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Modern Asian Studies / *FirstView* Article / July 2013, pp 1 - 29

DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X12000753, Published online: 03 July 2013

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### How to cite this article:

ELISABETH MARIKO LEAKE British India versus the British Empire: The Indian Army and an impasse in imperial defence, *circa* 1919–39. *Modern Asian Studies*, Available on CJO 2013 doi:10.1017/S0026749X12000753

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# *British India versus the British Empire: The Indian Army and an impasse in imperial defence, circa 1919–39*

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## **Abstract**

From the end of the Great War to the onset of the Second World War, Great Britain and British India clashed over the Indian Army's role in imperial defence. Britain increasingly sought an imperial fighting force that it could deploy across the globe, but the government of India, limited by the growing independence movements, financial constraints, and—particularly—renewed tribal unrest on its North-West Frontier, refused to meet these demands. Attempts to reconcile Britain's and India's conflicting strategies made little headway until the late 1930s when compromise ultimately emerged with the establishment of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39. While the Committee refuted India's traditional focus on the subcontinent's own security, importantly it recognized the necessity of British financial support for the Indian Army and the maintenance of a large local fighting force to prevent North-West Frontier unrest from disrupting imperial military planning at a time of global war.

## **Introduction**

In the interwar years, Great Britain and British India struggled to compromise over the responsibilities of the Indian Army. Although Britain hoped to station Indian forces throughout the empire, India refused. Limited by financial constraints and increasingly powerful Indian nationalists, British India instead focused on the security of its own borders and internal peacekeeping. India remained determinedly aloof from British military strategies that would have required the deployment of Indian troops across the Far and Middle East, although it slowly started deploying troops abroad as the British—equally reluctantly—agreed to provide financial support in return. These small developments early in the 1930s still left the bulk of Indian

troops available to subdue the subcontinent's restless North-West Frontier, which erupted into rebellion in 1936 when various Pathan tribesmen in the federally governed tribal zone were inspired to take up arms by a militant religious leader, the Faqir of Ipi. The region required constant military vigilance for years after the revolt, as tribes continued to test colonial rule.

In the years spanning the frontier rebellion to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, policy makers in India and Britain alike found the North-West Frontier a source of frustration and provocation, and they consequently invested considerable time and effort in creating alternative political and military strategies for subduing the region. Peace on the North-West Frontier became even more vital when it became apparent that a world war was looming. The British demanded that India change its military policies and accept imperial commitments, subsidizing Britain's own weak army and subduing unrest throughout the empire.

Studies of the growing tensions between the 'continental commitment' and imperial defence during the interwar years represent a large body of historiography and scholars have widely considered the preparations undertaken to ready the empire's armies for war.<sup>1</sup> The Indian Army has attracted particular attention because of its considerable size and its uneasy role in the changing landscape of Indian nationalist politics and imperial decline.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have recognized that the government of India, like that in Britain, resisted committing its troops to the defence of the empire; instead, the subcontinent's own security preoccupied India's military during the interwar years. Historians have been slower to recognize the significance and correlations of ongoing struggles on India's North-West Frontier with the wider debates about the future of military policy taking place in both India and Great Britain. The issue of the frontier and India's local defences arose in numerous policy-making debates as the Second World War approached, ultimately requiring

<sup>1</sup> See Barnett, C. (1974). *Britain and her army, 1509–1970*, Penguin, London; Bond, B. (1980). *Military policy between the two world wars*, Clarendon Press, Oxford; Howard, M. (1972). *The continental commitment: The dilemma of British defence policy in the era of the two world wars*, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., London; and Peden, G.C. (1984). 'The burden of imperial defence and the continental commitment reconsidered', *The Historical Journal*, 27:2, pp. 405–23.

<sup>2</sup> See Heathcote, T.A. (1995). *The military in British India*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, and Tomlinson, B.R. (1979). *The political economy of the Raj 1914–1947*, Macmillan, London.

the establishment of several committees to attempt to reconcile the Indian Army's deployment on the frontier with imperial demands abroad.

The Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39 built upon the findings of previous commissions to provide policy recommendations for the Indian Army's deployment along the Indo-Afghan border and abroad at a time of global crisis. The Expert Committee sought a compromise between military intervention on the frontier and the provision of Indian troops for the imperial war effort. It ultimately succeeded in enacting a revision of traditional Indian military policy, for the first time fully incorporating the subcontinent into imperial defence and making provisions for the deployment of Indian soldiers throughout the empire. At the same time, the Committee recognized the enduring obligations towards the North-West Frontier, garrisoning a huge body of troops there, despite the growing threat of global war. Throughout the interwar years, the Expert Committee on the Defence of India proved to be the most successful in balancing India's local military requirements with its ability to send troops abroad, drawing India into a global defence system just at the moment when Britain faced one of the greatest threats to its isles and its empire.

### **The Indian Army and imperial defence, 1919–1933**

The peace conferences following the First World War led to the expansion of the British empire into the Middle East, including informal control of the vital oilfields in Iran and Iraq. As Britain struggled to police its extended empire with a severely diminished British Army, officials in London turned to the Indian Army as the single greatest ready fighting force in the empire. Traditionally the Indian Army had only been responsible for maintaining peace on the subcontinent, particularly on the North-West Frontier where three Anglo-Afghan wars (the most recent in 1919), fears of Russian expansion, and constant unrest among the tribes necessitated a vigilant army garrison. However, the Army's duties had expanded with the outbreak of the First World War when more than 700,000 Indian personnel took part in the British war effort.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Heathcote, *The military in British India*, p. 24.

