Assistance Force, Australian Army.

Today, the International Security Assistance Force's strategic thinking has moved from the overly restricted stance of fighting in an Afghan theatre to the more realistic concept of a so-called AfPak theatre of operations (Leahy 2011, 9). Once again, contemporary invading forces of Afghanistan have re-learned the overriding importance of the immutable geo-political relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan's North-West Frontier.

The Country and the People

Afghanistan is a large land-locked area of approximately 650,000 square kilometres. It is bigger than the combined land areas of France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Its population is also large – 32 million (2008 census). There are a further 12 or so million Afghanis living in the historical Afghan territory of the North-West Frontier. The eastern border of Afghanistan was delineated by a British surveyor, Sir Henry Durand, who ignored ethnic, cultural, linguistic as well as geographic divides. The Durand Line, which was not surveyed in full, was imposed on the Emir of Afghanistan in 1893. It is the basis of much of the modern conflicts within the AfPak Region. The line remains the current eastern territorial boundary of the country.

The south and west of Afghanistan are deserts, but the remainder is mountainous, along with many fertile plains and valleys supporting most of the population. A long mountain range known as the Hindu Kush, with numerous passes and a maximum peak at 7700 meters (25,250 feet) runs north-east into Pakistan (Merriam-Webster 1997, 9 – 10). There are four chief towns: Kabul, the capital, in the east; Kandahar, the second city, in the south; Herat in the west; and Mazar-i-Sharif, near the Uzbekistan border in the north.

Afghan society is based upon strong clan and tribal links: the tribal units are fiercely independent and are commonly in conflict with neighbours. The major ethnic group is the Pashtuns – known in colonial times as

Pathans. In a 2011 census, Pashtuns accounted for 40 per cent of the Afghan population. The Pashtuns are distributed in the centre and south of the country and form a majority of much of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Pashtuns dominate modern Afghan society, whilst historically, they reaped great financial rewards and power from those areas along the old trading routes. Other Afghani ethnic groups include the Hazara, who are spread throughout the land, and two small groups in the northern zones, the Uzbeks and Tajiks.

There are two major languages spoken in Afghanistan: Persian Dari and Pashto. Both are Indo-European in origin. In addition, there are numerous ethno-linguistic groups across the region and multilingualism is common.

Religion is a strong influential force within Afghanistan and 99 per cent of the people are Muslim. Sunni Muslims account for about 80 per cent and the rest are of the Shi'a sect. The Muslim local preachers, mullahs, periodically declare holy wars. If killed, the mujahideen ('warriors of God') are promised unimaginable religious advantages.

Anglo-Afghanistan Conflicts of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Baker (2011) describes no fewer than eighty armed clashes in the last 172 years between 1839 and 2011, some of them major wars lasting for years and involving battles with thousands of casualties on either side. The year 1839 is arbitrarily chosen for the start of the modern discourse. This was the year of the First Anglo-Afghanistan War which ended in 1842. This major conflict is a stand-out in the annals of the British profession of arms. In mid-winter 1842, 16,000 persons under British protection, of whom 5000 were under arms, were forced to quit Kabul. Their route was to be via Jalalabad and the Khyber Pass in the north-east to Peshawar. The disordered column was attacked and rapidly defeated in detail in seven days, well before it reached Jalalabad. The Pathans systematically sniped with jezails (hand-made, long-barrelled brass-bound muskets) and hacked with tulwars (curved swords) the entire column. A wounded Surgeon Brydon with a handful of sepoy's reached the British-held fort at

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