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The Perennial March:
Britain's Road to Afghanistan

Cole Peterson

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From 1826 to 1842, Britain tried – and failed – to counter Russian expansion in Central Asia, leading to the ultimately disastrous British invasion of Afghanistan. This was part of the so-called Great Game, a term that described British and Russian attempts in the nineteenth century to outmaneuver each other in the Near East and Central Asia.¹ The term, which might conjure up thoughts of Victorian adventure novels, is not an accurate one.² Warfare and conquest are not things that should be considered games. While the sense of scale and adventure might have seemed “great” to young British military men hoping to gain rank and prestige, the diplomatic, political, and military turmoil these men caused was anything but. Years of foreign policy that directed British interests towards Europe meant that, by the time they were willing to counter Russian influence in Central Asia and the Near East, they were woefully unprepared to do so. The methods used to counter Russia varied from ministry to ministry, often without any shared policy objectives. The duel between using military force, or using economic and diplomatic influence, was the driving force behind British blunders, and the ultimate failure to contain the expansion of Russian influence and territory in Central Asia and the Near East.

This duel led to one of Britain’s greatest military disasters, which could have been avoided. In 1838, the United Kingdom, through the East India Company, declared war on the remote country of Afghanistan. Hoping for advice on how to best defeat the Afghans, a member of the Company’s board of directors wrote to Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington.

Wellington, Britain’s foremost soldier, had built his reputation in India, and his opinion carried great weight. What the Duke had to say was, however, not what the Company wanted to hear.

“The consequences of crossing the Indus once,” Wellington wrote, “to settle a government in

¹ The Near East stretches from modern-day Turkey to Egypt and includes Iran (referred to as the Ottoman Empire and Persia respectively in this paper). Central Asia includes the various “-stan” countries: Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

² The term was first coined by Arthur Connolly but came to prominence after the publication of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*.

Afghanistan [more favorable to Britain], will be a perennial march into that country.’”³ Rather than take Wellington’s advice to heart and halt their mission, the Company marched forward. By 1842, the army that was once so confident in its success was in full retreat as thousands perished, hundreds were captured, and only dozens were left to tell the tale.

Castlereagh, Canning, and Eurocentrism

Although Britain's invasion of Afghanistan started in 1838, it is first necessary to start in 1815, the year when Britain began to shift its policies in the Near East and Central Asia. The final defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo was a defining moment for the victors of the Seventh Coalition. The great powers of Europe finally breathed a collective sigh of relief once the former French emperor was securely confined on St. Helena, returning to the peace conference in Vienna that Napoleon had temporarily interrupted. Most of the European states sent representatives to the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), the peace conference established to bring lasting peace to the European continent for the first time in over thirty years. Although all the participants had a role in the final settlement, the greatest issues were decided by the five great powers: Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and France. Out of those five, two could be considered the greatest of the great powers – Britain and Russia. Britain was France’s great enemy during this era, with the two states at war almost uninterrupted since 1792. Not only that, but Britain was the great naval power of Europe as well as the financier of the various coalition wars against France.

The other greatest of the great powers was Russia. Russia and Britain appeared in many respects to be the opposite of one another. Russia’s great strength was its army, which had

³ George Anderson and M. Subedar, *The Expansion of British India (1818-1858)*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1918), 18.

successfully pushed back the remnants of Napoleon's Grand Armée out of Russia and Central Europe, paving the way for the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty in France. The British may have enjoyed a great deal of prestige after Waterloo, but it was the Russian army that ultimately made Wellington's victory possible. Britain and Russia also had very different political systems, with the more democratic Britain often butting heads with the more autocratic Russia. The two empires, however, shared one main characteristic: both were global powers, and both had a great interest in both Asia and Europe. Britain was the paramount European power in India by way of the East India Company, while Russia held more territory in Asia than it did in Europe. Britain was highly aware of its dual role as a European and Asian power. Napoleon planned to deprive Britain of its Indian colonial empire with his invasion of Egypt, while the "great" Russian tsars Peter I and Catherine II harbored designs on India. The British fear that Russia desired its Indian territory would come to shape British foreign policy, even if that fear turned out to be unfounded.

Believing that Russia held designs on India, Britain had relied on various allies to protect its empire in India before and during the Napoleonic wars. While able to use its navy to move material and men to the subcontinent, the British in particular relied on the friendliness of Persia to guard India's western frontier against potential invasion. The two states signed a treaty in 1800 stipulating that "God willing, the friendship between the two great governments will be everlasting," along with Persian guarantees that it would not act as an ally of either France or Afghanistan.⁴ God, apparently, was not willing to grant everlasting friendship to the two countries. In 1807, Persia looked to France for a military alliance against Russia, although these plans never came to fruition.⁵

⁴ Hasan-e Fasa'i's, *History of Persia Under Qājār Rule*, trans. Heribert Busse (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 95.

⁵ J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 82.

The first to break up this friendship was Britain, which by 1813 had different priorities. Napoleon was retreating to France after his defeat in Russia, and Britain looked to drag Russia back into an anti-French coalition. Britain's foreign secretary Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, needed Russian goodwill and Persia looked like the place to earn it. Persia was still at war with Russia, even though it never secured the French alliance, and Castlereagh, writing to Britain's ambassador at the Russian court, hoped the war would end quickly, believing that the Persians would sue for peace after Russia's recent successes.⁶ Castlereagh also wrote that he would be visiting Count Lieven, the Russian ambassador in London, to discuss British relations with Persia. Noting that the treaty of friendship was constructed when Russia and France were aligned against Britain, Castlereagh added that "...the former power [Russia] will not be surprised if we looked a little anxiously to the preservation of India under such a combination."⁷ While being a little anxious about India's defense might have undersold British concerns, the key takeaway was that Castlereagh appeared to view these concerns as nonexistent in the present. Castlereagh was willing to sacrifice Britain's influence in Persia for the sake of Russia, but also for peace in Europe. Castlereagh, like many, failed to understand this tradeoff between European and Asian interests, if he cared to understand it at all.

If Castlereagh took Britain a small step away from Persia, his successor took a giant leap. George Canning and Castlereagh, as will be seen, often occupied opposite ends of foreign policy decisions in the Tory Party. One of the few areas on which they could agree, however, was Persia. Canning, unlike Castlereagh, was openly hostile towards Persia and those who looked to

⁶ Lord Castlereagh, *Correspondence, Despatches, and other Papers, of Viscount Castlereagh, Second Marquess of Londonderry, Volume 8*, ed. Charles William Vane, Marquess of Londonderry, 12 vols. (London: William Shoberl, 1848-53), 303,

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Memoirs_and_Correspondence_of_Viscount_C/K3sNAAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.; Edward Ingram, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775-1842* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1984), 166.