Faced with rebellion in Egypt, unrest in Iraq, and fears of Russian and Turkish interest in the oilfields, British policy makers immediately deployed Indian troops to the Middle East. India protested at this additional cost, however, as it was burdened with more than 200 crores of rupees of wartime debt as well as by unrest against increased taxation in the subcontinent.<sup>4</sup> In response, the 1919 Government of India Act decreed that the primary purpose of the Indian Army was the defence of the subcontinent, not the empire, leading to a recall of Indian troops.<sup>5</sup> The Act did little to deter British policy makers who argued that overstretched British forces could not maintain peace in the region and must be withdrawn and replaced by Indian troops. The British government demanded an additional 39.5 Indian infantry and pioneer battalions supported by cavalry, sappers, miners, and signallers to deploy to Iraq, sparking an uproar within the government of India, which refused to spend 40 per cent of India's net revenue on imperial policing.<sup>6</sup> Despite the protests by the viceroy, a new Army in India Committee, appointed by the British government, went ahead with an examination of the Indian Army's role in imperial defence. The Esher Committee, as it was known, lauded the future deployment of the Indian Army for imperial defence, proposing that the Army's reorganization and modernization would 'secure that the government of India will have at its disposal a well-trained and loyal army, fit to take its share in the defence of the Empire'.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Committee recognized that its proposals would increase the annual cost of the army beyond even its huge wartime cost.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Great Britain severely reduced military expenditures after the First World War, so was the government of India also determined to slash its army budget. Indian defence expenditures had swelled by nearly 300 per cent during the First World War and the Esher Committee's proposal for a further budget increase was unacceptable.<sup>9</sup> The crisis caused by the Esher Committee resulted in

<sup>4</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, pp. 108–10. A 'crore' equals 10 million rupees.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery, K. (1984). *The British Army and the crisis of empire 1918–1922*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, pp. 114–15.

<sup>7</sup> 'Report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for India to enquire into the administration and organisation of the Army in India', 22 June 1920, Public Records Office, Kew (PRO), CAB 24/112.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Bose, S. and Jalal, A. (1998). *Modern South Asia: History, culture, political economy*, Routledge, New York, p. 127.

a new study of the Indian Army by a Committee of Imperial Defence sub-committee, which eventually concluded that the Indian Army's main responsibility remained the subcontinent, not the empire.<sup>10</sup> As the furore over the future of Indian military deployment died down, the government of India refocused on reducing its defence spending. In 1925 alone, policy makers curtailed India's military budget from £61.5 million to £42 million with consequent cuts to the army's numbers: the size of the Indian Army dropped from 159,000 to 140,000 men and another 18,000 British troops left the subcontinent.<sup>11</sup>

The Indian subcontinent remained fairly quiet throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, despite fears of a Soviet invasion and renewed Anglo-Afghan tensions, but abroad, Britain faced imperial competition and growing threats in Europe. Great powers had begun forming rival empires: Italy had overrun Ethiopia and Libya, while Japan had annexed part of Manchuria, established the puppet kingdom of Manchukuo, and invaded China. Within the British empire, a massive revolt in Palestine and pan-Arab tensions throughout the Middle East led the British to seek various settlements.<sup>12</sup> Britain came to an uneasy compromise with Egypt, recognizing its independence in 1936, but maintaining a British garrison in the Suez Canal zone and a 20-year military alliance.<sup>13</sup>

In Great Britain, policy makers hesitated in deploying the British Army—even after signing the Locarno Treaty in 1925, planners balked at expanding or modernizing Britain's armed forces for fear of another continental conflict.<sup>14</sup> Policy makers adhered closely to the 'Ten Year Rule' established by Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary for the Committee of Imperial Defence, which assumed 'that the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary Force is required for this purpose. [...] The principal functions of the Military and Air Forces is to provide

<sup>10</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Mason, P. (1974). *A matter of honour: An account of the Indian Army, its officers and men*, Jonathan Cape, London, p. 456.

<sup>12</sup> See Krämer, G. (2008). *A history of Palestine: From the Ottoman conquest to the founding of the state of Israel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; Tripp, C. (2000). *A history of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Fieldhouse, D.K. (2006). *Western imperialism in the Middle East 1914–1958*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Beasley, W.G. (1987). *Japanese imperialism 1894–1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>13</sup> Kolinsky, M. (1999). *Britain's war in the Middle East: Strategy and diplomacy, 1936–42*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> Bond, *British military policy between the two world wars*, pp. 75–80.

garrisons for India, Egypt, the new mandated territory and all territory (other than self-governing) under British control.<sup>15</sup>

Constrained by a weak British Army but nevertheless requiring forces to quell unrest throughout the empire, military officials turned to the Indian Army as a tool of imperial defence. The Garran Tribunal in 1933 proposed to circumvent the 1919 Act by providing an annual £1.5 million to the government of India in return for maintaining an 'Imperial Reserve'.<sup>16</sup> The enquiry calculated that this sum would 'relieve the Indian taxpayer of the cost of some ten British Infantry battalions'.<sup>17</sup> Policy makers in London also proposed to withdraw additional British troops from the Indian Army to serve elsewhere in the empire, citing the Indianization of the officer corps as a measure that would replace British officers leaving the subcontinent.<sup>18</sup> Indianization itself, which the government had adopted in the last months of the First World War, gained favour as an additional means of decreasing the Army's costs. As one official noted, '[t]he general attitude of the India Office has been that in any case the new type of Indian officer should no longer be given the Indian Army allowance or overseas element of pay, and that if a new and lower scale can be devised which will attract the right type of candidate and enable him to maintain a reasonable standard of life as an officer it will be all to the good'.<sup>19</sup>

The Tribunal's compromises provided immediate relief for India's strained defence budget as well as for British military forces needing reinforcement for imperial policing across the world; in broader terms, the numbers of Indian forces offered were minimal. However, little further action could be taken while British administrators in India were preoccupied by the growing Indian independence movement and the emergence of new threats on the subcontinent's volatile North-West Frontier.

<sup>15</sup> War Cabinet conclusions, 15 August 1919, PRO, CAB 23/15.

<sup>16</sup> Heathcote, *The military in British India*, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> Press communiqué, 20 December 1933, India Office Records, London (IOR), L/Mil/7/5508.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; Bond, *British military policy between the two world wars*, pp. 111–12.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Sir Findlater Steward to A.P. Waterfield, 14 July 1931, IOR, L/Mil/5/885. For more on Indianization, see Gupta, P.S. (2002). 'The debate on Indianization 1918–39', in Gupta, P.S., and Deshpande, A. *The British Raj and its Indian armed forces 1857–1939*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 228–69.

