

Monday, November 12, 2012

## Impatient for Pashtunistan

By Stanley A. Weiss

**WASHINGTON**-- On November 12, 1893 -- 119 years ago today -- Afghanistan's Amir Rahman Khan and Britain's Foreign Secretary for India, Sir Mortimer Durand, drew a line across the roof of the world. Running roughly 1,600 miles through the rugged peaks of Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan, the Durand Line was intended to mark "the limit of their respective spheres of influence, so that for the future there may be no difference of opinion on the subject." (Should "any difference of detail" arise, the agreement stated, they were to be "settled in a friendly spirit.")

It is uncertain whether the "Iron Amir" fully understood the English document to which he ostensibly affixed his signature, or whether he acquiesced only because the agreement's final article increased by a half the Amir's existing British retainer of 1.2 million rupees. What is certain is that no subsequent Afghan government officially recognized the agreement, and that for the millions of Pashtun tribesmen whose ancestral homeland was unceremoniously sundered by British surveyors, the line meant nothing.

While the Brits' biplane bombers engaged in early aerial counterinsurgency campaigns to secure the frontier in their Central Asian "Great Game" with Russia, as British India partitioned into Pakistan in 1947 and Afghan dynasty gave way to Taliban ascendancy, the Pashtuns continued to travel freely back and forth, trading wives, grazing goats, smuggling drugs, and tending their farms on either side of the poorly demarcated border. Bloodlines trumped borderlines. To this day, some Afghan border police commute from their homes in Pakistan.

So it was with a sense of the symmetrical tragedy of history that on November 12, 2001, U.S. and coalition forces captured Kabul, only to watch Taliban fighters melt into the borderlands delineated by Durand a century earlier.

A decade later, as the U.S. readies to pull out American troops by 2014, the "Af-Pak" border region remains the home of unbowed Taliban insurgents, and the primary source of instability for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, the answer to these bewildering border challenges is not to exert further control but to secure a vacuum -- a country carved out between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which the Pashtuns can finally call their own.

On many Taliban maps, the length of the border with Pakistan is already labeled "Pashtunistan." And it's easy to understand why the nearly 50 million ethnic Pashtuns native to the region -- 12.5 million in Afghanistan, and 30 million in Pakistan -- dream of independence. Though their daily lives are little hindered by Durand's doodling, these members of the world's largest tribal society chafe at any directive from Kabul or Islamabad. In fact, some argue that self-rule is so central to Pashtun identity that they are not true Pashtuns without it. They resent the corruption in both capitals, and agitate for greater development and more equitable treatment.

The ongoing Af-Pak war has only inflamed Pashtun nationalism, exacerbating longstanding tensions with Islamabad and Kabul, while American military movements create new enmities daily. Revenge, a central part of the code of Pashtunwali that governs the tribes, ensures that nearly every drone strike casualty swells the ranks of the Taliban, already largely comprised of Pashtun warriors.

As Harvard research fellow Hassan Abbas notes, "Pashtuns are

at the heart of insurgency in both Pakistan and Afghanistan," with nationalism gradually morphing into a resurgent Taliban extremism. This creeping extremism was horrifically illustrated with the recent shooting of 14-year-old education advocate, Malala Yousafzai, in Pakistan's Swat Valley -- the heart of any would-be Pashtunistan -- for which the Taliban remains unapologetic.

Partially shaken out of its decades-long double-dealing with extremist elements, Pakistan has belatedly attempted to exert control over its lawless tribal areas. Yet as Asia scholar Selig Harrison writes, "sending Punjabi soldiers into Pashtun territory to fight jihadists pushes the country ever closer to an ethnically defined civil war, strengthening Pashtun sentiment for an independent 'Pashtunistan.'" On both sides of the border, America's unreliable allies only provoke -- they cannot pacify.

Meanwhile, despite optimistic assessments ahead of the Afghanistan pullout and the 2014 Afghan elections, few believe the fragile status quo will last. The Taliban have reentered Afghanistan's most peaceful provinces. Anti-American sentiment is running white-hot among the Pakistani public, while at the same time, atrocious incidents like the Pakistani couple who killed their 15-year-old daughter with acid for looking at a boy have left Americans wondering why we support Pakistan.

Tellingly, the troubling rise in so-called "green on blue" attacks by Afghan army and police on U.S. and NATO forces -- there have been 53 this year alone -- lays bare the glaring truth of Pashtun sentiment: whether the foreign presence comes from Kabul, Islamabad, or Fort Bragg, they do not want us there.

So what if, instead, the U.S. pushed for the creation of an independent Pashtunistan between the Indus River to the east and the Hindu Kush mountains to the west? Working with the U.N. and NATO allies, in concert with a *loya jirga* -- a grand council of the tribes -- the international community could offer development assistance in exchange for the Pashtuns abiding by international conventions and policing the Taliban within their borders. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan would lose territory -- a thought that petrifies Islamabad -- but left to their own devices, the Pashtuns could begin building their own nation, rather than destabilizing their neighbors.

Stepping back, imagine a similar approach to dozens of other former colonies turned global hotspots, from Syria to Myanmar. Imagine an international system where culture, not colonialism, determined the lines on the land and self-determination was granted real, lasting international support. It would be a messy process (and white Westerners are perhaps the least qualified to recommend such reconfigurations), but could it be any worse than the artificial and willfully indifferent mapmaking of the preceding centuries?

Given its vital importance to regional -- indeed, global -- stability, perhaps Pashtunistan is the place to start.

After all, this is no longer the "Great Game." As with most imperialistic chess matches, it was never much of a game at all. On this Veterans Day, November 11, 2012 -- a decade into America's longest war -- we remember the 2,152 of our sons and daughters who have laid down their lives defending a bygone British boundary.

The time has come to ask: where do we draw the line?

*Stanley A. Weiss is Founding Chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington. This is a personal comment.*