⁷ Castlereagh, vol. 8, 303.

defend British interests there. By 1826, Persia found itself at war with Russia again, calling on Britain to honor the terms of a different treaty that promised a subsidy in case Persia was invaded by a European power. The Duke of Wellington, in a letter to Canning, acknowledged that the Persians were not subject to the subsidy, but were able to ask for British mediation by another treaty article.⁸ Canning agreed with Wellington in his response but went even further, suggesting that the whole treaty should be annulled, calling it a "...most unlucky effort of negotiation."⁹

At a time when Russia worked to expand its influence militarily, Castlereagh's detachment and Canning's dismissal of Britain's alliance with Persia made little sense. Both men failed to understand one thing: Britain's territory in India meant that it had to be concerned with both Europe and Asia. They seemed convinced that, in the case of Persia, Russia was not a threat; in fact, Russia should be *allowed* to interfere with Persia despite British guarantees of support. The idea that Russia, which was perceived as a state willing to swap sides as needed, would remain a steadfast ally seemed absurd to Britain.¹⁰ Castlereagh and Canning both worked to distance themselves from the Holy Alliance of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Canning more so than Castlereagh.¹¹ Even when considering Canning's desire to work closely with Russia, which will be discussed in more detail below, previous attempts to restrain Russian expansion in Europe were successful with the collaboration of all the great powers working together. Castlereagh and Canning sacrificed British influence in Persia for short-term gains in Europe, which at the time appeared to be the necessary thing to do; the peace of Europe could not be

⁸ Wellington, *Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington, K.G., Volume 3*. ed. his son, the Duke of Wellington, 'in continuation of the former series,' 8 vols. (London: John Murray, 1857-80), 466, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000271353>.

⁹ Wellington, vol. 3, 467.

¹⁰ Austria's former alliance with Napoleon was conveniently forgotten about. Britain's more permanent interest in countering France trumped concerns about potentially untrustworthy allies.

¹¹ The Holy Alliance was a creation of Tsar Alexander designed to draw the powers of Europe together under the common theme of a shared Christian religion. Castlereagh, skeptical of Alexander, did not allow Britain to be drawn into the Holy Alliance.

blocked by British interests in Persia. Castlereagh and particularly Canning's pre-existing perception of the usefulness of Britain's alliance with Persia likely made the decision an easy one. That, coupled with the way Britain failed to fulfill its treaty terms, meant that later ministries were left to deal with the long-term consequences of disengaging from Persia.

The Greek Revolt and the Eastern Question

Castlereagh, along with his Austrian counterpart Prince Klemens von Metternich, had achieved his goal of securing peace in Europe, creating the Congress System. The system, a byproduct of the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), was designed to allow the great powers of Europe to come together to solve issues diplomatically rather than by force. Metternich also wanted the Congress powers to put down revolutions, a concern shared by the powers of the Holy Alliance but not necessarily by Britain. As the years since 1815 passed, revolutions erupted in Portugal, Spain, and Italy that looked to implement more democratic forms of government. Britain, with its constitutional monarchy, often found itself sympathizing more with the revolutionaries than the autocratic European powers. While the Congress System held together despite Britain's lack of enthusiasm for crushing revolutions, it began to break apart in 1821 as it tried to deal with a revolt of the Greek population in the Ottoman Empire.

The fact that the Greek revolt even occurred was another sign of the Ottoman Empire's decline in the eyes of the European powers. Although Castlereagh had tried to bring the Ottomans into the Congress System, thus ensuring that the powers of Europe would work to crush revolutions in the Ottoman Empire and preserve its legitimacy, this did not happen. As a result, Europe was conflicted about how to deal with the Greek rebellion. The tsar, Alexander I, sympathized with the Greeks at a personal level. Russia saw itself as the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christianity, and the tsar longed to defend the Orthodox Greeks against their Muslim

Ottoman overlords. Metternich could not allow any Russian intervention in Greece, believing that it would be the end of European peace:

The first and most certain effect of the war would be a general attack on the Alliance, the existence of which would become doubtful if one of the allied Courts should take upon itself the burden of the war, and which would cease to be formidable in the eyes of the revolutionists when the forces of several of the Powers were employed in the East.¹²

Metternich wished to hold another meeting to discuss Russian intervention in European revolts, hoping that he and Castlereagh would be able to convince the tsar to step back from his desire to put down illegitimate revolts. There was one problem: Castlereagh committed suicide in August 1822.

Canning, although holding similar perspectives to Castlereagh regarding Asia, was his opposite on European affairs. Canning detested the autocratic tendencies of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, and was not disposed to take up Castlereagh's role as Metternich's partner in restraining Alexander. In fact, Canning held little interest at all in the revolutions popping up around Europe, except for Spain in relation to its American holdings. "...In the present state of the world," wrote Canning to the Cabinet, "no questions relating to continental Europe can be more immediately and vitally important to Great Britain than those which relate to [South] America."¹³ Wellington, the last-minute British ambassador to the Congress meeting at Verona due to Castlereagh's death, received similar instructions from Canning, making it very clear that Britain would not be part of any intervention to quash the revolts either in Spain or in South America.¹⁴

Metternich, who historian Rory Muir notes stood with Britain's stance of non-intervention in

¹² Metternich, Vol. 3, p. 603. Klemens von Metternich, *Memoirs of Prince Metternich, 1815 – 1829, Volume 3*. ed. Prince Richard Metternich, trans. Alexander Napier and Gerard Smith, 8 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880-82), 603, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001599798>.

¹³ George Canning, *Some Official Correspondence of George Canning, Volume 1*, ed. Edward Stapleton, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887), 48.

https://books.google.com/books/about/Some_Official_Correspondence_of_George_C.html?id=T3vFAAAAMAAJ.

¹⁴ Rory Muir, *Wellington: Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814–1852*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 194.; Wellington, vol. 1, 304.

principle, could not spread his influence on the tsar too thin; he needed Alexander's support in Greece first and foremost.¹⁵ Britain, as a result of Canning's policy of non-intervention, was becoming an isolated, reactive diplomatic power rather than one engaged with the continent, helping dictate the peace; a large shift from the Congress of Vienna.

