



Curzon and British Strategy for the Persian Gulf

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Introduction

During Lord Curzon's viceroyalty (1898-1905) differences of opinion arose among British Officials, over the policy to be pursued towards Persian Gulf. There was severe friction between London and Calcutta. In this controversy, Curzon supported a forward policy in most instances, occasionally even undertaking aggressive measures without Home approval.¹

Lord Curzon's arrival in India in 1899 coincided with the commencement of a period of unprecedented international activity in the Middle East, especially in Persia and the Persian Gulf. As Viceroy, Lord Curzon pursued a vigorous policy directed against not only towards Russia but also towards any power which sought to encroach upon British paramountcy in the Gulf. Russia was steadily, consolidating her influence in Northern Persia. Russian Commercial interest therefore appeared to threaten the British position in Persia.² Britain was aggressively and quite openly developing her schemes for the construction of a railway in South Persia and for the establishment of a fortified sea base.³ France was on the point of securing a suitable coaling station in the Gulf of Oman as well as trying to establish her influence over Bander Gissech.⁴ There were simultaneously suspicions about Germany, which was assiduously pressing forward the Baghdad Railway in Ottoman Iraq. She was quietly seeking an outlet in the Gulf over which she could exercise territorial control. Turkey, on the other hand, was endeavouring to undermine the independence of Shaikh Mubarak of Kuwait, over whom it claimed paramountcy. Thus Russia in Persia and Germany in Turkey seemed to be preparing to establish themselves upon the flank of India and to undermine British predominance in Gulf waters.⁵

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Apart from the activities of Imperial power in the Middle East, other factors also shaped the formulation of Curzon's policy towards Persia. In the Boer War (1899-1902) Britain incurred a heavy burden of expenditure. Keeping this situation in mind, the British Foreign secretary Lansdowne and General Hamilton instructed Curzon to formulate policy towards the Middle East under certain guidelines. Curzon was directed to maintain a passive, non-aggressive policy like making treaties with other Imperial power for their containment and their own defence. But Lord Curzon, after becoming viceroy took an engrossing interest in Gulf affairs, and was not persuaded by the Home Government's cautious stance.⁶

Russia tried to increase her influence as well as to contain British influence in South Persia. This could be realized with construction of a railway line running from Kermanshah to Seistan. Lord Salisbury (Secretary of State for India in 1874 and Foreign Secretary in 1878) thought that Russia would not march towards Tehran, which would entail the risk of a British stroke in the Gulf. Until Russia had finished the Siberian railway, and completed her task in Manchuria, she would not be disposed to exert any pressure on Persia. The departure of Salisbury from foreign office prompted Curzon to engineer, a more spirited extension of British interests in Persia. The new Foreign Secretary Lansdowne cared little for such a division of spheres of influence as would keep the British out of the North but would not prevent Russia and other intriguer in the South. Russia must not be allowed a footing in the Persian Gulf for naval or military purposes. Lansdowne warned Persia that no outside interference in Seistan would be tolerated; rather he refused to draw a line beyond which Russia's southward progress would be opposed.⁷

British had special interest in the South of the Gulf and Seistan. Actually the British were afraid that Russia could advance more towards the Gulf even through railway connection within interior of Persia.⁸ Curzon realized that British influence had declined and they had no definite policy towards Persia. On the other side the Russian grip was constantly increasing towards South of Persia through construction of railways and introduction of steamers in the Gulf.⁹ Russia was

also interested in the proposal to construct a trans-Persian railway. These steps forced Curzon to think about a forward policy towards Persia, which would be suitable for Britain's own strategic interests as well as acceptable to the British Government at London. ¹⁰

First of all in 1901 Curzon set about analysing the nature and progress of Russian ambitions in Persia. His finding was that Russian interests there had so far been purely commercial, giving Britain no cause for apprehension. He thought that if Russia for once obtained a part of the Gulf then France and Germany would also enter it. On the other hand, a Russian rail link to the Indian Ocean would mean the loss of Seistan. ¹¹

In 1889 he had recognized that Seistan war was not of small strategical importance. It was the meeting point of the spheres of British and Russian influence. ¹² British government wanted exclusively to keep Seistan for itself. So exclusion of foreign control from Seistan now become definite part of British policy. ¹³ For attaining this objective British developed Seistan-Nushki route. It served two purposes: Firstly it secured British interest in the area. And secondly under Anglo-Russian convention, Seistan was declared to be within the British sphere. ¹⁴

Elsewhere in Southern Persia active steps were taken to consolidate and develop British influence and to extend British trade. The number of consular officers was considerably increased. The system of Communication was also improved Curzon introduced some special new posts in southern Persia and along the Afghan frontier and also supplied to each consulate suitable military escorts. ¹⁵ Additional telegraph cables were laid, and improved steamer and postal facilities were obtained in return for increased subsidies given by Lord Curzon's government. Another subject of importance dealt with during Lord Curzon's viceroyalty was that of the Persian customs administration. ¹⁶

