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LETTERS

Wither Afghanistan?

Marcus Fielding

Bruce Short's contributed essay "Afghanistan and the AfPAK theatre of operations" in the last edition [*United Service* 62 (4), 26 – 29, 2011] summarised well the sovereignty and security challenges that Afghanistan has

Bruce identified the Durand Line as "the basis of much of the modern conflicts within the AfPak region". Indeed, it is because the Durand Line now forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan that the situation in Afghanistan cannot be separated from that in Pakistan. Bruce also identified that the Durand Line ignored ethnic, cultural and linguistic divides, and its impact was most significant on the ethnic Pashtun and Baloch peoples. While the Durand Line is now recognised internationally as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the minds of ethnic Pashtuns and Balochs it is a colonial invention and largely ignored.

Bruce cites Indian strategic analyst A. K. Singh regarding the future of Pakistan – but I would caution on potential bias in his views as there is some evidence that Pakistan and India are both contesting for influence in Afghanistan. There is no doubt, though, that Pakistan is to some degree a weak nation-state given its ethnic diversity and given that the historical homelands of the Pashtun and Baloch people are divided by the Durand Line. But Pakistan's desire to remain a unitary state is strong and its military is imbued with this aim.

More significantly given the present imperatives, I believe we should spend more time examining the question of whether Afghanistan is capable of being a unitary state given the significant divisions and enmities between the northern Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups and the southern Pashtuns. The Pashtuns have been the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan since the 18th century and are the second largest ethnic group in Pakistan. Given their number a case could be mounted for a Pashtun state, but it is highly unlikely that Pakistan would countenance any move in this direction.

Given the 'impossibility' of formal partition in Afghanistan, I suspect the situation will revert to a contest between the northerners and the southerners. In time, while their traditional homelands will remain divided by an internationally recognised border, the Pashtun people will ignore the border and the Pakistan government will continue to grant them a degree of autonomy. And Kandahar will reclaim its place as capital of the Pashtun people.

Hawthorn, Victoria, 26 December 2011

Author's response

Marcus Fielding makes a cogent point as to the likelihood of a north-south divide within Afghanistan should the Karzai administration collapse. This and his other observations form a pertinent postscript to my essay.

Bruce Short

Blackheath, 17 January 2011

⁶Marcus Fielding, a councillor of the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria, lived in Peshawar and travelled extensively throughout Pakistan's North West Frontier and Baluchistan Provinces and eastern Afghanistan in 1992.