The British were not left on the sidelines for long, even if Canning wished not to become entangled in Europe. By 1826, four years after Verona, major developments took place. The Ottomans and their vassal Egypt fully committed troops to Greece, and atrocities committed by both sides made European intervention increasingly likely. Additionally, in the winter of 1825 the Greek's champion, Tsar Alexander I, died. The new tsar, Nicholas I, was virtually unknown in Europe. Having crushed a revolution by the Decembrists, a group of military officers who looked to stop Nicholas from ascending to the throne, Nicholas was predisposed to detest any revolution against an established order.¹⁶ Would Nicholas be in favor of intervention in Greece, as his predecessor had been, or would he look to crush the revolt? Canning, hoping to find out, sent Wellington on a mission to St. Petersburg in the spring of 1826 to discuss the matter with the tsar.¹⁷

Wellington's greatest achievements were the results of his battlefield victories, but relatively little attention is paid to his career as a diplomat. Most biographies of Wellington tend to gloss over his post-Waterloo career, but he had considerable experience in dealing with diplomacy. He was a close friend and ally of Castlereagh, and after Castlereagh's death, Wellington carried the torch of continued cooperation within the Congress System.¹⁸ Wellington also served in various diplomatic posts, serving as a representative at congresses including at

¹⁵ Muir, 194-195.

¹⁶ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs: 1613-1918*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 349-350.

¹⁷ M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question: 1774-1923*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 64.

¹⁸ Muir notes that Wellington was considered for the Foreign Office following Castlereagh's death. Muir, 185.

Vienna and Verona, as well as ambassador to France. He knew the leading statesmen of Europe, and arguably surpassed them in prestige; one reason Canning chose to select Wellington for his mission to Russia was that, outside of King George IV, he could talk to the Tsar as an equal.¹⁹ This experience, and his closeness with Castlereagh, meant that Wellington was also very opinionated and disagreed with Canning. Wellington did not support the Greeks but did not do so out of an ideological position; in fact, he had no special feelings for either the Ottomans or the Greeks.²⁰ Instead, Wellington believed that the great danger of the Greek revolt was Russian intervention that would surely bring Austrian and French intervention, plunging Europe back into a general war.²¹

Canning's gamble to bind Britain with Russia bore fruit, as Wellington returned with the Protocol of St. Petersburg. The Protocol stated that Britain had the option to mediate between the Greeks and the Ottomans, but if this failed then Russia and Britain could intervene militarily either together or individually.²² Wellington's visit bore fruit, but it was rotten from the inside. Canning's efforts to prevent Russia from going to war to protect the Greeks failed; Britain consented to an agreement that allowed Russia to intervene in Greece with or without them, making intervention all the more likely. The architect of Russia's foreign policy, Count Karl Nesselrode, used this advantage to extract concessions from the Ottomans under the Convention of Akkerman.²³ Canning, realizing his mistake, now looked for other Europeans to help contain Russia. He found a willing partner in France, and in 1827 Britain, Russia, and France signed the

¹⁹ Muir, 234-35.

²⁰ The question of Greek and Turk is trifling in comparison with the importance of the other [Russian intervention]. Wellington, vol. 3, 114.

²¹ Wellington, vol. 3, 114.

²² Anderson, 65.

²³ Anderson, 65.

Treaty of London, an almost exact copy of the St. Petersburg Protocol.²⁴ Again, though, Canning drew Britain closer to war rather than away from it. When the Ottomans declined to accept the tripartite mediation, the British, French, and Russians destroyed the Ottoman-Egyptian fleet at Navarino.²⁵ The British public was not pleased with the outcome – as discussed below, even Wellington believed the battle was a disaster – but the Treaty of London bound Britain to the Russian cause, whether Parliament or the public agreed.

Canning's plan to circumvent the Congress System and work directly with Russia failed. The Protocol of St. Petersburg, signed by Britain, allowed Russia to enforce its demands on the Ottomans. By the time Canning realized this, it was too late to unite all the European powers against Russia. His death in the late summer of 1827, only months before Navarino, left the succeeding ministry in a difficult position. Russian influence appeared to be spreading everywhere, from the Balkans to Persia. It was, however, not a grand strategy conducted by the Russians.²⁶ They benefited from it, to be certain, but if the "Great Game" is defined by Britain's rivalry with Russia, then Britain was not trying very hard to fight against its rival. Rather than blame Canning for these failures, though, future ministries fanned the flame of Russophobia as they looked to justify political positions that had no basis in reality. They went looking for the Russian bear and found it, but only because they expected and wanted to find it.

The Role of the Eastern Question

The plight of the Greeks might appear utterly unrelated to the defense of India, but to understand why the British believed that the Russians desired to expand in Central Asia it becomes necessary to examine the "Eastern Question." By the nineteenth century, the great

²⁴ Anderson, 66.

²⁵ Aksan, 343-44; Anderson, 68.

²⁶ Anderson, 86.

powers of Europe believed that the Ottoman Empire was in decline. The Ottomans administered their territory by using governors, who held various degrees of authority and power; some, like Muhammad Ali of Egypt, were highly independent, and as a result often disloyal.²⁷ Excluded from the terms of the Congress of Vienna, courtesy of pressure from Tsar Alexander, the Eastern Question served as a corollary to Russian expansionism in Central Asia in the eyes of the British.²⁸

Tsar Alexander was not the first Russian ruler to harbor designs against the Ottomans. In fact, he followed a Russian tradition that stretched back to Peter the Great a century earlier. The strategic problem the Russian tsars confronted regarding the Ottomans concerned Constantinople, or more specifically the Turkish Straits. The straits separate the Mediterranean from the Black Sea, meaning that any naval vessel that wished to cross from one to the other needed to pass through the straits. This forced the Russian Black Sea fleet to rely on the goodwill of the Ottomans, who held the right to close the straits to foreign vessels at war. As one might imagine, Russia wanted to move freely through the straits and, if possible, prevent enemy warships from moving into the Black Sea. As discussed above, Russia also wished to protect the Orthodox Christians living within the Ottoman territories. Seeing itself as the protector of the Orthodox religion, Russia wanted significantly more influence in the Balkans to achieve its goal of protecting the Orthodox community that lived under the Muslim Ottomans.

The British also understood the strategic importance of the straits. As the same rules would apply to them, if the British were at war with Russia, then the Ottomans could decide to either allow Russian warships to sail into the Mediterranean or permit the British navy to enter

²⁷ Virginia H. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged*, (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007), 306-07.