As a result of Curzon's tour in the Gulf as viceroy at the end of 1903, Government of India recommended the selection of suitable naval base and cooling station at the entrance to the Gulf. This was proposed out of fear that German and Russian fleet might enter the Gulf. ¹⁷

Moreover the British Government of India considered the establishment of a naval base in Persian Gulf by any other power as a move dangerous to British interest.¹⁸ Active steps were taken by Lord Curzon in order to maintain peace and security of British ships in the Gulf.¹⁹

The naval importance of Elphinstone Inlet²⁰ was recognized by Curzon.²¹ The British secured certain advantages here, firstly, by using this place for telegraphic purposes to prevent the entry of any other in the neighbourhood and then utilizing Elphinstone inlet for naval or strategical ones.²²

Curzon inspected the inlets of the Musandam peninsula, which he considered of vital strategic importance in guarding the entrance to the Gulf. The Musandam promontory for naval war purposes was the most important, and he held that it could never be allowed to fall into the hands of an enemy.²³

Curzon harped on the danger to India by the establishment of a Russian naval base or fortress at Bandar Abbas. On the other hand it would threaten the safety of the Suez route to India and would also be helpful in improving Germany's communication with East Africa.²⁴ This led the British to expand their sphere in Persian Gulf. The British sphere must include the whole entrance to the Gulf, including islands like Hormuz, Larak, Henjam, Kishm and Lingah.²⁵

Turkey was another pioneer which caused a great deal of worry to British in the Gulf during Lord Curzon's viceroyalty. She repeatedly endeavoured to obtain possession of Kuwait and claimed suzerainty over it. The Turks for long sought to make fresh conquests in the Gulf and tried to secure the allegiance of Bahrain. There was reason to suppose, however, that their eagerness to seize Kuwait during Curzon's rule in India was due to the belief that the harbour was the only possible terminus for the Baghdad railway. During the term of Midhat Pasha (Vali of Baghdad) in 1869-70, the people of Kuwait had successfully resisted Turkish attempts to bring them within the latter's control, and maintained their "practical independence".²⁶

In Curzon's view the suzerainty of the Turkish Sultan over Kuwait was never more than a "political fiction".²⁷ Great Britain had never recognized the Turkish seizure of Al-Qatar. For

Britain the best thing that could happen to Eastern Arabia was that the Turks withdrew from it altogether.²⁸

Curzon wanted to give the status of a protectorate to Kuwait, which however was vetoed by British Cabinet. The Cabinet was also not averse to Germany having her railway outlet at Kuwait. The negotiations to reach agreement to this effect were held in 1913 and 1914 between Ottoman Turkey and Germany. However, the Basra -Kuwait section was ultimately to be constructed by British.²⁹

Foreign domination in Persia reached its climax with the Russo-British convention of 1907. Curzon thought it worth while to attempt in collaboration with Russia, a demarcation of both power spheres of influence in Persia. British political, commercial and strategic interests were concentrated in Southern and Central Persia. Russian interests, on the other hand, concerned the North. A line drawn from Khanikin through Kermanshah, Ramadan, Kerbin and Yezd to Seistan was to represent the boundary between the English and Russian spheres of interest.³⁰ According to Anglo-Russian convention two powers, Britain and Russia intended to have an army in the North under Russian officers, and in Southern Persia an army under British officers.³¹ Curzon admitted that the arrangement he had made suffered from certain imperfections. For instance, Tehran, the Persian capital, was in the Northern zone, giving Russia an advantage over England. More concretely, access to the Gulf through Mesopotamia still remained open to Russia yet in the balance, the advantages of the arrangement outweighed its disadvantages. In fact, this agreement was intended to eliminate the basic point of friction between England and Russia in Asia.³²

Opinion in official circles in India was not in concurrence with this agreement to divide Persia into British and Russian spheres of influence, though for the wrong reasons. Colonel K. Gardiner, a member of the viceroy's Executive Council, protested against the passive tone of agreement. He wanted the absorption of the Southern and Central regions of Persia as a policy to get better dividends. No doubt such an orientation would entail an increase in commitments, but it would also reduce Russian pressure on the frontiers of India.³³

The Anglo-Russian convention achieved a privileged diplomatic position for Britain in the European arena. It may be said that Britain gained an ally against Germany, in general and specifically in the Gulf, or at least the danger of Russo-German cooperation against Britain was temporarily removed. Anglo-Russian understanding, according to British Cabinet members, was in Britain's vital interests.³⁴

The Persian Gulf was left in the neutral sphere, but in practice the danger of Russia's acquisition of a Gulf port, now practically disappeared. As Grey was later to write, "the cardinal British object in those negotiations was to secure ourselves for ever, as far as a treaty could secure us, from further Russian advance in the direction of the Indian Frontier."

