Why Pakhtun lands have been so volatile for two centuries

BY TIMOTHY NUNAN

T he quadrant of land bounded by Kabul, Peshawar, Quetta and Kandahar would, at first glance, seem to be an unlikely piece of real estate for international competition. The quadrilateral – populated primarily by the Pakhtuns and split between Afghanistan and Pakistan – remains marginal to the world economy and possesses insignificant energy resources. The drama over Pakhtun self-determination never captured world attention to the same degree as the self-determination of the Palestinians or the cause of Kurdish independence has. And since the end of the Cold War, prospects of Russia reaching the Indian Ocean through the Pakhtun quadrilateral seem more outlandish than they did at any other time in the last 200 years.

Yet the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands remain the theatre of international rivalries. The 1.6 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan under the United Nations mandate constitute one of the largest and longest-existing refugee populations in the world and since 2001, American drones (some launched from within Pakistan) have killed thousands within the said quadrant of land. And if that were not enough, the official line in Kabul remains that Afghanistan has no recognised eastern border and that the Durand Line that marks the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan is an illegitimate colonial construct. Why, a century after the end of the Great Game, does this piece of territory invite so much attention?

Two recently published books by new scholars of the region offer answers to this question. The first, Martin Bunton Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878, explores a theme in the 19th century British colonial history of particular interest to us, the Pakhtuns. Bunton’s other, Elisabeth Leake’s The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonisation, 1936–1965 explores how the British Empire in South Asia and the Cold War turned the territories that now comprise Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) into such hotly contested regions. The emphasis in Bayly’s account is on how colonial “knowledge” generated about the region, and the British policies implemented therein, were based on ignorance and flawed assumptions. Leake’s work, on the other hand, focuses on how regional competition and the Cold War mostly added to the woes of the region — a trend unlikely to change as China, America, Iran, Pakistan and India continue to jostle for influence across Central Asia.

What emerges from a reading of the two books is an appreciation of how empires and superpowers rendered meaningless the claims to sovereignty over these territories — including those of the Pakistani state – long before Pakistan’s birth. Readers will certainly debate whether this internationalisation of the Pakhtun quadrant has done more to hurt the region (and Pakistan) than help it — just ask the families of those killed by errant drone strikes in Fata or, one generation earlier, Pakistanis civilians and the members of the Shia communities killed by the import of American military equipment and sectarian Sunnism promoted as part of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Similarly, China’s plans to invest 46 billion dollars into Pakistan infrastructure may appear less sinister at first glance but they are likely to revolve around securing guarantees for Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — whether provided by Beijing directly or by Islamabad. Regardless of whether one sees Pakhtun interests as best protected in tandem with or in defiance of “assistance” from Washington or Beijing, an understanding of how and why the entire western half of Pakistan was subject to the Great Game competition in the first place is essential for any debate about the country’s future role in the Middle East, Central Asia and the world at large.

Bayly’s account of Anglo-Afghan relations from 1808 to 1878 (from the fall of Shah Shuja to the Second Anglo-Afghan War) revolves around a deceptively simple question: what is Afghanistan? As he shows, even though the British never formally colonised Afghanistan, the internationalising of their encounters with Afghan monarchs, London’s clash with other regional powers (Russia and Persia), and a generous dose of unchallenged ideas and parallels led to a certain British view of what constituted Afghan polity and who constituted its legitimate ruler under which conditions. When in the 1780s the East India Company employees began engaging with the areas now comprising Afghanistan, they brought with them idealised notions of the republican nature of rural life to describe the local Pakhtun tribes. Early British explorers (many of them Scottish) saw in Pakhtun tribes a parallel to Scottish yeomen struggling against the landed estates of rural Britain. Their successors imagined the Afghan polity in terms of city states. Throughout, however, there remained a general British common-weight (whether of tribes or city states) was necessarily ruled by a king, who ruled not as a tyrant but in consonance with the love for liberty exhibited by the Pakhtun tribes. To be clear, none of these concepts – most of which referred back to the European norms about royal authority and the nobility of (whether of tribes or city states) was necessarily ruled by a king, who ruled not as a tyrant but in consonance with the love for liberty exhibited by the Pakhtun tribes. To be clear, none of these concepts – most of which referred back to the European norms about royal authority and the nobility of

The emphasis in Bayly’s account is on how colonial “knowledge” generated about the region, and the British policies implemented therein, were based on ignorance and flawed assumptions.

the Pakhtuns could dominate the entire region. This reality was to supplant him as the ruler of Afghanistan.