²⁸ It should be noted that Castlereagh wished for the Ottomans to be members of the Congress System. Anderson, 47.

the Black Sea. In both instances, it would restrict the British naval superiority in the region, making it more difficult for the British to gain an upper hand. As has been stated above, the British were also worried about Russian expansion. Should Russian influence become paramount in Constantinople, then there would be considerable pressure on Persia – even if Castlereagh and Canning allowed British influence to languish – and the Mediterranean.

Wellington's Ministry and the Art of Damage Control

These issues formed the context of the British response to the remainder of the Greek insurrection and the start of attempts to expand its influence in Central Asia. The ministry formed after Canning's death, led by Lord Goderich, was weak and collapsed at the start of 1828. In January, King George IV called on Wellington to form a ministry. Concerning foreign policy, the ministry was immediately tasked with cleaning up the fallout from Navarino. When the King opened Parliament at the end of January his speech, written by the Cabinet, called Navarino “wholly unexpected” and stated that “His Majesty deeply laments that this conflict should have occurred with the Naval Force of an ancient Ally.”²⁹ A clear moderation from Canning's more pro-Greek policies, Wellington saw Navarino as an unprovoked event and the Allied task force as the aggressors; considering the language of the King's Speech, the Cabinet largely agreed.³⁰ Tying the British to Russia, which Canning hoped would moderate them, had dragged in another European power and only served to harden Ottoman resolve against France, Britain, and Russia.

²⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, 2nd ser., vol. 18 (1828), cc 1-4.

³⁰ Muir, 297, 308.

Russia was not making matters easy for the Wellington ministry. Ending its war with Persia, the Russians came out as the victors with the Treaty of Turkmenchay.³¹ The treaty, which forced Persia to cede or recognize Russian territory and pay reparations, was notable more for the clause that stated Russia would support the Persian heir to the throne, Abbas Mirza. Persian succession was not guaranteed, meaning that the treaty would have allowed Russia to intervene militarily in favor of Mirza.³² With troops freed up and Persia more firmly in Russia's sphere of influence, Nicholas decided to strike at the Ottomans, declaring war at the end of April.³³ Wellington staked out his position in a memorandum, believing that Nicholas was dictating his demands to the Allies and that he had no right to do so.³⁴ In the meantime, Wellington urged cooperation with France, bringing in Austria and Prussia, and creating terms that would be acceptable to both Russia and the other European powers.³⁵ The European powers had come together to stop France in 1815; Wellington hoped that Britain's re-entry to the Congress system would bring Europe together against Russia.

Ultimately, the plan worked. Nicholas and Nesselrode knew the consequences of capturing Constantinople, and seeing that Europe was moving against Russia, made peace with the Ottomans at Adrianople in 1829. Under the terms of the treaty, the principalities of Serbia, Moldova, and Wallachia were for all intents and purposes independent and under the Russian sphere of influence.³⁶ Additionally, Russian commercial vessels could now pass through the

³¹ Interesting to note that Sir John Malcolm, the British envoy in Persia, apparently visited the Russian commander and warned him of the repercussions if Russia took Persian territory, referencing the Congress of Vienna. Busse, 184.

³² Atkin, 158.

³³ Anderson, 69.

³⁴ Wellington, vol. 4, 303.

³⁵ Wellington, vol. 4, 303-304

³⁶ The Principalities were nominally still under Turkish suzerainty. Aksan, 361; Anderson, 73.

Turkish straits whenever they wished.³⁷ In a separate protocol, France, Britain, and Russia came together on a plan for an independent Greece, which the Ottomans would not recognize until 1832.³⁸ While Wellington appeared disappointed at times with the ministry's policies, ultimately the road for Russian intervention in the Greek revolt was decided by Canning's policies. Canning's followers, as might be expected, were disappointed with Wellington's policies on the Eastern Question. Henry Temple, the young Lord Palmerston, was vehement in his criticism, stating that "this is the fate of those who are unable to pursue a straight course, because their inclination leading one way, & necessity driving the other they are forced into the diagonal."³⁹ Palmerston would eventually have the opportunity to see that moving into the diagonal is often the best course.

Wellington, Containment, and the Start of the "Great Game"

During the 1828 Russo-Ottoman War, Wellington agreed with a memorandum authored by Edward Law, Lord Ellenborough, on British policy regarding Russia. Russia, in Ellenborough's eyes, had broken the Treaty of London by declaring war on the Ottomans; the British "[had] to do with a Power in which no trust can be placed, and which will make the disposition of its army an excuse for violating its word."⁴⁰ Ellenborough went on, concluding the memorandum with his thoughts on Britain's next steps:

Whatever our line of conduct now, let us constantly look to the restraining of Russian encroachments, and the diminution of Russian power, as the true and legitimate object of our policy. Let us begin to lay our plan now, and not throw away the opportunity of accomplishing an

³⁷ Aksan, 362; Anderson, 74.

³⁸ Anderson, 77.

³⁹ Muir, 361.

⁴⁰ Although not explicitly stated, the memorandum can be found in Wellington's dispatches, coupled with a quote by a frustrated Ellenborough mentioning the two agreed on diplomacy. Later, we also see Wellington agreeing with Ellenborough's methods for containing Russian influence. Wellington, vol. 5, 55; Ellenborough, vol. 1, 212.

object essential to the repose of Europe, which the rash ambition of Russia and the retributive judgment of Providence seem to have placed within our grasp.⁴¹

Snuck in at the end of the memorandum, Ellenborough argued for a drastic reevaluation of British foreign policy. Cooperation with Russia – a country on record of disregarding negotiated treaties – was no longer an effective policy. Only the restraining of Russian territorial expansion and influence, in a planned manner, would bring peace to Europe. Ellenborough proposed a form of containment, similar to the one proposed by George Kennan in 1947. The question was how it would be achieved.

Lord Ellenborough, a youthful, energetic minister, originally joined the Cabinet as Lord Privy Seal but eventually ended up as the President of the Board of Control. The Board acted as governmental oversight over the East India Company, meaning Ellenborough would be concerned about perceived Russian expansion. Writing in his diary, Ellenborough believed that “...we [Britain] have too much sacrificed our interests on the side of India to a weakness in favor of Russia,” later adding that “I must endeavor to retrieve our affairs there [in Persia].”⁴² While Ellenborough was often prone to making exaggerated claims, his rationale presented here is not an absurd position, especially when placed in the context of Turkmenchay.⁴³ Wellington agreed that Persia should become a focus of British policy once again, but the two differed on the methods. Ellenborough advocated an aggressive approach to counter Russian influence in Persia, going so far as to write privately “I would, in Persia and everywhere, endeavour [sic] to create the means of throwing the whole world in arms upon Russia at the first convenient time.”⁴⁴

Wellington, seeing the poor performance of the Persian military against Russia, believed that

⁴¹ Wellington, vol. 5, 56.