Lord Curzon, however, was not in agreement with the British Government regarding this treaty which he considered would not secure the Persian Gulf. As a result of this treaty Russia expanded its influence in the West to Kasr-i Shirin on the Turkish frontier, and, through Isfahan, Yazd and Kahrizk, to the point where the Russian and Afghan frontiers intersect.³⁵ The province of Arbistan as also Bushire, Shiraz and Isfahan and along the Karun river were of paramount interest to Britain. Curzon felt that the treaty had led them to voluntarily dissociate themselves from these interests and to abandon that preferential position for Britain which represented its position of supremacy, "a Fruit of many decades."³⁶

A more cogent objection was advanced by General Sir Edwin Collyer, a military member of the Executive Council. Collyer questioned the wisdom of dividing Persia into spheres of influence on strategic grounds. He argued that immediately after a demarcation had been effected, Russia would concentrate her energy in the sphere allocated to her and convert Northern Persia into a strong military zone. It would be futile to hope for a corresponding degree of British activity in the South. The result would be the military entrenchment of Russia along the Herat-Seistan line, a couple of hundred miles to the south of the present position held by her. The only favourable policy, therefore, should have been to maintain the integrity of Persia and push Russian influence as much to the north as possible.³⁷

Another disadvantage for Britain was the loss of control over land covering important trade route through Khankin to Baghdad. It now fell within the sphere of influence of Russia. As a result Britain would weaken her position in Southern Persia.

The severest criticism in the British political circle against convention (1907) related to political fall-out upon British interest in Southern Persia. This convention would allow other powers to inspire into this region hurting British supremacy. ³⁸

Curzon's ideas were opposed to Hamilton on certain other grounds. It was apprehended by him that this new understanding between Russia and Britain would necessitate Britain convincing the Shah of Persia that dividing his territory was the immediate object of present policy of Britain. This situation would jeopardize the established policy of Britain to keep other foreign powers away from Southern Persia.³⁹ Curzon came to realize that Persia and other countries were apprehensive that this convention was an effort to partition Persia. He further realized that Russia would take advantage of self denying clauses of the preamble (which recognized the freedom of international commerce) of the convention. Curzon's apprehension proved correct as Russia made an agreement in 1911⁴⁰ with Germany by extending its Northern Persian railway for a link with the Baghdad railway at Khankin. Further Russia made a secret agreement in 1915 to encroach upon the neutral zone of Persia, as was subsequently exposed by Russian Balsharik government after the October Revolution of 1917.

In comparison with the authorities in London Curzon's policy may certainly be called "forward" for the Home officials tended to temper their concern for the protection of British interests in the Gulf to their diplomatic needs in Europe. For such contradictions in the interests of Imperialism there could be no "perfect" solutions.

Notes and References

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14. See *Curzon in India*, op.cit., p.
15. See *India under Curzon and After*, op.cit., p. 123.
- 16) The operations of breaking such bales and cases and converting them into packages of dimensions and weights suitable for animal transport takes place under customs supervision, and merchants are further allowed to store such merchandise in certain rooms for which a rent is charged inside the customs buildings until transport was available and the goods can be cleared for transit. See July 1912 (Secret-E) Government of India. British Foreign Department Documents, op.cit., p. 63.
- 17) K.H. Fenelon, *The United Arab Emirates An Economic and Social Survey*, Second edition, London, 1973, p. 29. Cf. Sir Thomas Raleigh (with an Introduction) *Lord Curzon in India being a Selection from his Speeches as a Viceroy Governor-General of India 1898-1905*. London, Vol. 2, 1906, Vol. 2, p. 232.
- 18) August 1905 (*Secret-E Proceedings*) Government of India, British Foreign Department Documents, Nos. 280-307, New Delhi, p. 17.
19. Ibid., p. 17.
- 20) Elphinstone Inlet is situated near Strait of Hormuz in the Gulf of Oman (or near the entrance of Persian Gulf).
21. See Lovat Fraser, op.cit., p. 98.
- 22) See August 1905 (Secret-E) British Foreign Department Documents, op.cit., pp. 7,8.
- 23) November 1902 (*Secret-E proceedings*) Government of India. British Foreign Department Documents, Nos. 7-12, New Delhi, p. 15.
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25. See Lovat Fraser, op.cit., p. 131.
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- 27) Kuwait's ruler Shaikh Mubarak neished to preseve his own independence, and to enjoy the protection of British worships in case of ned, and also preferred to keep on good terms with his Turkish neighbour so far as was possible. He therefore thought it good policy to have a foot in each camp.
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