

UNIT 48 – UPSC - Tripartite Treaty

India's History : Modern India : Tripartite treaty between Shah Shuja, Ranjit Singh and the British : 1838

The Treaty

The debacle of the Afghan civil war left a vacuum in the Hindu Kush area that concerned the British, who were well aware of the many times in history it had been employed as the invasion route to India. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, it became clear to the British that the major threat to their interests in India would not come from the fragmented Afghan empire, the Iranians, or the French, but from the Russians, who had already begun a steady advance southward from the Caucasus.

At the same time, the Russians feared permanent British occupation in Central Asia as the British encroached northward, taking the Punjab, Sindh, and Kashmir. The British viewed Russia's absorption of the Caucasus, the Kirghiz and Turkmenlands, and the Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara with equal suspicion as a threat to their interests in the Indian subcontinent.

In addition to this rivalry between Britain and Russia, there were two specific reasons for British concern over Russia's intentions. First was the Russian influence at the Iranian court, which prompted the Russians to support Iran in its attempt to take Herat, historically the western gateway to Afghanistan and northern India. In 1837 Iran advanced on Herat with the support and advice of Russian officers. The second immediate reason was the presence in Kabul in 1837 of a Russian agent, Captain P. Vitkevich, who was ostensibly there, as was the British agent Alexander Burnes, for commercial discussions.

The British demanded that Dost Mohammad sever all contact with the Iranians and Russians, remove Vitkevich from Kabul, and surrender all claims to Peshawar, and respect Peshawar's independence as well as that of Qandahar, which was under the control of his brothers at the time. In return, the British government intimated that it would ask Ranjit Singh to reconcile with the Afghans. When Auckland refused to put the agreement in writing, Dost Mohammad turned his back on the British and began negotiations with Vitkevich.



In 1838 Auckland, Ranjit Singh, and Shuja signed an agreement stating that Shuja would regain control of Kabul and Qandahar with the help of the British and Sikhs; he would accept Sikh rule of the former Afghan provinces already controlled by Ranjit Singh, and that Herat would remain independent. In practice, the plan replaced Dost Mohammad with a British figurehead whose autonomy would be as limited as that of other Indian princes.

It soon became apparent to the British that Sikh participation advancing toward Kabul through the Khyber Pass while Shuja and the British advanced through Qandahar--would not be forthcoming. Auckland's plan in the spring of 1838 was for the Sikhs--with British support--to place Shuja on the Afghan throne. By summer's end, however, the plan had changed; now the British alone would impose the pliant Shuja.

