

Embracing Curzon's Political Vision To Secure India's Cultural and Political Borders

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Abstract

Lord Curzon is a name reviled in Bengal as the man who divided Bengal in 1905; but he is also a man regarded by historians as one who believed in the greatness of ancient India. The centrality of India and its culture as a “core” of the Indian subcontinent is geographically and historically apparent. According to Curzon, defence of the Indian subcontinent lay in control of surrounding buffer areas of the Kabul and Herat valleys, Tibet and Burma and their denial to potential enemies. In the south, such zones included entries to the Arabian Sea at Aden, the Indian Ocean at Seychelles / Mauritius and the Bay of Bengal from the Malacca and Sunda Straits.

The present Indian borders have surrendered significant portions of the outer buffer areas and exposed the Indian core homeland to external threats. The existence of Pakistan as a state inimical to India, the Chinese expansion into Tibet, PoK and parts of eastern Ladakh as well as increasing Chinese influence over Nepal have exposed the Gangetic Valley, the Assam valley and the eastern Punjab Plains to potential invasion. Cultural and demographic encroachment of traditional Indian borderlands have created potential flashpoints. Indian policy makers must realize the necessity of having a stable and peaceful rim of buffer states to allow core areas to prosper and progress. This need not be conquest or occupation but economically, culturally and spatially incorporate rim buffer states friendly to India in a unified common economic and cultural unit while remaining politically distinct. The objective of this paper is using a historical-empirical method to analyse the strategic effect of India moving beyond its borders to exercise influence based on Curzon's vision.

Key words: Curzon, Indian subcontinent, Partition of India, India's borders, Soft power, Buffer States, Indian strategic affairs.

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Introduction:

Lord George Nathaniel Curzon who was Viceroy of British-India from 1898 to 1905 was one of the most well-known Viceroys of the Raj. He was an energetic person who brought in far reaching reforms both in administration and in academia. While, he is better known and reviled in Bengal for having affected the partition of the province, he is also associated with setting up of the Archeological Survey of India, mainstreaming study of Indian history and archeology as well as British adventures in Persia, Kabul and Tibet in the first decade of the 20th century. Lord Curzon has been famous amongst practitioners of realpolitik for redusting the Arthashastra and applying it for imperial Britain. He believed that Imperial Britain, following the principles of Max Mueller's Aryan invasion theory, was a successor State to the great empires of ancient India and hence its policies could be based on the "*Mandala Theory*" of Chanakya. He believed for that for a safe and secure Indian subcontinent, there had to be a rim of controlled or buffer states which would bear the brunt of any invasion or intervention directed at the subcontinent. This led to a series of British Imperial interventions in Tibet (1903), Iran (1908-40) and Afghanistan (1919-20, 1929).

The Younghusband Expedition into Tibet in 1903 was aimed at bringing Tibet into the British Sphere of influence. It resulted in treaty with the Qing Empire of China and the Government of Tibet allowing British control over overland trade south into India, defence, overland communications and foreign affairs of Tibet. A similar treaty was signed with Kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan effectively incorporating them into the subcontinental defence system. With Afghanistan, the British had been having a "*blow hot blow cold*" relationship over the last century. The main aims of British India were to stabilize the North western frontier, maintain control over the Pashtun tribes in the area, prevent Afghan overt and covert help to Pashtun rebels, and maintain the "*friendly*" neutrality of Afghanistan. Essentially the British aims were to keep the Pashtuns quiet and deny the Russians influence in Afghanistan. But in practice, any attempts at strict neutrality or even developing independent foreign relations by the Afghan Government during this period was often met with British opposition and sometimes even military intervention.

With respect to Iran, British intervention was both commercial and strategic. The discovery of oil in the early 1900s led to the founding of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909. This increased British stakes in Iran and Lord Curzon has often been described as the architect of this policy. The British developed increased penetration into the port of Qom and Bushehr and forbade Iran from any alliance or diplomatic parleys first with Imperial Russia and later with the Soviets. In the words of Lord Curzon himself, *“I should regard the concession of a port upon the Persian Gulf to Russia, by any power, as a deliberate insult to Great Britain and as a wanton rupture of the status quo, and as an international provocation to war”* (Engdahl, 2004). British aims with respect to Iran were aimed at preventing any adversarial penetration into the Persian Gulf so as to defend its position on the principal lines of communication and supply between Britain and British India and protect the newly discovered Persian oil from falling into alien hands. (Fain, 2008) (Johnson, 2003). After the Bolshevik revolution, the immediate threat of Imperial Russian expansion into Iran diminished and Britain concluded the Anglo-Persian Agreement with the pro-British government of Hassan Vosouq al Dawleh in 1919. One of the underlying aims of this treaty was to improve Iran’s security and defence capabilities and make it a more reliable buffer state between India and European powers (Daniel, 2001). Thus we can see from the preceding notes that the main thrust of Lord Curzon’s foreign policy initiatives was in setting up a zone of buffer states intervention by a Great Power.