### **Internal restrictions: Indian nationalism and the North-West Frontier**

Though lesser agreements had been reached between the British and Indian administrations, which allowed for restricted deployment of the Indian Army abroad, officials had to address a number of limiting factors within the Indian subcontinent before further negotiations could take place. Indian nationalist forces had undergone extensive transformation since the end of the First World War and British policy makers could no longer make decisions without considering the influential independence movements. At the same time, a resurgence of violence on India's North-West Frontier refocused military planners on the necessity of quelling the Pathan tribesmen of the borderlands: before the Indian Army could be deployed abroad, it had to secure India's own perimeters.

Indian nationalists from various parties, particularly the Liberals and Swarajists, focused on the Indianization of the army as the means to extend local influence on the imperial force.<sup>20</sup> This trend began during the Great War with the appointment of some of the first Indian officers, and British administrators agreed to the expansion of Indian officer commissions in eight units in 1923 before advancing Indian admissions at Sandhurst, Woolwich, and Cranwell, and establishing the Royal Indian Air Force.<sup>21</sup> At the First Round Table Conference in 1931, British officials finally established the Indian Military Academy.<sup>22</sup> Even as efforts to Indianize the armed forces continued throughout the interwar years, Indian politicians remained uneasy about the large costs of the military; the military budget remained a major bone of contention between Indian political representatives and British officials.<sup>23</sup>

Political developments gave Indian politicians additional sway in influencing whether the Indian Army was integrated into imperial defence schemes. After the Great War, the Indian National Congress dominated the movement for Indian independence, while its main rival, and sometime ally, the Muslim League, largely lay in abeyance until Muhammad Ali Jinnah revived the organization in 1934.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Gupta, 'The debate on Indianization', p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> Unsigned document, 'Indianization', undated, IOR, L/Mil/7/5465.

<sup>22</sup> Press communiqué, 20 December 1933, IOR, L/Mil/7/5508.

<sup>23</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> Jalal, A. (1985). *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 7–13. For more on growing



Congress and League agitations ultimately led the British to pass the 1935 Government of India Act, granting provincial autonomy and creating a new council of state and a revised, elected federal legislature. In the subsequent 1937 elections, the Congress won decisive victories in many provinces, while the Muslim League faced defeat even in those regions where Muslims comprised the majority.

Increasingly restricted by representatives in the legislative assembly, British administrators in India could provide only minimal guarantees for imperial defence abroad, and security concerns on India's North-West Frontier created an even more immediate limitation. Restless Pathan tribesmen and the permeability of the Durand Line kept the region in a state of constant flux as violence on either side of the border broke out time and again. For decades, policy makers had tried to find ways to subdue local tribesmen; they debated adopting a 'forward' policy towards the North-West Frontier, which would bring the region directly under colonial rule, or adopting a 'closed border', which would leave the tribes to their own governance.

Policy makers such as Olaf Caroe, who served as a political agent on the frontier before becoming penultimate governor of the North-West Frontier Province, emphasized the difficulties of attempting to integrate tribesmen into Indian provincial governance but also warned of the strategic dangers of leaving the tribes to their own devices.<sup>25</sup> Even after the fall of tsarist Russia, military strategists still discussed the potential continuation of the Great Game. The Blue Plan of 1927, the Defence of India Plan of 1928–29, and the Pink Plan of 1931 worked on the assumption that a great power—typically the Soviet Union—would attack Afghanistan and subsequently the North-West Frontier.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless administrators failed to agree on a specific tribal policy and instead relied on existing military garrisons and attempts to integrate the tribes economically into the subcontinent through efforts such as road building.

tensions between India's Hindu and Muslim communities, see also Page, D. (1982). *Prelude to partition: The Indian Muslims and the imperial system of control 1920–1932*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

<sup>25</sup> See Brobst, P.J. (2005). *The future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's independence, and the defense of Asia*, University of Akron Press, Akron, Ohio, particularly pp. 101–03.

<sup>26</sup> Prasad, B. (1963). *Defence of India: Policy and plans*, *Official history of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45*, Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, Calcutta, pp. 28–31.

Military patrols in the two years following the 1919 Anglo-Afghan war had suppressed local Pathan tribesmen, but left them restless. Nevertheless, besides smaller disturbances among the Mahsud and Afridi Pathans in 1930, 1933, and 1935, which the Indian Army quickly subdued, the frontier remained essentially peaceful.<sup>27</sup> After this period of quiescence, however, in 1936 a rebellion broke out in the federally governed tribal zone on the frontier, led by the militant Faqir of Ipi. The revolt gained military significance as the rebelling force grew to some 5,000 to 7,000 Wazir Pathan tribesmen who took part in attacks against the British, aided by Afghan tribesmen who crossed India's border to support their religious brethren.<sup>28</sup> In turn, the British deployed the Royal Air Force and mechanized tank companies to support 61,000 personnel in military and road-building operations.<sup>29</sup> Only the Arab Revolt—where Britain deployed 14 battalions to Palestine—could compare for sheer size.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the huge cost of operations on the North-West Frontier was impressive: by August 1937 the campaign consumed one lakh of rupees per day.<sup>31</sup> By October the total cost of operations had reached 160 lakhs, approximately £1,200,000.<sup>32</sup> Besides the fighting in Palestine, the rebellion on the North-West Frontier was the only major obstacle to broader imperial peace, and for this reason, the Waziristan campaign become one of the largest military engagements of the interwar years.

While official histories and accounts of the 1936–37 rebellion in Waziristan suggested it ended with the close of 1937, in reality a brief lull in fighting quickly gave way to clashes in March 1938 as a Congress ministry was established in the North-West Frontier Province and the Faqir of Ipi continued to encourage armed resistance.<sup>33</sup> The British

<sup>27</sup> Caroe, O. (1962). *The Pathans 550 B.C.–A.D. 1957*, Macmillan, London, p. 397; Elliott, J.G. (1969). *The frontier, 1839–1947*, Cassell & Co., London, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Warren, A. (2000). *Waziristan, the Faqir of Ipi, and the Indian Army: The North-West Frontier revolt of 1936–37*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, p. 279; Supplement no. 2 to monthly intelligence summary no. 7 on events in Waziristan, 20 July 1937, IOR, L/Mil/5/1065.

<sup>29</sup> Moreman, T.R. (1998). *The Army in India and the development of frontier warfare, 1849–1947*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 163–67.

