

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

TALK BY WILLIAM DARLYMPLE

RETURN OF A KING: BATTLE FOR AFGHANISTAN(1839-42)

16TH APRIL , 2013

General

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies organised a talk by Mr. William Darlymple on “Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan 1839-42” on 16th April 2013 at Ashoka Hall, Manekshaw Centre. The talk was attended by serving and retired officers of all three services and members of the strategic community, journalists and scholars.

Welcome Address- Maj Gen Dhruv Katoch, SM ,VSM (Retd),Director CLAWS

Our part of the world is fast approaching a period of profound change and potential upheaval. Troop withdrawals, pivotal elections and domestic political strife highlight concerns over regional stability. Amidst these looming shifts, militant organisations are altering and adapting their behaviour, relationships and tactics, with potentially significant consequences for the region. It remains to be seen if militant groups in South Asia will view the US led redeployment from Afghanistan as a “defeat”, and if so, to what effect.

Revisiting history and understanding past events helps in giving a clearer perspective of the future. It has been famously said that history repeats itself because men repeat their mistakes. However, it may be more appropriate to state that men repeat their mistakes because they have failed to read history and draw appropriate lessons therein. Today, Mr William Dalrymple will take us through an event in History, the First Afghan War of 1839-42. Perhaps this could enable a better understanding of the present situation in Afghanistan and also give a perspective of what the future might be like.

Talk by Mr.William Darlymple

Mr. William Darlymple gave fascinating insights into various aspects of Afghan War of 1839-42. These facets are as under are-

- a) Britain and Russia were vying for power in Central Asia since 1837. Britain had the largest standing army in Asia and Russia had conquered the Persians and the Ottomans. The British were fearful of Russian influence in the region and at the same time desired to control trade routes to China, Tehran and India. Faulty intelligence estimates in Britain led to the Afghan War in 1839.

- b) Shah Shuja, who was ousted by Dost Mohammed Khan was placed back on the throne as the British puppet after having won in what proved to be an easy war.
- c) The overconfident British officers stayed in tented camps rather than establishing forts, which could be protected. They left their artillery behind in the false belief that they faced no potent threat. Misbehaviour with Afghan women by the British and a series of other events eventually led to an attack by the Afghan tribes, which subsequently led to the rout of British forces.
- d) Lack of planning, leadership and overconfidence resulted in the worst defeat for the British. Afghans plundered their treasure and disgraced their army. Many of those who were abducted remained as beggars in Kabul like a ship sunk without trace
- e) Mr. William Darlymple recites an extract from his book –
 -An American officer asked an Afghan, “ Why do you hate us”?
 The Afghan said, “You blow down our doors, enter our houses, pull our women by the hair and kick our children. We cannot accept this, we will fight back and we will break your teeth, when your teeth are broken, you will leave just as the British left, it’s just a matter of time. All the Americans know their game is over, it’s just the politicians who deny, these are the last days for Americans, and next it will be China”.

Question and Answer

a)What kind of exit do you visualise the Americans making?

Karzai is the direct descendent of Shah Shuja who was regarded as a puppet of the British regime in Afghanistan. Karzai is aware of the contempt Shah Shuja is held in Afghanistan and intends to distance himself from the Americans to not be so regarded and reviled by future generations in Afghanistan. This is also the reason behind his extraordinary comments on Americans colluding with Pakistan to support Taliban in the region. Karzai cannot stand for the elections in 2014, which is the reason he is trying to manoeuvre his brother Kayub into it. The Americans are going to leave some troops behind post 2014 withdrawal, so it is highly likely that the Karzai regime will survive as long as the arms and ammunitions continue to pour into the region. .

How one reads Pakistan’s relationship with Taliban is also the key to visualise the exit. Top officials in Pakistan including Hina Rabbani Khar and Kayani are severely threatened by the Pakistani Taliban and fear a full-scale victory of Taliban in Afghanistan. There is also an emerging paranoia regarding India arming and training the Afghan army. It is in India’s interest to see if this should be encouraged further or use it as a lever to extract concessions.

b) Is China going to be the next victim? China has already established itself in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and is extending into Afghanistan. Is Chinese

presence just restricted to commercial activities or is it another disguised venture for the deployment of troops?

The reality is that the Chinese are already there in Afghanistan. They have invested heavily in the mineral wealth of Afghanistan and have launched joint Afghan-Chinese ventures for oil exploration in the region. There are plans to construct railway route till Uzbekistan which at a later stage can be linked to the Iranian railway system.

These ventures can be seen as a positive force where in the Chinese could put pressure on the Pakistan military to sustain peace in the region to extract commercial benefits. On the other hand, it is also strategically and politically important to analyse if the Chinese rivals have major foothold in areas, which are pro Indian. It is possible that the Chinese also manage to stop the Taliban to create anarchy in the region.

c) Pakistan is treading a dangerous path by perpetuating the dichotomy between good and bad Taliban. While they would not like Afghanistan Taliban to gain victory in Afghanistan, they treat Pakistan Taliban as their friends. In reference to the historical facts cited in the seminar, does it not make sense to leave Afghanistan to the Afghanis and not interfere in their culture? The British, Russians and Americans have failed and it is possible that the Chinese will not succeed either.

Pakistan is well aware of the threat imposed by the Pakistan Taliban. There is a semblance of fear even within the Pakistan army when the entire traffic is blocked in the Cantt area just to get the army kids safely to schools. The army cars do not use number plates for fear of being targeted. This dichotomy of good and Taliban has proved to be disastrous for the Pakistanis.

d) Afghans believe that the Durand line had an expiry date with duration of a hundred years. David Milliband, the foreign Secretary of United Kingdom has shed all such treaties. What future do you envisage for the Durand Line, is there a possibility of it getting erased if the situation goes out of hand in Pakistan?

People have been predicting the fracturing of Pakistan for a long time, but the country has survived. The Pashtuns definitely do not want their families to be divided by the border, which in any case exists only in name. However, Pakistan would like to see the sanctity of the Durand Line being maintained.