⁴² Lord Ellenborough, *A Political Diary, 1828-1830, volume 1*, ed. Lord Colchester, 2 vols., (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1881), 224, 233.

⁴³ It should be noted that Ellenborough was also somewhat aware of exaggerated claims presented to him. He found a report from Sir John Malcolm “very curious, and worked up à la ‘Walter Scott’.” Vol. 1, 46.

⁴⁴ Ellenborough, vol. 1, 238.

Persia would not be a useful ally in the event of a Russian invasion of India. He argued that the best course of action was “peace and good neighbourship [sic],” along with providing British officers to train the Persian military to maintain internal stability.⁴⁵ Ellenborough acquiesced, likely due to Wellington’s strong personality, and set the tone early that the Wellington ministry’s policy would be one of soft power.

Seeing that Persia served as no barrier against a potential Russian invasion, Ellenborough looked for different ways the British could contain Russian forces. As he spent more time as President of the Board of Control, he became more and more concerned that a Russian invasion of India in the northwest was possible, and that Britain would not be able to respond quickly.⁴⁶ To be able to deliver information quickly to London in case of a Russian invasion, Ellenborough brought two proposals to Wellington. First, the government should invest in methods to discover alternate methods of transmitting information between London and Calcutta.⁴⁷ Second, the government should attempt to navigate the Indus River using steamships and, in conjunction, spread British trade to Afghanistan and Bokhara.⁴⁸ Both ideas made sense within Wellington’s view of containing Russia. The former would have allowed Britain to receive updates about a potential invasion faster than normal, allowing them to respond before the Russians advanced too far.⁴⁹ The latter was an attempt to use Britain’s economic power to bring the various states of Central Asia into its sphere, believing that steam transportation could deliver goods cheaper and faster than Russian caravans.⁵⁰ The goal, again, was to bring these states under Britain’s influence but not to conquer them. In a dispatch sent to the Governor-General of India, a

⁴⁵ Wellington, vol. 5, 117-118. It should be noted that Wellington wanted the Persians to pay for these officers.

⁴⁶ Ellenborough, vol. 2, 122-123, 125.

⁴⁷ Ingram, 153; Kelly, 263.

⁴⁸ Ellenborough, vol. 2, 150.

⁴⁹ Kelly, 263-264. The idea was not new, with former British officials in India advocating for steamships to be placed on either side of the Suez isthmus to transport mail rather than overland or around the Cape of Good Hope.

⁵⁰ Ellenborough, vol. 2, 150, 152

proposed diplomatic mission was to “introduce English goods, and not English men, into Cabool [sic] and Central Asia, and our desire being to effect this object silently,” while also stating that British allies in Sind and Punjab should be aware that this mission was of a “purely commercial character.”⁵¹

Regarding the Ottomans, Wellington again changed his position. Writing to Lord Aberdeen in August 1829, Wellington stated that “we mean to maintain the power of the Porte.”⁵² However, the Cabinet disliked the facts on the ground. The Ottomans appeared weak, meaning that a stronger Greek state would serve as the best barrier against Russian expansion.⁵³ Ironically, though, the Russians also wanted to keep the Ottomans strong, or at the very least they wanted the Ottomans to continue to exist. As mentioned above, tsar Nicholas knew that the consequences of pushing for a total victory against the Ottomans would be disastrous. Nicholas constructed a special committee of ministers, who concluded that a breakup of the Ottoman Empire would be disadvantageous; rather than a weak, Russian-influenced Ottoman state, it would be bordered by strengthened Austrian, French, and British empires.⁵⁴ The problem between the British and Russian positions, though, was perspective. For the Russians, the ultimate terms of Adrianople were more moderate than what they could have been – the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. For the British, the fact that Russia went to war against the Ottomans was bad enough. When coupled with its war against Persia, as well as the fact that Russian territorial gains were mostly in Asia, it is understandable why the government was so concerned

⁵¹ Instructions from the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company to the Governments in India, from September 14th, 1827, to Present [April 15, 1839], 14-15, Mss Eur. F213/31. (Need something more there)

⁵² Wellington, vol. 6, 115.

⁵³ Anderson, 70.

⁵⁴ Anderson, 71.

with Russian expansion.⁵⁵ From the Russian view, however, Nicholas and his ministers moderated their positions, and in both Persia and the Ottoman Empire the Russians looked to uphold preexisting legitimate governments. Rather than being seen as a stabilizing force, though, Russia's actions towards Persia and the Ottomans were viewed as expansionist by Britain.

When examining the policies of the Wellington ministry, and specifically its use of economic rather than military power, it is important to note that they believed that a Russian invasion of India was unlikely to occur; their main concern was to curb the expansion of Russian influence, not to prepare for an invasion. At any rate, even if an invasion were to occur, Wellington and others believed that it would be a matter of when, not if, the Russians would be defeated.⁵⁶ Their true fear behind a Russian invasion, real or imagined, was an Indian mutiny.⁵⁷ In the Secret Committee dispatch on a Bokharan diplomatic mission, the Committee noted "we dread, therefore, not so much actual invasion by Russia, as the moral effect which would be produced amongst our own subjects in India, and amongst the Princes with whom we are allied...."⁵⁸ The British were so concerned with the defense of India because they believed that even the idea of a Russian invasion would undermine their control. It made sense to reduce Russian prestige and influence rather than match it militarily because the army in India was needed to secure internal peace; remove the Russians from the equation, and the British believed that the risk of mutiny would decrease.

Wellington's strategy, coming out of the fallout from the Greek revolt, was to contain the spread of Russian influence. The ministry's policy, therefore, was a general one; the Near East

⁵⁵ It should be noted that not all officials were concerned about Russian expansion. Lord Heytesbury, ambassador at St. Petersburg, often tried to make the point that Russia wanted to spread its influence, not its borders. His warnings often fell on deaf ears. Anderson, 72.

⁵⁶ Ingram, 157.

⁵⁷ Ingram, 157.

⁵⁸ Secret Committee, 14, Mss Eur. F213/31.

and Central Asia were regions that the ministry targeted as areas of focus, but Wellington's containment extended to Europe as well. This policy was one of soft power, using British economic and diplomatic power to combat Russian influence. Wellington and Ellenborough believed that a Russian invasion of India was unlikely, the former more so than the latter, but thought that countering Russian expansionism would prevent mutiny and best maintain British power in India. They believed that the British military would, eventually, defeat Russian forces anyway. It made more diplomatic and economic sense to invest in trade missions and goodwill rather than build up a large military. In short, Wellington hoped to win the hearts and minds of Central Asian and Near Eastern states rather than fight a pitched battle.