<sup>30</sup> Kolinsky, *Britain's war in the Middle East*, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> 'Frontier operations cost about rs. one lakh a day', *The (Lahore) Tribune*, LVII (25 August 1937), p. 16. A 'lakh' equals 100,000 rupees.

<sup>32</sup> 'N.-W. frontier fighting. British casualties. Total cost of campaign', *The (London) Times*, no. 47847 (20 November 1937), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> In the North-West Frontier Province, the Congress established a ministry with the aid of their allies, the Khudai Khidmatgars, a Pathan nationalist organization based in the settled districts. While the Khudai Khidmatgars, or 'Red Shirts' as they

worried about the effects of the Congress's victory, particularly on the Indo-Afghan tribesmen. Sir James Grigg, finance member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, considered the implications of the Congress's victory for peace on the North-West Frontier: '[a]re we [sic] in the process of divesting ourselves of real power and, if so, in favour of whom? If our policy can be represented as working towards Hindu Raj then nothing we can do now will keep the Frontier quiet or induce Afghanistan to help us in doing so.'<sup>34</sup>

The effects of nationalist agitations on the North-West Frontier acquired new dimensions as tribal unrest resumed, targeting Hindu civilians in the Province's settled districts. Tribesmen planted homemade bombs along roads and raided the Province's settled regions, particularly Bannu District, where they kidnapped numerous Hindu civilians. On 27 May 1938 more than 1,000 tribesmen converged on the Datta Khel Lowargi area where they attacked two Frontier Scouts posts. In response, the British launched air attacks against the Madda Khel Wazirs, the tribesmen largely responsible for hostilities and who had refused to expel the Faqir of Ipi from their lands.<sup>35</sup> Unrest continued through to the end of 1939, with sniping and raids on district settlements frequently occurring.

The British tried unsuccessfully to suppress the tribes, initiating a five-day campaign by columns in the Ahmedzai Salient north of Bannu at the end of September 1938, column action in South Waziristan in December, and an operation in the Khaisora Valley in North Waziristan in February 1939. The Royal Air Force acted throughout to support troops and also took independent action against tribesmen.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, tribal *lashkars*, or war parties, continued their attacks and the Faqir of Ipi remained free. Governor George Cunningham

were popularly known, based their movement on Pathan tribal law and traditions, they only minimally influenced the Pathans of the tribal zone. The British limited the Red Shirts' access to the tribal zone, leaving the organization to develop almost entirely in the settled districts. See Banerjee, M. (2000). *The Pathan unarmed: Opposition & memory in the North West Frontier*, James Currey, Oxford.

<sup>34</sup> Sir James Grigg to Sir Aubrey Metcalfe, 29 October 1938, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge (CCAC), Grigg Papers, PJGG 4/4/1.

<sup>35</sup> See 'Appreciation of the political situation by the Government of India', 21 January 1938, PRO, CAB 24/274; *Ibid.*, 23 February 1938, PRO, CAB 24/275; *Ibid.*, 20 March 1938, PRO, CAB 24/276; *Ibid.*, 21 April 1938, PRO, CAB 24/276; *Ibid.*, 21 May 1938, PRO, CAB 24/276; *Ibid.*, 20 June 1938, PRO, CAB 24/277.

<sup>36</sup> 'Appreciation of the political situation by the Government of India', 24 October 1938, PRO, CAB 24/279; *Ibid.*, 18 January 1939, PRO, CAB 24/283; *Ibid.*, 1 March 1939, PRO, CAB 24/284.

of the North-West Frontier Province lamented to the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, that 'the possibility of achieving any finality is remote so long as Ipi can take refuge over the Durand Line and secure assistance in men and supplies from Afghanistan'.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, the threat of Axis infiltration had seeped into the subcontinent, creating new concerns among government officials about the security of the frontier. A second popular Muslim insurgent, the Shami Pir, appeared on the North-West Frontier in 1938; after he began advocating that the frontier Pathans fight to return the deposed king, Amanullah, to the Afghan throne, the government of India threatened to launch a new air campaign before ultimately bribing him to move to Syria.<sup>38</sup> Some officials suspected the Shami Pir of working for the Axis powers, though no evidence ever supported this belief. As war loomed, however, the government of India understandably grew wary of any potential Axis designs: during the First World War, German nationals in Kabul had tried to foster tribal revolts against the Raj. By June 1939, members of the Italian Legation in Kabul had contacted the Faqir of Ipi with similar ambitions.<sup>39</sup>

As a consequence of ongoing struggles and growing fears about the frontier—as well as public outcries against civilian bombings—the government of India commenced new discussions of frontier political and military policy. Officials proposed various strategies for subduing the frontier, ranging between the 'close border' and 'forward' policies. The close border policy traditionally required British governance of the frontier's settled districts and only limited punitive expeditions into the tribal areas, while the forward policy entailed the almost complete occupation of tribal territory. Early in the interwar years, the British had embraced a 'half forward' policy, stationing troops in posts throughout the tribal areas without pushing for total settlement.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Fortnightly report from North-West Frontier Province Governor to Viceroy, 23 July 1938, IOR, Linlithgow Papers, Mss Eur F125.

<sup>38</sup> 'Appreciation of the political situation by the Government of India', 22 July 1938, PRO, CAB 24/278.

<sup>39</sup> Hauner, M. (1981). 'One man against the empire: The Faqir of Ipi and the British in Central Asia on the eve of and during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16:1, p. 185, pp. 192–99. See also Hauner, M. (1981). *India in Axis strategy: Germany, Japan and Indian nationalists in the Second World War*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart.

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum prepared by the Air Staff and given to Sir Thomas Inskip by Sir Kingsley Wood, 'Policy and control of the North West Frontier of India', 22 November 1938, IOR, L/Mil/7/5465.