Subcontinental Borderlands-Historical Perspective:

Indian history from the days of the Harappan Civilisation to the modern era has been characterized by periods of unified rule followed by periods of disarray and repeated foreign invasions especially through the North-west route. Most Indian rulers have displayed a shocking disregard for securing frontier lands and would act only when the enemy was directly on the gates. Only a few rulers in Indian history have shown regard for securing borderlands and incapacitating hostile powers by going beyond their borders such as Chandragupta Maurya, Chandragupta II Vikramaditya, Bappa Rawal, Raja Raja Chola, Alauddin Khilji, Balban, Lalitaditya, and Raja Ranjit Singh. There have been many other great rulers and warriors in Indian history but most of them excelled within the country. There was no attempt to create a systematic environment of influencing neighbouring countries and civilisations. Indian civilization whether during the Hindu period or during the

Islamic period remained inward looking and reactive in strategic thought and outlook. Lack of such a culture has frequently created havoc for established states and even common people by exposing them to repeated invasions. A country which simply defends its territory from invasions will always face losses even if it wins the war. This is because the invading force will be fighting in Indian Territory and inflict damage on Indian population and resources. There is no “*price to be paid*” for losing a war as the defending army will simply allow the invaders to leave. If, however the invaders win, then they gain control of land, resources and population.

If one were to look at the history of the days from the first Arab invasion of Sindh, one fact stares at our face. The strategic depth that the Kabul and Gandhara Valleys offered allowed local rulers to prolong their struggle against invaders from 712 AD to nearly 1000 AD when Ghazni became a power centre. Islamic invasions of the Indian mainland started only after the Turks were able to establish themselves in eastern Afghanistan; and this was when the local rulers received little or no help from larger and more powerful Indian states (Keay, 2013). Even Chandragupta Maurya after establishing his might in northern and central India first moved to the Indus and secured his North West by conquering eastern and central Afghanistan and Baluchistan from Seleucus before venturing into the southern states. The Achaemenid Empire of Persia (6th century BCE to 4th century BCE), the Sassanids of Persia, the Greeks and Macedonians, the Scythians and the Huns all considered Kabul, Gandhara (Kandahar) and Bactria (Balkh) as Indian territories. But by the time of the establishment of the Mughal Empire, Kabul and beyond were foreign lands for Indian rulers; and the first call to defend Indian lands would come only after an invader had crossed the Indus into the Punjab. This pattern has been repeated again and again even up till the modern era after Independence. The Durrani Empire before the 3rd battle of Panipat and even after, in its correspondence with the Marathas expressed their desire to hold on to Punjab. This was rejected by the Marathas who claimed all land up till the Indus as the Indian homeland. There was no general strategy to influence borderlands, to go beyond the border and inflict a cost or preempt would be invaders.

On the other hand, Empire builders like Vikramaditya, Alauddin Khilji and Balban had proper policies in place for securing the borderlands. If one reads their histories, they did not wait for the invaders to progress deeper into India but after the first invasion moved beyond their borders and

established buffer zones of friendly states or even attacked the homelands of the invaders. Their idea of defence of the realm was that the fight should not take place in Indian territory as far as possible. In the east, despite common cultural and linguistic heritage, Nepal has steadily moved out of the Indian political system into an independent system linked to politics in Tibet. This has started right from the days of after Harshvardhana and continues to this day. Nepal is important for the Indian political system as it lies adjacent to the Gangetic Plains. The defence and security of Nepal has to be a part of the Indian security system as any failure on this front will mean that the Indian security will be operating right on the Gangetic Plain against an invader or infiltrator. Similarly, further east, Indians have never traditionally thought beyond the western Brahmaputra valley (Kamrup), even after suffering successive invasions from Yunnan and Myanmar. It was the British who finally extended the security system to envelop Burma as part of the Indian security grid. Thus, historically, buffer states have acted as a shield to protect the frontiers of India and denied an exposed flank that could be exploited by an adversary.