Lord Palmerston and the Eastern Question

Wellington's ministry fell a little over two years in the late spring of 1830. The last of the great statesmen who presided over the post-war peace refused to be synonymous with the reform of the British constitution, leading the way for younger – relatively speaking – and more ideological politicians to find a place in the government. Henry Temple, introduced previously as Lord Palmerston, came to dominate British foreign policy for more than thirty years as both Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister.⁵⁹ Notably, Palmerston also served in Wellington's ministry briefly but resigned over clashing opinions between the more conservative Tories and the Canningites, of which Palmerston was one.

Palmerston's connection with Canning colored his outlook on the world, particularly in his early years as Foreign Secretary. Like Canning, and therefore unlike Wellington, Palmerston's idea of foreign policy was more ideological; he held, for example, strong pro-

⁵⁹ Palmerston's time as Prime Minister falls outside the scope of this paper, while the large focus of his time as Foreign Secretary will be under the ministry of William Lamb, Lord Melbourne.

Greek feelings during the Greek Revolt.⁶⁰ He was also relatively inexperienced. His only Cabinet position was in Wellington's ministry, while previous foreign policy experts had met the other statesmen of Europe and guided Britain through the tumult of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.⁶¹ Finally, and most importantly, Palmerston was much more willing to use British military power whereas Wellington was not. Comparing Palmerston to his Tory counterpart, Lord Aberdeen, biographer David Brown made an important note: "Palmerston viewed victory at a distance measured both geographically and temporally.... Aberdeen had witnessed the levelling and humbling aspect of war, Palmerston saw only the glory."⁶² Palmerston, unlike Wellington and Aberdeen, was willing to use the military as a tool because he was less exposed to the horrors of war as they were, marking a large shift from the more peaceful policies pursued by previous ministries.

Palmerston's lack of foreign policy experience, especially concerning the Near East, showed itself early. Although the Greek revolt was settled, at least to the European powers, new trouble was brewing. The Ottoman sultan, Mahmud II, and his governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, despised each other. Ali, wanting compensation for his efforts to suppress the Greek revolt, attacked his suzerain in the summer of 1832.⁶³ The British, more concerned with events in Belgium, were nonplussed.⁶⁴ Ottoman solicitations for British help fell on deaf ears, while some in the Cabinet hoped that Ali would succeed in his goal and ultimately destroy the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁵ The Russians, on the other hand, were quick to act. Tsar Nicholas still resolved to maintain the Ottomans, as he had done at Adrianople, and saw the conflict with Ali as an

⁶⁰ Many Britons subscribed to the ideology of Philhellenism, which was based on prevailing ideas about ancient Greek contributions to the Western world.

⁶¹ Palmerston was Secretary at War for a short period, but this was not a Cabinet position.

⁶² David Brown, *Palmerston: A Biography*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 105.

⁶³ Anderson, 77-78.

⁶⁴ Anderson, 79.

⁶⁵ Anderson, 79; Brown, 177.

opportunity to further bring the empire under the Russian sphere.⁶⁶ The result of Britain's indecisiveness was the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi, signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the summer of 1833. The treaty stipulated mutual defense in case of attack, but more important was a secret article stating that the Ottomans would close the Turkish Straits to any foreign warship if Russia were attacked.⁶⁷ While Russia certainly benefited from having its southern flank secure from a potential naval attack, the actual terms of the secret article are not different from how the Ottomans acted historically. The treaty was not perceived, though, as a reiteration of Ottoman tradition; Palmerston noted that it was like treaties signed between the Governor General and various Indian states, making them subjects of the East India Company in all but name.⁶⁸ Russia appeared to be turning the Ottoman Empire into a protectorate, all while Britain continued to stand back and let it happen.⁶⁹

The erosion of Britain's position in the Near East appeared to be complete. If there were any remaining doubts about Russian influence being paramount in Constantinople, they were largely quashed courtesy of Unkiar Skelessi. Palmerston, realizing what the government's inaction caused, ventured to right some of the wrongs. He believed that British naval power in the Mediterranean needed to be strengthened, along with sending military missions to the Ottoman sultan, the former being more successful than the latter.⁷⁰ The most important effect, though, of the treaty was the perception of continued Russian expansion, stoking the flames of Russophobia in Britain. Palmerston would preside over, and often harness, this Russophobia to ultimately disastrous ends.

⁶⁶ Anderson, 84.

⁶⁷ Anderson, 84; Askan, 375.

⁶⁸ Brown, 179.

⁶⁹ Anderson, 85.

⁷⁰ Askan, 377.

Palmerston, Forward Policy, and Afghanistan

As the Whig ministry dealt – or more accurately failed to deal – with the Eastern Question, their policy moved more in line with the idea proposed in Wellington’s memorandum. Palmerston wrote, "...our attention must be steadily directed to restrain the encroachments of Russia, whose greedy and indefatigable ambition of conquest is the great danger with which Europe at present is threatened."⁷¹ The main difference between the two was the failure of the Whig ministry to combat Russian encroachments and influence during the Egyptian affair, allowing the Russians to strengthen their hand with the Ottomans. Again, while Unkiar Skelessi did not radically alter the Russo-Turkish relationship, Britain saw it as a massive shift in the balance of power. As in Persia, British inaction was taken advantage of by the Russians. Attempts to co-opt France and Austria to contain Russia, as had been attempted during Russia’s intervention in the Greek revolt, failed; Palmerston and Metternich were both strong personalities who believed each other to be in the right.⁷² That left Britain on its own, with no European allies and unreliable options in the Ottomans and Persia.

As the Whigs looked for a solution to this problem, new avenues opened up in Central Asia. The trade mission to Bokhara, authorized near the end of the Wellington ministry by Ellenborough, appeared to bear fruit. A dispatch from the Secret Committee noted their desire to hear about the expedition conducted, as well as floating the idea of proposing commercial treaties with powers along the Indus River.⁷³ Interestingly, the dispatch notes that any potential treaty should be considered after much consideration, especially as treaties could lead to armed

⁷¹ Kenneth Bourne, *Palmerston: The Early Years, 1784-1841*, (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 559.