The presence of the Indian Army along the Indo-Afghan border sparked various debates. Despite public outrage against aerial bombardment, the Air Staff, dismissing the half forward policy, recommended the withdrawal of land forces from the region and their replacement by the air force: '[i]f we can carry out a major withdrawal under the sanction of air forces there is no normal tribal situation that air forces cannot solve with ease'.<sup>41</sup> A proposal to replace the Indian Army regionally with irregular troops and frontier scouts also sparked debate. Cunningham lauded the gradual removal of the regular army, telling the viceroy, 'the embarrassment in the present position is that we maintain a large Military force in a potentially hostile country, while at the same time seldom, if ever, is any really adequate Military objective offered'.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, R.A. Cassels, the commander-in-chief, questioned the advisability of withdrawing troops, demanding '[a]part from other considerations, what are the political effects of this withdrawal so far as Afghanistan and the tribes, not only in Waziristan but on the whole Frontier, likely to be? I cannot help thinking [sic] the certain effect in the minds of our tribesmen and of those across the Afghan border will be that our control is definitely weakening'. Instead, Cassels recommended the 'total or partial disarmament' of the tribal zone.<sup>43</sup>

The viceroy took a personal interest in the frontier's future, presenting a memorandum on border policy on 29 June 1939. He first considered previous changes in frontier policy, which in 1936 had resulted in the secretary of state for Foreign Affairs telling the Afghan minister in London that the British government meant to 'preserve the peace of the border, foster good relations with the tribes, and gradually to introduce standards of civilization and order into the tribal area together with the improvement of their economic conditions' by peaceful means, though by force 'when it is necessary to do so'.<sup>44</sup> After summarizing events since the 1936–37 revolt, Linlithgow ultimately concluded that the 1936 policy should remain in place without any drastic changes. Despite continued border clashes, he argued that frontier operations had been 'generally successful, save perhaps on

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> G. Cunningham, 'Note on His Excellency the Viceroy's memorandum on frontier policy dated 29th June, 1939', 5 July 1939, IOR, L/PO/5/32.

<sup>43</sup> Further notes on Viceroy's memorandum from R.A. Cassels to the Marquess of Linlithgow, 10 July 1939, IOR, L/PO/5/32.

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum by His Excellency the Viceroy on frontier policy, 29 June 1939, IOR, L/PO/5/32.

the economic and civilizing side [sic]. Nor is there any alternative method of securing our objectives which would appear to be less open to objection than the existing policy'.<sup>45</sup>

Linlithgow's memorandum did not serve as the final word on frontier policy; government of India officials continued to call for further consideration of the military's role in the region and the future of the North-West Frontier within a self-governed India. Caroe, deputy secretary to the government of India's Foreign Department, remarked '[t]hinking Indians, both Hindu and Muslim, have frequently told me of their objection to the mystery with which frontier affairs are shrouded. It is no longer possible to work in the dark in the tribal areas, and I would suggest freer and fuller discussion of these matters in Assemblies and political circles, whether at the centre or in the North-West Frontier Province'.<sup>46</sup>

In London, men who had served in the region continued the debate. The former North-West Frontier Province governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir R. Griffith, resignedly concluded that 'so long as numbers [of tribesmen] are hungry and possess arms and irresponsible freedom to use them as they will, we must expect periodic outbreaks, and can at best look for slow progress only'.<sup>47</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel C.E. Bruce informed the East India Association that the close border policy had resulted in systemic failure and 'it was by the exercise of a just and civilizing control that Britain could secure safety of life and the sorely-needed development of the tribal country'.<sup>48</sup> At the same meeting, Field-Marshal Sir Philip Chetwode called for economic development of the tribal area, while Sir William Barton, who had also served in the region, bemoaned '[w]hat a vast difference it would make if we could feel that a million fighting men of the frontier were on our side in the next war'.<sup>49</sup>

As officials continued to debate, some changes went into effect on the frontier. On 10 April 1939 political control of Waziristan shifted

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum responding to memorandum by His Excellency the Viceroy on frontier policy from O. Caroe, 8 July 1939, IOR, L/PO/5/32.

<sup>47</sup> Griffith, R. (1938). 'The frontier policy of the Government of India', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 83:531, p. 577.

<sup>48</sup> 'Pacification of N.-W. Frontier. Mistakes in method', *The Times*, no. 48307 (17 May 1939), p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; see also Chetwode, P. (1936). 'Proceedings of the East India Association. Some aspects of the defence of India. Now and when the reforms materialize', *The Asiatic Review*, 32:109, pp. 463-78.

from the general officer commanding-in-chief, Northern Command, to the civilian North-West Frontier Province governor, but tribal incursions into the settled districts continued on an almost daily basis as did attacks on soldiers, necessitating a continued military presence. *Lashkars* still planted bombs on roads to Razmak and between Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan and raided properties near Bannu, kidnapping and killing villagers and sniping at troops along roads and in encampments.<sup>50</sup> Frontier policy thus had little more definition by September 1939 than it had had at the end of the 1936–37 revolt. The need to address regional upheaval acquired new urgency, however, as policy makers in London demanded that the frontier should no longer drain India's military resources and that instead the Indian Army should fight abroad.

### **Great Britain, the Indian Army, and military reform**

While government of India officials struggled to develop a policy for eliminating North-West Frontier unrest, thereby limiting its local military expenditures, officials in London considered the region in the context of national and international defence. Strategists traditionally had seen the North-West Frontier as India's most likely point of invasion by a foreign power and they had created plans for India's defence accordingly. But the dwindling Soviet threat in the 1930s and the approach of war between European powers led policy makers to reconsider the role of the Indian Army in imperial strategy, particularly its deployment along the Indo-Afghan border in a time of international conflict.

Great Britain, by this time, had realized that it was desperately ill-prepared to fight a major war, particularly one taking place on land. In Britain's own forces, the 'Ten Year Rule' and the government's preference for a policy of 'limited liability' meant that Great Britain had forestalled modernizing its army in the years after the First World War and those changes that had taken place had prepared

<sup>50</sup> For examples see 'Tribesmen kidnap three women and one man. Village party gives them fight. Two persons rescued', *The Tribune*, LIX (24 June 1939), p. 3; 'Cavalry lines in Bannu fired on', *The Tribune*, LIX (30 June 1939), p. 3; 'Tribal raids in Bannu, D.I. Khan', *The Tribune*, LIX (8 July 1939), p. 3; 'Bombs explode on Razmak road. One man injured', *The Tribune*, LIX (22 July 1939), p. 16; 'Razmak camp sniped. No casualties. Bridges damaged; lorries detained', *The Tribune*, LIX (10 August 1939), p. 7.