The British Indian Security Arrangement:

The British right from the days of the Tudors in the defence of their homeland had a policy of interfering in European mainland affairs if any of the continental powers got too powerful. This policy was evident in British support for France and the Dutch when the Spanish Empire was at its peak. The British then supported German, Dutch and Italian states during the days of French and Austrian hegemony over continental Europe and during the Napoleonic wars. After the rise of Germany, British support shifted to the French and Austrians and later Russia. One thing evident from this is that the aim of British policy for homeland defence has been to fight against a powerful enemy by making a system of alliances, opening multiple fronts supported by other states and prevent the enemy from concentrating on English soil.

The same principles were applied by the English in India from the days of the East India Company. They instigated wars between states and offered help to one state over another. In the areas under their own control, they set up buffer or “friendly” states around these areas and encouraged expansion or gradual incorporation of these buffer states into ever increasing bubble. The annexations of Assam (1826), Ceylon, Sindh (1843), Kashmir (1849), Burma (1886), Kalat

(1890s) and Khyber agencies (1856 onwards) were all planned to create buffer states beyond their recently annexed or incorporated Indian territories in the Gangetic and Indus valleys and the Tamil heartland. After 1858, when control of India came directly under the British Crown, the British effectively moved beyond the Gangetic and Indus watersheds and viewed the subcontinent as a whole. This gradual outer expansion of British zone of influence was influenced by a concurrent Russian expansion into Central Asia and at least the outward solid look of the Qing Empire which now controlled Tibet. In the east there was mutual competitiveness with the Dutch and the French over control of South East Asia and the “approaches to British India”. In fact, the British occupation or control over Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Aden, Suez, Oman and British East Africa were guided by the need for controlling the sea routes to India as well and create a buffer “bubble” around the subcontinent.

This thought process and principle reached its zenith under Lord Curzon who espoused the centrality of India to that of Asia and hence the need for India to influence nations beyond its political domains. According to Curzon, defence of the Indian subcontinent lay in control of surrounding buffer areas of the Kabul and Herat valleys, Tibet and Burma and their denial to potential enemies. In the south, such zones included entries to the Arabian Sea at Aden, the Indian Ocean at Seychelles / Mauritius and the Bay of Bengal from the Malacca and Sunda Straits. This was the reasoning for his interventions in Tibet, Afghanistan and Iran. Lord Curzon, described India’s pivotal role in his 1909 essay *“The Place of India in the Empire”*, as:

“On the West, India must exercise a predominant influence over the destinies of Persia and Afghanistan; on the north, it can veto any rival in Tibet; on the north east and east it can exert great pressure upon China, and it is one of the guardians of the autonomous existence of Siam [Thailand]. On the high seas it commands the routes to Australia and to the China Seas.” (Rajamohan, 2004)

While the manner of such intervention may be debatable, the underlying principle has been validated by a study of history and by the turn of events in the last 70 years since Indian Independence. Since its Independence, the modern Indian State has displayed a striking naivety towards border management. India has been considering its given borders as sacrosanct, a principle

which has never been respected or reciprocated by many of its neighbours. Till a couple of years back, the general feeling amongst India's certain inimical neighbours has been that one could strike at the Indian state and go back if it was not successful. There was no threat of a repercussion. Only once has this cycle been broken, during the formation of Bangladesh, when India did play power politics and broke apart Pakistan thereby significantly diminishing its clout and strategic reach in the subcontinent.

Why is Border Management Necessary for India?

Prof Hans Morgenthau, in his book "Politics among Nations" stated that "*The minimum requirement of nation states is to protect their physical and cultural identity against encroachments by other nation states*". (Morgenthau, 1954). Therefore, a nation-state in its strict Westphalian definition needs to keep alive its distinct geographic and political entity. If there is a threat to its territorial integrity than all other interests become subordinate to national security irrespective of the political and economic costs. India and its rulers have to realize that while the physical boundaries of India may be defined by a political map and the maritime boundaries by prevailing international law based on continental shelves, the "political" boundaries of India extend much beyond. India must define its zone of influence based on what role it sees for itself in the comity of nations. If India sees itself as a successor state in the modern era to the British Raj, and as successor to the Empires of the Mughals, the Mauryas, the Cholas and the Guptas; then it should realize that it must be prepared to exercise influence beyond its borders. In fact, the true borders of India as was described in the previous section in the words of Lord Curzon, would then mean the entry to the Indian Ocean both from the east and the west at Aden, Mauritius, the Malacca and the Sunda Straits in the maritime domain. In the land front, India must realize the importance of Myanmar, Oman, and Central Asia in securing its present land borders in the west and Myanmar and Indonesia in the east.