Mountstuart Elphinstone, to the Durrani ruler, Shah Shuja, in 1809, the dynasty’s control over its Central Asian realms was at a low ebb. The failure of the Sadozais to maintain order in Kandahar and Herat was held to be a cause of Afghanistan’s disorderly state, not the other way around. This framework, however, begged the question of how Afghanistan had lost power to the rival Barakzai leaders as Dost Muhammad Khan if they really were naturally predisposed to rule. More fundamentally, it failed to explain how the Pakhtuns could dominate the entire Afghan state with a large number of non-Pakhtuns living in it if they could barely control their own tribal cousins. Bayly’s story is not about British ignorance, bias and prejudice. According to him, Dost Muhammad Khan also contributed to the legend of Afghanistan as a Pakhtun polity, by comparing his accession to power in 1826 to that of Ahmad Shah Durrani, the supposed founder of the modern Afghan state. Like Durrani, Dost Muhammad Khan had blades of grass placed in his turban upon his accession, which took place in the company of a council of his Durrani relatives and other Pakhtun tribal chiefs. And in contrast to the Sadozai rulers, who took the Persian title of Shah, Dost Muhammad Khan reverted to the use of Emir, the title that Durrani had used for himself. In doing so, Dost Muhammad Khan attempted to legitimise himself as the leader of the entire Afghan tribal confederation. Yet this idea implicitly consigned the Tajiks, the Hazara and other non-Pakhtuns to subordinate roles in Afghanistan’s affairs.

Little attention to Dost Muhammad Khan’s attempts to secure legitimacy for himself in these terms, London continued to insist on the “unity” of an Afghan polity under its “natural” rulers — the Sadozais. Such arguments — scantily substantiated by evidence or proof — helped justify the disastrous attempt to instal the new Emir during the First Anglo-Afghan War. Readers need not look far to find present-day parallels in post-2001 American insistence
Bayly’s ambition in *Taming the Imperial Imagination* goes beyond merely telling the history of Anglo-Afghan relations and critiquing the imagination of Afghanistan as a Pakhtun-dominated polity. A scholar of international relations at the London School of Economics, he aims to challenge his own discipline to take culture, ideas and prejudices seriously as sources of foreign policy. In contrast to the so-called realists within his field, who view the international system as an anarchic jungle with no inherent rules, one that is populated by sovereign states in cut-throat competition with each other, Bayly stresses that we need to consider how empires have rewritten the rules of international system to support or erode Afghan claims to sovereignty, at different points in history.

The realists, whom Bayly criticises, take for granted the existence of anarchy in the international arena. Bayly, in contrast, shows how and why stronger actors have acted in accordance with and espoused international norms such as genocide prevention, abolition of slavery and human rights that weaker states are expected to follow. Arguably, the British Empire in India, the Italians in Ethiopia and the Americans in Iraq succeeded in legitimising their hegemony over these states by acting as if these norms were universal. If the international system were really just an anarchic, free-for-all universal, there would have been little reason for these powers to justify their interventions in terms of universal norms, rather than merely in terms of national or imperial interests.

For Bayly, the key concept was “civilization” rather than human rights or genocide prevention. As Bayly explains, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, in the international society was redefined. Mere territorial control did not guarantee that membership. Instead there was a civilizational benchmark that states had to enjoy the protection of international law. But by the 1850s, a new mix of Social Darwinist ideas helped to legitimise “civilizational denial” — that is, assertions that the internal character of “barbarians” or “savages” prevented them from membership in international society. These attitudes have had long afterlives, too — “civilization” as a category for state sovereignty at the United Nations was abolished only in 1960.

The rise of civilisational discourse ironically allowed the “civilized” Russians to colonize the Muslim khansates and emirates of Central Asia. It also allowed British colonial officers to write off Afghanistan as an exceptional space of barbarism to which the standard rules of international society, like respect for sovereignty, did not apply. If the British earlier thought of dealing with Afghanistan through diplomacy, now they described Afghan emirs as “barbarian” chiefs, dealing with whom required that “the fine drawn distinctions of Western international law [be] brushed aside as mere cobwebs when substantial and Imperial interests intervene.” The only real question that mattered was the establishment of a “scientific frontier” that allowed for the most efficient military defense of Punjab and Sindhi while, at the same time, neutralising Afghanistan as an international actor.