Britain's armed forces for imperial deployment, not a conflict against a highly mechanized, modernized European foe. As early as 1932, the Committee of Imperial Defence Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee acknowledged that British military policy had resulted in 'a terrible deficiency in essential requirements for all three Defence Services and a consequential inability to fulfil our major commitments[,] the decay of our armaments industry [and] a state of ineffectiveness unequalled in the defensive arrangements of any foreign military Power'.<sup>51</sup>

In 1934 the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee called for a 'five year deficiency programme' to modernize Britain's Navy, Army, and Air force. The Committee believed that Britain's land forces should be organized into four modern, mechanized divisions supported by a tank brigade and a cavalry division which could be mustered at a month's notice.<sup>52</sup> Even with these proposed changes, the British Army suffered neglect in comparison to the other services: in 1934 alone, policy makers allocated only £6.9 million in rearmament spending to the Army while they gave £20.9 million to the Royal Navy and £9.4 million to the Royal Air Force.<sup>53</sup> Policy makers still identified imperial defence as the Army's main duty, while the Air force and Navy shared responsibility for Britain's own security. As late as 1938 Secretary of State for War Leslie Hore-Belisha maintained that British troops would fight in Europe only if 'the situation in the rest of the world permits'.<sup>54</sup> Policy makers consequently split the British Army's budget between anti-aircraft defences and building up the field forces, further minimizing the military's development.<sup>55</sup>

Finances inevitably served as one of the greatest limitations on war preparations. The British government acknowledged that military modernization and mechanization were an expensive but necessary undertaking, forcing the Cabinet to invest £1,650 million to rearm the Army, Navy and Air force over a five-year period (1937–41). Even this sum stretched the resources of the Treasury and the chancellor of

<sup>51</sup> Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, 'Imperial defence policy', 23 February 1932, PRO, CAB 53/22.

<sup>52</sup> 'Report by the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee', 28 February 1934, PRO, CAB 24/247.

<sup>53</sup> Postan, M.M. (1952). *British war production, History of the Second World War, United Kingdom civil series*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, 'The organization of the army for its role in war', 10 February 1938, PRO, CAB 24/274.

<sup>55</sup> Barnett, C. (1972), *The collapse of British power*, Eyre Methuen Ltd., London, pp. 502–03; Postan, *British war production*, p. 33.



the exchequer concluded that the costs of rearmament ‘not only placed a terrible strain on the national finances, but could not be increased without financial disorganization to an extent that would weaken the resistance of the country’.<sup>56</sup>

By April 1939 Nazi advances in Europe had forced Cabinet members to recognize the inescapability of war. They enacted emergency measures to build up the Army, passing the Compulsory Training Act and doubling the size of the Territorial Army to 26 divisions. The regular Army still was ‘short of establishment’ by 19,000 men and Hore-Belisha hoped to enlist 100,000 men to make up for deficits throughout the forces; the chancellor of the exchequer informed him, however, that the cost of this policy ‘was more than we could possibly bear’.<sup>57</sup> While the British struggled to field an army, the Dominions could only offer limited support. Like Great Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa had resisted the idea of a second global conflict and their armed forces were consequently underprepared. Together, the four Dominions could offer only approximately 170,000 men to the Allied cause, most of whom belonged to reserves and local militias rather than regular armies.<sup>58</sup> Lacking alternatives, the British turned to the Indian Army to bulk up their own strained forces and to counter weaknesses prevailing throughout the empire.

The Garran Tribunal had provided soldiers for imperial policing, but in the face of the growing German threat in Europe, the Indian Army offerings were pitiful. While British planners looked to the Indian Army to subsidize their weak forces, it could not readily provide the required aid. The significant decrease in the Army’s size and funding after the First World War had compounded generally weak economic circumstances in India to stunt most modernization efforts. While some mechanization had occurred before the 1936–37 revolt on the North-West Frontier, by 1937–38 the Indian Army reputedly was

<sup>56</sup> Cabinet conclusions, 16 February 1938, PRO, CAB 23/92; see also Kennedy, P.M. (1981). *The realities behind diplomacy: Background influences on British external policy 1865–1980*, Allen & Unwin, London, especially pp. 234–35.

<sup>57</sup> Barnett, *Britain and her army*, p. 420; Cabinet conclusions, 5 April 1939, PRO, CAB 23/98.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, A. (2006). *The British Empire and the Second World War*, Hambledon Continuum, London, pp. 64, 241, 477; (1966). ‘Defence—Armed Services: Army, New Zealand’, in McLintock, A.H. *An encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, p. 5, Te Ara: The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand: <<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/defence-armed-services-army-new-zealand>>, [accessed 21 May 2013].

still inferior to Egyptian and Iranian fighting forces—and entirely incapable of engaging a power like Germany.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, officials recognized the shifting international responsibilities of the Indian Army. In February 1938 the secretary to the government of India wrote to the secretary for the India Office's Military Department:

At the time of the publication of the Garran Report the international situation was very different from that now obtaining. Italy had not conquered Abyssinia; she was not threatening our position in the Mediterranean, nor had she attempted, as she is now doing, to establish her influence in Afghanistan. [...] It is impossible to ignore the fact that India is likely, in the future, to be called upon to accept wider overseas commitments in the interests of Imperial Defence.<sup>60</sup>

London policy makers shared this opinion. A new 1937 Defence of India Plan required the Indian Army to prepare military formations for deployment abroad, including two infantry battalions: one each for Egypt and Hong Kong and one each for Burma, Singapore, and Iraq.<sup>61</sup> Officials recognized that the subcontinent could not afford the requisite mechanization, while Indian political opinion would not accept additional military spending, particularly when prominent Indian politicians decried British control of the defence budget and the costs of continued frontier operations. Constitutional changes undertaken by the 1935 Government of India Act further limited India's central budget.<sup>62</sup> In 1938, as the government of India struggled to balance its budget, the viceroy noted that 'it must not be forgotten that the Central Budget has already had to find nine crores of rupees a year to meet [the] cost of new Constitution arrangements and that it is inescapably faced with a further seven crores of rupees a year. In relation to the size of our budget, 16 crores of rupees a year is equivalent to £200,000,000 a year in England'.<sup>63</sup> When asked by British Cabinet members about the expansion of India's armed forces, government of India officials stated they already had encountered financial and political problems because of 'improved conditions of

<sup>59</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, p. 138.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Secretary, Government of India, to Secretary, India Office, Military Department, 9 February 1938, PRO, CAB 24/278.