India after Independence has been successively defending an area defined by its 1947 borders. While this may have been initially necessary given the limited resources a newly independent country had, it would not make sense in the present era especially if India decides to project itself as a Great Power. The present Indian borders have surrendered significant portions of the outer

buffer areas and exposed the Indian core homeland to external threats. The existence of Pakistan as a state inimical to India, the Chinese expansion into Tibet, PoK and parts of eastern Ladakh as well as increasing Chinese influence over Nepal have exposed the Gangetic Valley, the Assam valley and the eastern Punjab Plains to potential invasion. Even if India did not believe in foreign conquests and domination which is very difficult in the present era, it makes sense to have a cushion of buffer states around the core homeland. Cultural and demographic encroachment of traditional Indian borderlands have created potential flashpoints. This works both ways, as it helps protect the homeland from external influences in the form demographic imbalances, military or militant infiltrations and climactic changes or changes brought about in local ecology. The buffer states also benefit by reaping security and economic benefit from associating with a powerful State. Other issues of having hostile borders without buffers is the threat to internal security in the form of terrorism, extremism, radicalization, subversion of population and trans-national crimes. Open borders with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar have been exploited by smugglers, militants, terrorists and criminals posing a serious internal security challenge (Kumar, 2018). Thus India has to manage its relations with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Maldives and these countries should be part of overall security strategy to mitigate vulnerabilities and deny exposed flanks that could be exploited by state and non-state actors. In addition, India will need to pay attention to Oman, Iran, as well as some of the Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which have been sympathetic to Indian concerns in the past.

Indian grand strategy has been usually linked a lot to Nehruvianism and Non-Alignment in the past and has many proponents even today. These people believe that states and their people can better understand one another and thus avoid conflict. Violence should always be a regrettable last resort. Nehruvians also believe that conflicts between States should and can be mitigated by international laws and institutions, military restraint, compromise and negotiations (Bajpai, 2014). The other school of thought is that of the Neoliberals who believe that the international system consists of nations at war or conflict with each other and power and its pursuit involve both economic and political. The Neoliberals also believe that economic power may be more effective than military power and pursuing military power only like the USSR could degrade India's domestic and global economic prowess. Neoliberals also believe that economic security and civil satisfaction is closely linked and necessary ensuring for national. Hyperrealists are the third group

of Indian strategic policy intellectuals who believe that international relations can be only described by threat and counter-threat. However, each of these groups have provided important inputs for strategic thought processes and have influenced foreign policy. Finally, as seen from the preceding paragraphs, border management becomes necessary for India to safeguard its core homeland, preserve its intrinsic and unique culture and heritage, provide for economic prosperity to its population in a safe environment and deter hostile states and non-state actors.

Can India still use Curzon's Principles in safeguarding its Borders?

As said before, Lord Curzon was one of the few people in modern times who understood the importance of the Subcontinent's geography in Asia's power dynamics as well as the local culture. Independent India must borrow from his ideas and adapt them to modern times. However, saying that his principles could simply be lifted and applied in today's world would invite disaster. Indian strategists will first have to decide out their Grand strategy with respect to the key nations that India must interact with. There should also be a decided policy and a blue-print on what constitutes the first-, second- and final tripwires or borders which would invite Indian intervention. These tripwires could be foreign interventions or local politics of groups of countries which would form the buffer zone around India.

Northwestern borders: The major event in the last century which has severely limited India's border security has been the Partition of India. Since then the sub-continental system has been effectively ripped down the middle with Pakistan in its efforts to equalize India being ready to host foreign powers. The Partition has brought forward the Northwestern borders from beyond the Indus in to the middle of the Punjab Plains and Rajasthan desert. There is little or no natural barrier here and deterrence can be achieved only through force maintenance and use of rivers and canals as natural barriers. An inimical Pakistan has also had the effect of disrupting India's physical connection with Central Asia as well as has pushed non state actors such as terrorists and smugglers with a view to undermine India's political and economic institutions along its border areas. Such persistent hostile behaviour has been emboldened by the fact there is often no or little price to pay. India has historically avoided aggressive foreign invasions or interference. In recent years, the IPKF involvement in Sri Lanka has served to deter India from venturing beyond its borders unless

under a UN umbrella. In the last half decade, however, India has begun to shed its reticence and has replied to significant militant attacks by crossing hostile borders and attacking enemy heartlands. However, stabilization of the Indo-Pakistan border can only come if there is an acceptance on the part of Pakistan of the inequalities between the two countries or if there is a high price to pay for destabilizing the border in the form of targeted attacks or assassinations, economic coercion or internal disruptions.