These intellectual about-turns have contemporary echoes. The Taliban controlled some 90 per cent of the territory in Afghanistan, including the capital city, who view their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. However, their control of territory — usually the traditional criteria for sovereignty — became less meaningful than adherence to Western norms of women’s rights as a marker of legitimacy. Photographs and videos of bearded Taliban executing chaddar-clad Afghan women in football stadiums circulated quickly through the Western media space and delegitimised them as modern-day “barbarian” chiefs. Western commentators frequently cite the recognition of the Taliban government by only three countries (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) as a sign of its illegitimacy rather than paying attention to how sovereignty had become conditional on international norms, not on territorial control.

Once the Taliban were revealed to be harbouring the modern-day equivalent of pirates like Osama bin Laden — their legitimacy as lawful actors in international society evaporated entirely. Just as in the post-1840 era that Bayly explores, Western approaches towards the Taliban cannot be explained in terms of political realism but rather in the context of concepts such as human rights and “state sponsors of terrorism”, presented as international norms and upon which Afghan sovereignty remains conditional — even today.

When the British Empire finally found a way out of Afghanistan, the British withdrew from Afghanistan but claimed for themselves a “diversified sovereignty” over the country. The Afghan emir, Abdurrahman, would have unlimited sovereignty within his country’s borders and receive an annual subsidy but he had to accept British control over Afghanistan’s foreign policy. This proved more sustainable for the British Empire than the previous projects of regime change and was made possible partly by the Anglo-Russian détente. Yet it is difficult to imagine how this model of split sovereignty could ever be resuscitated today in a regional setting of competitive multipolarity. And even though the benefits of sovereignty for Afghans remain dubious, few Afghans would agree to their country becoming a formal protectorate once again.

In this sense, our world resembles the multipolar situation that followed the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919 that summer, a lack of British will and treasure to finance the regime in Kabul led to the Afghan independence. London only begrudgingly acknowledged it but the Soviet Union and other irredentist powers such as Germany, Turkey and Italy extended diplomatic recognition and aid to Kabul almost immediately. Soon, the powers armed with notions of sovereignty and international order very different from those held by the British Empire came to court Kabul with promises not of civilisational standards, but rather sovereign equality.

Looking back at that eclipse of the British influence in Kabul, one cannot but wonder about parallels with today, as America seeks to engage India as a “benevolent counterweight in Kabul to Iran, China and Pakistan” as it has previously been in keeping the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — and the tribal areas of Pakistan in keeping the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) which from being a buffer state to a connector state — connecting not markets but rather conflicts, as those between Russia and China, New Delhi and Islamabad, and Riyadh and Tehran.

Leake’s account stresses the agency of actors external to Pakistan in keeping the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) — now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — and the tribal areas at the centre of international politics. Pakistanis readers may wonder about the role of India and Leake spends considerable amount of space on this account, having combed through post-independence archives in Delhi.

As recent histories stress, the time to start looking when it comes to Indian foreign policy is the Second World War for it was in the crucible of that war that the British and the Indian nationalist leaders came to terms with what they saw (correctly or not) as India’s — and Pakistan’s — role in maintaining global order. British officials like Olaf Caroe, Governor of NWFP in 1946-1947, saw the quadrilateral of Karachi, Quetta, Kabul and Peshawar as a “side door” to the prize of Persia and the Persian Gulf region. Pakistan would have to secure this area — either alone or with Western allies, historians at the University of Sheffield — shifts the debate from the world of empires to that of decolonisation and Partition in her book *The Dienfant Border*.
of and for all Pakhtuns living on both sides of the Durand Line not only Islamabad but also Washington suspected that protesters overran the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul in 1955, setback it suffers in Afghanistan. For example, when Afghan been quick to project Indian machinations behind every disturbance in the books. As in Bayly’s 19th-century story, when the British expected a Russian hand behind every disturbance in the Frontier. He, therefore, advocated for investment and educational programmes that would broaden the horizon of the Pakhtuns with regards to India and the rest of the world. Nehru’s actual visit, however, was a flop as protests followed him, and tribesmen pellet him with rocks. Plans by the Indian National Congress to lead the Pakhtuns out of servitude predictably went nowhere but post-independence India retained interests in the region. Unfounded geopolitical fears that often find fertile soil in intelligence gaps have been another factor in shaping the borders of Pakistan. Line was behind the mob attack. Parallels abound in recent years, such as public and media concerns in Pakistan over the role of India’s four consulates in Afghanistan. Having looked through the archives in Delhi, Leake finds little evidence for such claims. She instead finds New Delhi being much more concerned about Pakistan facilitating Pakhtun tribesmen to attack Indian troops in Kashmir. Voices within India’s ministry of external affairs, though, argued that a pro-Afghan policy would, if anything, deter an anti-Indian jihad in Kashmir. That said, it was only after – not before or during – the 1965 India-Pakistan war that New Delhi officially threw in its weight behind Pakistan.

