

RETURN OF A KING: THE BATTLE FOR AFGHANISTAN

*Review by: Syed Taimoor Shah **

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The book is a recapitulation of the West's greatest imperial disaster of its time. It is a story of colonial ambitions, conceit and folly which has striking pertinence even today. In the year 1839, more than 20,000 British troops poured into the coarse mountain passes of Afghanistan and brought the exiled Shah Shuja on the throne. However, in two years, the Afghans' rebellion forced the British to retreat. The book also illuminates some key connections between the past and the present situation. The complexity of generational tribal rivalries, their stronghold on customs and politics had ensnared the British of the nineteenth century and the US and NATO forces of today.

The book starts from the year 1809 in which Shah Shuja received good news in the form of the lost Koh-I-Noor diamond and the arrival of an embassy. It gives an overview as to how after the death of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Durrani Empire was disintegrating. Shuja's son Taimur Shah maintained the lands of the crumbling empire, having 24 sons ended up murdering each other in various blood feuds. The empire soon fractured into anarchy. Mountain stretches of Afghanistan hosted decades of disputes and rivalries.

On the side lines, a significant meet up took place between Napoleon and Russian emperor Alexander II for a Joint Franco-Russian attack on Britain's wealth and her richest possession, India. Following which the tussle between Russia and Britain got intense. This was the inception of what generations later would term it as the "Great Game" which was mainly a grand contest of imperial competition, espionage in which these both countries were engaged in. According to the author, the

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'Armchair strategist' in London believed that both these empires would one day come into collision because their strategic designs were closing in at crossroads with each other. There was an ongoing wave of Russophobia, and the British intelligence network developed and expanded in the changing geopolitics, whereas Russia kept the British India Company's hawks active and termed such events as 'Tournament of Shadows' which led to process of imperial rivalry turning into deaths, wars, invasions, colonisation resultantly changing the lives of inhabitants of Afghanistan.

The author denounces the arrogance and incompetence of the Britishers and tries to draw a lesson that those who invade Afghanistan would face fatal blow in treasures and blood. The Britain's strategy in installing the king was successful in the beginning but they started making several mistakes. First, they were naïve about the terrain and attitude of the people of Afghanistan. Second, British envoy would repeatedly ignore the intelligence report on the evolving worsening situation. Third, British miscalculated the war costs. Forth, they diverted the financial assistance for the local tribal elders towards building a standing army. Lastly, the wrong timing of the troops retreat from Afghanistan which was having sub-zero temperature.

The author illustrates that the British Empire at its zenith faced a moment of complete colonial humiliation and annihilation at the hands of traditional forces. The troops which entered Afghanistan perished in mountains like a ship sunk without any traces. Towards the end, the book gives immensely important insights and lessons from the past and guidelines for future strategists. Accordingly, "The gold coin of honesty and scrupulous respect for one's engagement is a currency valid everywhere, which will preserve its owner from dishonour even in the most turbulent circumstances. If you are faithful and true, people will love you, deceit will only make people loathe you. Englishmen, who had boasted their shrewdness in policy and bravery in battler, were nothing compared to the Sardars of Khurasan. They were in fact mere mules stuck in the mud".

The author in a conversation with local chief draws a lesson that foreigners came for their own interests. Afghanistan is at intersection strategically and is considered roof of the world, but the people of this land do not control their own destiny. The invaders should draw a lesson that in Afghanistan, behind every hillock there sits an emperor who will never bow down to foreign occupiers.