Central Asia: The loss of Pakistan has severely reduced India's influence in Afghanistan and hence its buffer up to the Hindu Kush. India can resolve this by involving itself aggressively via Zaranj - Delaram Highway from Afghanistan on to the Chahbahar port as well as try to bring back into use the facilities offered by Tajikistan (Ayni airbase) for air bridging the Pakistani blockade to Central Asia. In the long run, India will have to reconsider taking back the Gilgit-Baltistan region to reestablish contacts with Central Asia and break the China-Pakistan nexus. In the immediate Near East, Oman and the UAE are two countries with whom India in recent times has started developing strategic relations. In the event of Iran foreclosing on India with respect to Chahbahar port, Oman and UAE provide vital facilities including berthing rights to keep a check on Chinese activities in Gwadar port and provide a useful west-of-Pakistan sea denial asset.

Northern Smaller States Nepal and Bhutan: Nepal is a perfect shield to heartland India and key strategic lines of communication connecting Eastern part of India with the rest of the country. India should look at managing their relations in a manner that Nepal is not pushed further away; that would create a security challenge for India. Nepal has been used by China and Pakistan as a conduit for Left wing extremists to link up with their Chinese supporters and for passage for flow of weapons and warlike stores. It also offers a potential safe haven to LWE cadres and leadership to create instability in heartland India. Similarly, Bhutan is vital to protect the Eastern flank of the narrow Siliguri corridor that is the only land link with the North Eastern States. Doklam has highlighted the fact that Nepal and Bhutan are key to India's defence preparedness against China, because the geographical disposition of these countries divide the Chinese application of force against India.

Far East: Myanmar on the Far East has precluded conventional military threat from China. In the last decade there was a lot of apprehension in Indian strategic circles on the increasing bonhomie between Myanmar and China and the refuge given by Myanmar to North-eastern terror groups. However, a lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. India has steadfastly engaged with Myanmar and has understood its security concerns. It has invested in Myanmar's security and in return has been rewarded with cooperation in joint military operations against NE militants causing many of these groups severe losses and forcing many to surrender to Indian forces. Myanmar has also received help from India in confronting its Shan rebels (who are being supported by China) but also in modernizing its navy. Good relations and security engagement with Myanmar have resulted in securing vital security related successes at the Far Eastern border of India with talks now underway to physically connect this border by road to other SE Asian countries. Myanmar thus becomes not only a buffer for India but also a vital link to South East Asia.

Close Maritime Neighbours: Sri Lanka and Maldives have the potential to be part of the maritime shield. If these states are allowed to slip away, India will practically have to defend its frontiers from Arabian Sea to Bay of Bengal along the land and maritime frontiers. Both Sri Lanka and Maldives have been targeted by the Chinese with their predatory economics in an effort to gain assets to set up naval bases and negate the Indian advantage in the Indian Ocean. While India has been very successful in fighting off the Chinese challenge, and maintaining its strategic presence in the archipelago, in Sri Lanka, India has faced setbacks with the Chinese able to acquire the port of Hambantota through predatory loans.

Indian Ocean Islands: India has since 2014 taken an active interest in developing strategic relations and establishing security related facilities as well as providing training for Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Mozambique and has signed defence agreements for mutual use of bases with Japan (for Djibouti), France (Reunion Island), the US (Diego Garcia), Australia (Keelings Island) and Singapore. Seen in toto, this secures the south western and western approaches to the Indian Ocean and closes the Sunda and Malacca Straits to hostile shipping. This along with bases in Maldives, Seychelles and radar facilities in Mozambique, Madagascar, Oman and Indonesia secures for India vital sea lanes of communication for its oil supplies and merchant fleet.

Conclusion

Defending the borders in the modern era means much more than just deploying forces at the political borders. It means being able to influence events before they reach the border (much less the heartland) as well as getting information in advance of such moves being planned. Having a rim of “friendly” buffer states around one’s nation provides that much more security and with common interests being supported by each other, reduces chances of a hostile power breaking through into the heartland and causing damage to the economy and population. India has to learn from Lord Curzon on the need to make such hard choices and not just believe in the innate goodness of nations. At the same time, it must recognize that creating a buffer should not mean plain interference in the internal affairs of a neighbour, which would cause resentment and defeat the purpose of the exercise; as India learnt in Sri Lanka with its IPKF experience. India should strive to recreate more Myanmars on each of its borders in which both parties benefit from close cooperation with each other.

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