⁷² Bourne, 381-382

⁷³ Secret Committee, 26-27, Mss Eur. F213/31.

conflict between Britain and the other power.⁷⁴ The man who undertook the trade mission, Alexander Burnes, returned and reported that it was possible for British goods to sail up the Indus.⁷⁵ Upon his return in the winter of 1831, he was sent off again to Afghanistan to establish links with its ruler, Dost Mohammad.⁷⁶

During the 1830s, Afghanistan was fractured. Recovering from a violent struggle for the control of Kabul, Dost faced enormous problems. The Afghan economy was weak, as the loss of Kashmir and Peshawar to the Sikhs deprived Dost of a stable source of revenue.⁷⁷ Additionally, much of the country remained in the control of various tribes, not the government based in Kabul.⁷⁸ Dost worked to centralize Afghanistan, imposing his power on the various tribes by imposing new taxes, imposing the rule of law, and sharing a common religion.⁷⁹ Dost also wanted a more modern, European-style military; Dost hired primarily British-trained officers to achieve his goal of modernization, as well as gathered knowledge from Burnes on his mission to Kabul.⁸⁰ From the start of his rule, Dost exhibited no real antagonism against the British – he welcomed their various trade missions, he wanted their expertise to train his military, and he likely would have benefited from increased trade, as the majority of his new taxes were imposed on merchants.⁸¹

Everything pointed to a potential relationship between Britain and Dost. By 1835, William Lamb, Lord Melbourne, formed a new Whig ministry with Palmerston as Foreign

⁷⁴ Secret Committee, 26-27, Mss Eur. F213/31.

⁷⁵ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, (New York: Kodansha America, 1994), 139.

⁷⁶ Hopkirk, 140.

⁷⁷ Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 60; Willem Vogelsang, *The Afghans*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 243.

⁷⁸ Gregorian, 60

⁷⁹ Gregorian, 74-75, 77-80,

⁸⁰ Gregorian,

⁸¹ Gregorian, 80.

Secretary. Melbourne was the opposite of Wellington in Cabinet management, taking a detached, hands-off position from government policy. This gave Palmerston, who blamed the old Whig ministry for the failures in the Egyptian affair, much more control over foreign policy.⁸² In shifting the focus of foreign policy towards India and Central Asia directly, rather than through the Ottomans and Persia, Palmerston relied on John Hobhouse, President of the Board of Control. By March of that year, the EIC Secret Committee sent a dispatch to the Governor General urging him to keep a close eye on Afghanistan and the other neighboring states; concerned that the Sikh leader and British ally, Runjit Singh, would become too powerful by annexing Afghanistan, the Governor General was urged to play the powers in the region against each other to ensure that none had total control.⁸³

In September of 1835, George Eden – Lord Auckland – a friend of Palmerston's, was selected as the new Governor General of India.⁸⁴ Dost wrote to Auckland upon the Governor General's arrival in India, informing him that Afghanistan's foreign policy would be guided by Auckland's wishes; Dost hoped his letter would warn the British to put pressure on their Sikh ally to return Peshawar to Afghan rule.⁸⁵ Auckland received another dispatch from the Secret Committee urging him to use a variety of methods to combat Russian influence, eventually responding to Dost with indifference.⁸⁶ Auckland was prepared to talk about trade with Dost but refused to commit Britain to either side on the Peshawar issue; the British not only supported Runjit as an ally but also harbored the former, deposed Afghan leader Shah Shuja in India on a

⁸² Brown, 177.

⁸³ Secret Committee, 44-45, Mss Eur. F213/31.

⁸⁴ Brown, 529, 551.

⁸⁵ Auckland finally arrived in India in January of 1836. Frank H. Wallis, *A History of the British Conquest of Afghanistan and Western India, 1838 to 1849*, (Lewiston: Edwin Melten Press, 2009), 31.

⁸⁶ Wallis, 31; SC to GG, 25 June 1836.

pension.⁸⁷ Auckland sent Burnes on a trade mission to Afghanistan to follow up on a commercial treaty, and Dost received Burnes with welcome and discussed alternatives to the Peshawar issue.⁸⁸ Not only was Dost happy to, again, receive a British mission, but he also worked with Britain to solve his problem.

If Auckland was truly following the orders issued to him in the two Secret Committee dispatches, then he should have tried to work with Dost and Runjit over Peshawar, or at the very least secure the commercial treaty with Dost. Runjit might have been a British ally, but one who was growing too powerful – how better to check him than by giving support to Dost? This was not what happened, though. Burnes received instruction to tell Dost that he would be protected from Persian and Russian aggression, but only if he dropped his claims to Peshawar and refused to treat with Russia and Persia. When these failed to convince Dost, Burnes was instructed to inform him that Dost should align with the British government simply because it was in his best interest, although the British refused to let him expand into other territories nor provide Dost with aid in the event of invasion.⁸⁹ Economic theory teaches that people respond best to incentives, and the British offered only disincentives. Dost, while more pro-British than pro-Russian, moved away from Britain because of Britain's position.

Herat, Simla, and the First Anglo-Afghan War

As Auckland pushed Dost away in India, Palmerston hoped to come to an understanding in Persia. It was not meant to be. As Persia loomed on the edge of a succession crisis in 1834, Britain played a secondary role in the ascension of the new ruler, Muhammad Shah; while the Russians and British eventually backed the same candidate, it was a testament to the ultimate

⁸⁷ Wallis, 31.

⁸⁸ Wallis, 31-32.

⁸⁹ Wallis, 32.

erosion of British influence in Persia.⁹⁰ Palmerston wanted to renegotiate the defensive treaty of 1814 with the new shah, believing that it could prevent the shah from breaking the peace unnecessarily and giving Britain the first right to mediate in a conflict with a European power.⁹¹ Muhammad, already pro-Russian, refused to sign a new treaty and moved to attack Herat, an Afghan province, in 1837. The attack on Herat coincided with the arrival of a Russian officer, Jan Vitkevich, in Kabul.⁹² The Russian government, meanwhile, authorized neither action. The siege of Herat was a decision made by Muhammad, although urged on by the condemned Russian envoy; in Kabul, Dost made efforts to sideline Vitkevich, who returned to Russia disgraced.⁹³ It also did not matter that British counterparts in Herat and Kabul were performing similar actions – Henry Pottinger led the defenders of Herat against the Persians, while Burnes remained in Kabul to work with Dost. To the British, all that mattered was that the siege of Herat had to be stopped and that Dost was guilty by association.⁹⁴

Palmerston and Auckland, believing that diplomacy had failed when it had never truly been achieved in the first place, resorted to using the military to solve the problems. Regarding Persia, Palmerston officially declared the treaty of 1814 void, deciding soon after that a naval squadron should be sent to the island of Khark to occupy it.⁹⁵ Regarding Afghanistan, there was a seemingly apparent solution. Shah Shujah, still drawing a British pension, should be placed on the throne at Kabul – to top it off, he could sign a treaty with Runjit formally renouncing all claims on Peshawar. Auckland, writing from the city of Simla, issued a manifesto calling for

⁹⁰ Kelly, 287. SC to GG, 8 Feb 1834.