Leake’s account reveals the Afghanistan they themselves to be the most entrepreneurial actors in transforming the borders into a sphere for superpower competition. Particularly under the leadership of Mohammad Daoud Khan, Kabul championed the idea of Pakhtunistan, producing flags and maps of the purported Pakhtun nation state comprising all the areas between the Indus and the Oxus rivers. (Such maps, produced by the Afghan cartographers – first with American and later with Soviet and Polish foreign assistance – rarely specified whether Pakhtunistan included Balochistan). Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khruschev, having already thrown in Moscow’s lot with India on Kashmir, sensed another opportunity to burrow the Soviet Union’s anti-Pakistani credentials in the region and supported Afghan calls for Pakhtunistan. One anecdote that Leake culled from Indian archives provides a flavour of the times. In May 1960, Soviet military shot down an American U-2 spy plane launched from Peshawar. The incident triggered a breakdown in Soviet-Pakistani relations, prompting Pakistani Foreign Minister Manzur Qadir to travel to Moscow in June 1960. There he found himself in a meeting with Khruschev and the Pakistani and Afghan ambassadors to the Soviet Union. The latter insisted to Khruschev that Peshawar was not in “northern Pakistan” as Qadir and his colleague were saying) but rather in “occupied Pakhtunistan.” Khruschev appeared to agree. He turned to the Pakistanis diplomats and informed them that they should report the “occupation” back to Islamabad. The implication, it seemed, was that Pakistan’s “occupying” forces should withdraw to the east of the Indus. Evidence of support for Pakistanistan within the tribal areas is limited. Leake stresses that whatever few tribal leaders did adopt the cause, they did so more to bolster their independent stance vis-à-vis Pakistani state authorities than to seriously consider independence or sponsorship by an Afghan state with little to offer in terms of subsidies. However, because of the spectre of Pakhtunistan or, worse, the possibility of the tribal areas falling into the Soviet camp, American diplomats never sought a final settlement of the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Western states instead poured money into Afghanistan’s southern and eastern borderlands, supporting the consolidation of what they understood as an essentially Pakhtun state in areas east and south of Kabul. Economists assumed that there was also something called an Afghan national economy that could be constructed, measured and bounded by the porous borders drawn up a century earlier. In effect, America and its many western allies committed themselves to building the material foundations of an Afghan state they viewed as irrevocably connected to its Pakhtun identity. Paradoxically, they also devoted even larger sums of aid to Pakistan to “develop” its own Pakhtun borderlands as a bulwark against the possibility of a Pakhtun nationalist government in Kabul that would tilt towards the Soviet Union rather than the West.

To reproduce Bayly’s argument once more: knowledge gaps, unconfirmed geopolitical fears plus the flawed understanding of the character of the states in the region led to a muddled British policy towards Afghanistan. Western policies in Afghanistan in the 1960s (and through to the 1990s) could only be seen as having a Cold War twist to Bayly’s 19th century story.

Yet, as Leake notes in her book’s conclusion, the internationalisation of the frontier did not end with the 1965 war. Following Pakistan’s defeat in the 1971 war, not only Pakistan’s military and political class but also its foreign patrons viewed NWFP and Balochistan as the core pivot points for Pakistan’s security and potential Soviet domination of the Indian Ocean. If, it stood to reason, the Communists managed to secure Baloch independence and take over the government in Kabul, the Soviet army could be in Quetta, Peshawar or Karachi on a short notice. Once the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Republic of Afghanistan seized power in April 1978, the nightmarish of a Soviet-backed, left-wing takeover of the entire region seemed imminent. Soviet-backed revolutionary movements had, indeed, taken over power in Ethiopia and southern Africa. A pro-Soviet communist government had seized control in southern Yemen and Soviet military ports had been set up in Socotra and Aden. The prospect of Soviet domination of the Indian Ocean did not seem far-fetched under those circumstances.