<sup>61</sup> Tomlinson, *The political economy of the Raj*, p. 138.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas, P.J. (1939). *The growth of federal finance in India: Being a survey of India's public finances from 1833 to 1939*, Oxford University Press, Madras, p. 424.

<sup>63</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy, 24 August 1938, IOR, L/WS/1/150.

the British soldier at a time when public opinion in India thought that the British soldier already cost too much'.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless, changing international circumstances necessitated a new British military strategy and thus 'the question [arose] whether the existing distribution of the Imperial Forces overseas, including India, [was] the most suitable under modern conditions'.<sup>65</sup> Desperate for aid and recognizing they had little alternative, Cabinet members agreed to subsidize the Indian Army's modernization in return for an expansion of the imperial reserve. The War Office's annual contribution of £1.5 million would increase to £2 million and the Treasury would provide the bulk of £5 million for the imperial reserve's modernization and £3 million to re-equip the Royal Air Force in India. In return the government of India agreed to release four British infantry battalions for deployment elsewhere and to maintain a ready reserve of three British and seven Indian infantry battalions.<sup>66</sup> Even this suggestion met with resistance in India. While the viceroy acknowledged the removal of four British battalions would ease the defence budget, he criticized Whitehall for refusing to pay for the imperial reserve's upkeep, noting Britain's contribution would still fall short of modernization costs.<sup>67</sup> All of these discussions and negotiations ultimately resulted not only in increased funding but also in the establishment of an expert committee that would travel to India to evaluate the economics, politics, and responsibilities of the Indian Army, seeking a fiscal compromise and a restructuring of the Army's imperial and local duties.

### **The Expert Committee on Indian Defence: redefining the frontier in imperial strategy**

Although the Expert Committee on Indian Defence shifted India's strategic priorities towards the defence of the greater British empire, it could not disregard the North-West Frontier. On a practical level, the Committee had little immediate influence on frontier operations, as the Second World War broke out before its recommendations

<sup>64</sup> Cabinet conclusions, 20 July 1938, PRO, CAB 23/94.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to S.H. Phillips from S.K. Brown, 2 June 1938, IOR, L/WS/1/150.

<sup>66</sup> Note by the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, 'India. Defence questions', 29 July 1938, PRO, CAB 24/278.

<sup>67</sup> Telegram from Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, 3 August 1938, IOR, L/WS/1/150.

could be enacted and ongoing regional conflict necessitated a continued military presence. Its final report, nevertheless, had major implications for the development of the Indian Army everywhere as it reinforced the necessity of modernization to prevent the Axis powers from overpowering India or the empire.

A Committee of Imperial Defence sub-committee, which immediately preceded the Expert Committee on Indian Defence, presenting its findings on 12 May 1938. Chaired by Major-General H.R. Pownall, himself a veteran of the North-West Frontier, this Committee evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of India's Army, the supporting air squadrons, and the military's changing responsibilities. Pownall viewed the North-West Frontier as *the* primary threat to Indian security, requiring troops for 'defence against external aggression' as well as 'control of the tribes'.<sup>68</sup> Otherwise, India's security depended on the preservation of its communications with Britain and imperial outposts, and maintenance of internal peace. The Committee advocated an extension of Indian military duties beyond the subcontinent; Pownall noted that the Royal Navy was too overstretched to patrol communication lines in the Mediterranean and around Singapore or to protect India's port cities, leaving India responsible for these regions. Similarly, the British Army could not maintain its hold in Palestine and the Middle East, where battalions were 'too weak for the proper performance of their important tasks'.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, while Pownall recognized continued risks on the North-West Frontier, he emphasized the need for deploying the Indian Army elsewhere. He noted that the traditional Russian and Afghan threats to the North-West Frontier had diminished, though 'the danger may prove to be only latent and may reassume serious proportions as the result of adverse factors', while 'the history of the North-West Frontier during the last five years shows that the tribal problems are still urgent and continuous'.<sup>70</sup> But the Committee concerned itself primarily with more indirect threats to India. It focused on the strategic importance of Egypt and Aden in the Middle East, and Burma, Singapore, and Hong Kong in the Far East, and Britain's tenuous hold in both regions. Pownall consequently identified India as 'the most suitable area East

<sup>68</sup> 'A report of a sub-committee on the defence problems of India and the composition and organization of the army and Royal Air Force in India', 12 May 1938, PRO, CAB 24/278.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

of the Mediterranean in which to station reserves for the Middle and Far East' and he called for the commitment of five infantry brigades, four infantry battalions, and 12 air squadrons for imperial defence. The Committee recognized that India could immediately supply only three infantry brigades and one infantry battalion, plus the four British battalions it had already sent abroad, and consequently requested the Committee of Imperial Defence to subsidize the Army's expansion.<sup>71</sup>

Pownall also revised India's existing defence plans for the North-West Frontier. Recognizing the likelihood of a world war, the government of India's General Staff proposed limiting military action on the frontier. In a worst-case scenario—in which Great Britain and Afghanistan were at war with simultaneous widespread tribal disturbances—the General Staff suggested the adoption of primarily defensive tactics with only small, local offensives.<sup>72</sup> The Pownall Committee decried this proposal, concluding '[t]he adoption of such a policy, though sufficient to secure the administered districts of India against hostile invasion, would not bring the Afghan government to terms acceptable to ourselves' and advocated the use of four bomber squadrons to support ground forces.<sup>73</sup> It also upheld that, despite global conflict, the number of regular Army forces stationed in the frontier could not decrease. In an appendix to his report, Pownall noted:

Apart from it being essential to localise disturbances from the outset, the nature of the country and the paucity and vulnerability of communications render the dispersion of the Covering Troops unavoidable. [...] In fact, the events of the past year in Waziristan have shown that the Covering Troops alone cannot be relied upon in all circumstances to carry out their task and may have to be reinforced to a considerable extent by formations of the Field Army.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the India Office's proposal for reducing frontier operations, the Pownall Committee believed that maintaining soldiers in the region was necessary from a collective security standpoint: '[i]f the Covering Troops were not in sufficient strength and suitably placed to meet hostile incursions and to deal promptly with tribal outbreaks, a really dangerous situation would be likely to arise'.<sup>75</sup> Irrespective

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

of policy debates within India, the Pownall Committee embraced a forward policy for the North-West Frontier.