⁹¹ Palmerston to Hobhouse, May 6, 1836, Mss Eur F213/4

⁹² Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67. <https://www-cambridge-org.owu.idm.oclc.org/core/books/the-russian-conquest-of-central-asia/60AD9B4DF95196BEA2F8EF67AF0CB8BB>.

⁹³ Morrison, 68.

⁹⁴ Palmerston, in a letter to Hobhouse, believed that Russia would guarantee a defensive alliance between Russia and Afghanistan. Palmerston to Hobhouse, June 18 1838, Mss Eur F213/4.

⁹⁵ Palmerston to Hobhouse, July 18, 1838, Mss Eur F213/4.

Dost's removal. Auckland claimed that Dost was working to extend Persian, and by extension Russian, influence into India, which was not true.⁹⁶ The occupation of Khark was enough to draw the Persians away from Herat, thereby removing the main reason behind Auckland's manifesto, but he continued with the support of Palmerston and the home government.

Although the immediate justification for war was removed, Auckland stayed the course and declared war on Afghanistan in the winter of 1838.⁹⁷ The First Anglo-Afghan War has been covered in detail in other works, especially considering the purpose of this work is to discuss the buildup to the war.⁹⁸ At first, the campaign appeared to be a success. Shuja was installed with relative ease, but the problems mounted. Afghans saw British troops and money flood into the country, despite Auckland's assurances that Shuja would come in with loyal troops merely supported by Britain.⁹⁹ Ultimately, the situation was untenable. The East India Company, which still managed economic affairs in India, could not afford to bribe the Afghan tribes or finance the large Army of the Indus.¹⁰⁰ The more permanent occupation needed to secure Shuja could not be achieved, but the British would witness this firsthand. In the fall of 1841, Afghans in Kabul revolted against the British, killing Burnes, political agent Willian Macnaghten, and other civilians.¹⁰¹ The British retreat in January 1842, through the wintery mountains of Afghanistan, was a disaster. The result of the war, then, was the death of thousands of British, Indian, and Afghan soldiers, the loss of thousands of British Pounds poured into Afghanistan, and the return of Dost to the throne of Kabul.

⁹⁶ Dost even sent a letter to Auckland asking for British aid to maintain control over Herat. Wallis, 34.

⁹⁷ The British caravan following the Army of the Indus was laden with champagne and cigars, not to mention various servants and others. Clearly, the British expected an easy victory.

⁹⁸ An excellent recent work by Frank Wallis, *A History of the British Conquest of Afghanistan and Western India, 1838-1849*, has been referenced above. Also recommended is Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), along with Antoinette Burton's edited collection *The First Anglo-Afghan Wars: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁹⁹ Wallis, 54

¹⁰⁰ Wallis, 72.

¹⁰¹ Wallis, 88-89.

During the Anglo-Afghan War, the Russians undertook their own expedition to the Central Asian state of Khiva, facing similar results. Auckland, perhaps realizing the folly of the Afghan war, hoped that Britain and Russia would finally come to an understanding in Central Asia.¹⁰² Palmerston believed that the Russians could not be trusted, calling for the continued expansion of British influence despite its effects. He would not have the opportunity to see his policy through. The General Election of 1841 saw the Whigs thrown out of office, as Sir Robert Peel was called to form a new Conservative ministry. Ellenborough, who replaced Auckland as Governor General, ordered a punitive expedition against Afghanistan, the results of which were horrible. The British, taking revenge for the deaths caused by Afghans as well as the loss of prestige, slaughtered their way through the country. Peel and Aberdeen, now Foreign Secretary, met with Russian ministers to establish a peaceful settlement in Central Asia between the two powers, although this never came to fruition.¹⁰³

Conclusion

What, then, are the lessons to be learned from the perennial march? First, much of the conflict between Russia and Britain was imagined. The period between the Greek Revolt and Unkiar Skelessi certainly saw the expansion of Russian influence, but after this point Russian expansion appeared to have stalled – they were satisfied with their position and knew the British would be agitated. The events of 1837 were condemned by the Russian government as the actions of men on the spot, something the British did not apologize for when sending missions to Afghanistan or elsewhere in Central Asia. Second, between Wellingtonian and Palmerstonian

¹⁰² Malcolm Yapp, “British Perceptions of the Russian Threat to India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 21, vol. 4 (1987): 660, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/312757>.

¹⁰³ Yapp also notes that Palmerston was opposed to any such agreement – even if Peel and Aberdeen came to an agreement, it is likely Palmerston would not have cared much about it. Yapp, 660.

policies, the Wellingtonian policy of containment through soft power appears to have been more effective. At the very least, it was not as destructive as Palmerston's aggressive policy.

Wellington believed that a Russian invasion could eventually be countered but believed that the great threat came from an Indian mutiny that even a threat of invasion would cost. If the idea was to ensure that British prestige and power remained unchecked, the disaster in Afghanistan did not help the military's reputation. Finally, the "Great Game" was imagined by Britain, who played it as if they wanted to lose. Castlereagh and Canning neglected the Near East, leaving Wellington to pick up the pieces. The Whig lack of leadership during the Egyptian crisis made the ultimate Russian diplomatic victory seem more exaggerated than it really was, fanning Russophobia and real fears of invasion. By the time of the Anglo-Afghan War, foreign policy was more unified, but it was not the right policy; Russia did not want to expand its influence in Persia and Afghanistan, contrary to British beliefs.¹⁰⁴

The "Great Game" culminated in a horrific, perennial march into Afghanistan, as Wellington and others predicted. The romantic image of adventurous captains traveling through the lands of Central Asia might excite, but it is misleading at best. Decisions were made by government officials, often without clear and unifying policy from ministry to ministry. The British fear of mutiny was eventually realized, although it was caused by their own actions rather than by any Russian subversion.

¹⁰⁴ Russia chose to largely focus on conquering the various khanates of Central Asia, as discussed in Alexander Morrison's *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814-1914*.

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