To halt this, the borderlands were internationalised once more, albeit by means of an ironic reversal of the historic patterns. Since the 1940s, Afghan nationalism and Mohammad Daoud Khan had beaten the drum of Pakhtunistan, treating the Durand Line as meaningless and challenging Pakistan sovereignty on one side of it. Once the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in 1979, however, both Moscow and its Afghan client regime called again and again for respecting Afghanistan’s territorial integrity. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev held that regional security could be guaranteed only through border-busting — not, however, through the formation of an independent Pakhtunistan but rather through the promotion of the socialist alternative for the region. Thanks to funding from America and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan became a desired destiny for two of the most radical international ideologies of the day — namely, Sunni jihadism and humanitariansim led by non-governmental organisations.

Even with the genie of left-wing irredentism put back in the bottle by the early 1990s, the pattern identified by Leake, whereby the supposedly pivotal role of River Paktunkhwa and the tribal areas in regional security echoes both nationally and internationally, persists. No census has been carried out in Pakistan since 1998, and whether one is carried out in 2017 (as currently planned) or not, its results may be disquieting. The Pakhtuns’ presence in Karachi can only have grown since the late 1990s, as has the rate of the Pakhtuns in border areas of Afghanistan and Balochistan as a whole. Visions of Pakhtunistan or some kind of greater Afghanistan running from the Oxus
to the Indus are gone. Yet, whether Pakistan can resolve the problems created by the Pakhtun migration within the country, and the growing Pakhtun prominence outside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata, remains an open question.

Leake’s *The Defiant Border* does not attempt to answer the questions but it does provide a guide to the deep historical patterns that have informed policy towards the borderlands for nearly a century. As Leake shows, again and again, Pakistan’s military and political leadership – along with its foreign patrons – has oscillated between conducting military campaigns in the tribal areas and giving one final push to introducing modern social and economic development to the region. Throughout the 1950s, in the face of Afghan-backed and Soviet-supported irredentism (and indigenous tribal caution about integration into the Pakistani state), officials in London reminded their colleagues in Karachi that “bombing after due warning as we know is the most economic and humane way of dealing with dissident Pathans.”

And in 1957, American economist Lewis Webster Jones – tasked to study the impact of foreign aid provided by America to Pakistan – recommended reclassifying all American aid to the borderlands as military aid: “... the presence of nomadic and warlike tribes in the mountain regions bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan has always created a problem of keeping order, requiring military strength,” he noted. These bursts of military activity were followed by spurts of road-building (another favoured British colonial tool) and promises of hospitals, schools and aid to come in after the smoke had cleared.

Those who think those days are over would be advised to read the recent news. Over the July 4 weekend this year, American Senator John McCain visited Afghanistan and Pakistan to discuss ongoing American military operations in the region. McCain, in an op-ed piece he wrote after the visit, cited the example of Miran Shah in North Waziristan, where the bazaar “once housed bomb-making factories, arms dealers, and office fronts for terrorist groups.” Since Operation Zarb-e Azb, however, he noted, “the military is building roads, border posts, schools and healthcare facilities across North Waziristan, a recognition that the failure to focus on economic development in the tribal areas in previous decades was a mistake.” Looking at the story Leake lays out, it is hard not to see history repeating itself, as foreign pressure – this time from China and America – prompts a renewed cycle of violence and development in the borderlands.

How the Pakistani state should respond to events like the 2014 Peshawar school attack without repeating the past mistakes is something that only Pakistanis themselves – including the people who live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata – can debate and decide upon. What Bayly’s and Leake’s accounts show is that both military operations and development have a history — one that has not been altogether pleasant.

It is also a history that remains as off limits for most Pakistani citizens as it is for foreign historians. Leake, for instance, made it to the National Documentation Centre (NDC) in Islamabad but she faced difficulties in accessing documents there. Her most illuminating finds come from British, American and Indian archives; Bayly, similarly, relies on the English-language British colonial archives in London and Delhi. As the two authors admit, their choice of documents tends to reproduce a view of Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands as inescapably internationalised. This choice – forced on them by the archives available to them – also reduces the role of local actors and local contingencies.

In short, what is missing in the two books is not so much a specific archival citation as a broader historiographical conversation to be led by scholars from Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, intimately familiar with the regional languages. Having inherited not only a state but also the colonial archives from the British, Pakistanis might prove themselves better at studying the latter in order to reflect on the former. Bayly’s and Leake’s books are valuable reminders of how and why that task still matters.