

Afghanistan: From The British Empire to the NATO Invasion: “Blind Man Walking on a Roof.”

Porous Pakistan: Afghan border a headache to NATO

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In 1839, British troops and Indian sepoys poured into Afghanistan in what turned out to be an unnecessary pre-emptive move to block a feared Russian expansion into the territory. Although the Russian envoy had failed to woo the Afghan ruler, the British authorities decided to err on the side of caution and invaded Afghanistan anyway.

Their intent was to put a pliant puppet on the Kabul throne to ensure that the northwest frontier of their lucrative Indian colony remained secure.

True to the historical pattern, the invading British made short work of the poorly armed Afghan defenders. However, once the occupation phase began, the British became overconfident in their military superiority.

Prior to the invasion, Britain’s East India Company had paid the border tribes a tribute — or bribe — to allow their trade convoys safe passage through the Khyber Pass. Now that they had defeated the ragtag Afghan army and set up shop in Kabul, the East India Company decided to save themselves some money and cancelled the tribute payments.

The result was that the Pashtun tribes along the border rose up in revolt and cut off the British supply lines from India.

Forced to retreat from Kabul in the fall of 1841, the British garrison suffered the most complete defeat in military history, with only one survivor — dressed as a woman — managing to elude the victorious Afghans.

Fast-forward to the present conflict and the porous Afghan-Pakistani border remains the predominant headache for the occupying NATO forces. While it would be impossible for the current Afghan insurgents to repeat their forefathers’ feat of annihilating the foreign forces, due to our modern weaponry, airpower and technology, NATO’s inability to close the border provides the Taliban with a constant supply of men and material.

Just last week, U.S. Army Col. Viet Luong told the Washington Times that “to secure the border in the traditional sense would take an inordinate amount of resources.” As the commander of U.S. troops in the province of Khost, Col. Luong’s unit is responsible for 261 kilometres of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The “traditional sense” to which Luong referred is, of course, the “Western sense” of securing borders, which would involve fences, checkpoints, sensors and controlled access —

all of which would be impossible in this rugged mountain terrain where an actual delineation of territory has yet to be surveyed.

The Pashtun tribes along this territory are fiercely hostile to any outsiders and this includes the predominantly ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks that comprise the ranks of the Afghan National Army. They are, however, also extremely loyal to their local warlord, Pocha Khan Zadran.

A former Taliban sympathizer, Zadran is also a cunning survivor who has now fully embraced the concept of democracy, for at least he enjoys its benefits.

As an elected member of Parliament, Zadran is technically only a minor official. In reality, he remains the only real authority in Afghanistan's four easternmost provinces.

When I interviewed him at his Kabul home in 2008, Zadran made it clear that he was willing to use his own militia to close the border. In return, he would, of course, expect to be paid a form of "tribute" and he vowed he could rid his provinces of all Taliban within two months.

Like the British East India Company officials before them, the Americans have chosen to do things their own way rather than strike a compromise with Zadran's collection of thieves and brigands. As a result, the border remains an open sore in this festering conflict.

Summing up the American strategy in Afghanistan, Zadran compared the U.S. military to a "blind man walking on a roof."

If the Americans refuse to listen to directions, he told me, sooner or later, they are going to fall off.

Scott Taylor is an author and the editor of Esprit de Corps magazine.

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