The Expert Committee on Indian Defence, which completed its report on 30 January 1939, placed the Indian Army in the greater context of national and international political and military circumstances. Headed by the admiral of the fleet, Lord Chatfield, the Committee also included Air Marshal C.L. Courtney, Lieutenant-General Sir B.N. Sergison-Brooke, and Major-General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who had risen to military fame fighting the Mahsud Wazirs on the North-West Frontier earlier in the 1930s.<sup>76</sup> The Committee initially met in London in October 1938 before travelling to India where it visited New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, and the North-West Frontier.<sup>77</sup> Like the Pownall Committee, the Chatfield Committee was charged with suggesting measures for modernizing India's armed forces and balancing local and imperial defence needs.

Unlike the Committee of Imperial Defence sub-committee, the Expert Committee recognized political constraints on the Indian Army's growth. Committee members tried to meet with prominent Indian politicians to ascertain popular views on military expenditure, but both Muslim League and Congress members refused, one Congress leader bluntly asserting 'he felt no useful purpose would be served by presenting himself as a witness'.<sup>78</sup> Those 'Hindu' politicians who gave evidence reiterated their belief that 'the forces maintained and paid for by India should contain no margin available for use in what are regarded as Imperial, as distinct from Indian, interests', while so-called 'Muslim' leaders exhibited less opposition.<sup>79</sup> Recognizing India's move towards independence, the Committee noted that if a Hindu majority came to power (most likely referring to the Congress), it would drastically change military policy since defence strategy and expenditure would leave British hands for the first time. The Committee believed that Muslims would oppose Hindu demands for the 'formation of an army on a "national" basis [... because] its purpose appears to be to counteract the relatively high proportions

<sup>76</sup> See Warner, P. (1981). *Auchinleck: The lonely soldier*, Buchan & Enright, London.

<sup>77</sup> 'Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938-39', 30 January 1939, PRO, CAB 24/287.

<sup>78</sup> Decypher of telegram from Government of India, Defence Department, to Secretary of State for India, 2 December 1938, IOR, L/WS/1/154.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* The Report did not make distinctions between Indian political parties such as the Congress or the Muslim League, instead making generalizations about public opinion based on religious divisions.

of Muslims in the Army as it exists to-day'.<sup>80</sup> Because Indian defence decisions remained with the British under the 1935 Government of India Act, the Chatfield Committee had few immediate worries about the impact of nationalist politics on the Indian Army, though growing tensions between the Congress and Muslim League foreshadowed debates that would emerge with the viceroy's declaration of war on Germany.

To improve the military's ability to meet India's internal and external defence needs, the Chatfield Committee recommended the complete modernization and reorganization of the Indian Army, totalling three British cavalry regiments, 15 Indian cavalry regiments, 37 British infantry regiments, and 82 Indian infantry battalions. These forces comprised four categories: 'frontier defence troops', 'internal security troops', 'coast defence troops', and a 'general reserve'.<sup>81</sup> Modernization efforts would eliminate 16 infantry battalions and four cavalry regiments, which would be shifted to British control, absorbed into mechanized battalions and regiments or altogether eliminated, ultimately lowering the Indian Army's costs. The British Army, in turn, would receive a field artillery regiment, three horse artillery batteries, and one medium artillery regiment in addition to the infantry battalions moved to British command under previous agreements.<sup>82</sup> The Chatfield Committee further advocated building up war industries in India to make the subcontinent self-sufficient and coordinating defence planning between Britain and India.<sup>83</sup>

The Expert Committee recommended radical policy changes in addressing troop deployment for local versus imperial defence. It refuted earlier distinctions between the imperial reserve and the greater Indian Army, arguing 'India should acknowledge that her responsibility cannot in her own interests be safely limited to the local defence of her land frontiers and coasts'.<sup>84</sup> This shift destroyed the traditional divide between British and Indian spending on the Indian Army. Instead of requiring Britain to pay for Indian forces deployed abroad, the Expert Committee believed the government of India should bear the brunt of India's 'external security' costs. To

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> 'Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938-39', 30 January 1939, PRO, CAB 24/287.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

lessen the shock of this policy shift, the Chatfield Committee proposed that Britain should undertake the substantial costs of modernizing the Indian Army, Air force, and Navy. Working with the Defence Department, the Expert Committee calculated that modernization over a five-year period would cost £34.33 million in net capital. The Committee concluded that the British government should give India a grant as well as loan additional funds, 'the service of which might, in view of India's immediate financial difficulties, be postponed until modernization had been completed'.<sup>85</sup>

In considering local threats to the subcontinent, the Chatfield Committee followed in the footsteps of countless other planners, identifying the North-West Frontier as the subcontinent's major weakness. The Committee recognized that Afghanistan did not present an immediate threat to India, despite the presence of Axis legations and propaganda in the country but it also argued that circumstances could easily change, particularly given the weak Afghan regime. Chatfield concluded 'that India's defence plans must provide for the contingency of Afghan aggression against India, coupled with the certainty of widespread tribal disturbances, and the possibility of assistance by a Great Power or Powers which might assume serious proportions', though he emphasized that India's security interests extended beyond the frontier as well.<sup>86</sup>

The Committee carefully analysed the government of India's policy towards the tribal area. In gathering evidence, the Expert Committee interviewed military officials like Brigadier-General Thomas Corbett who informed it that 'second only to political conditions and complexes within was the influence of the North West Frontier tribes on the Army of India. They constituted the most elusive and dominant factor in India's defence problems. They absorbed much of India's defence resources. They were a constant drain and a source of danger liable to flare up at the most awkward times'.<sup>87</sup> However, the Committee

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Neither officials in London nor Delhi mentioned a possible threat from Japan, probably partly because of their focus on the strategic importance of the Middle East and possibly also because of an awareness that the Pathans perceived Japanese Shinto and Buddhist practices as a greater threat to Islam than British rule. This became particularly evident after Japan declared war on the Allies. (See 'Extract from most secret General Headquarters India weekly intelligence summary of the North West Frontier and Afghanistan, no. 6', 13 February 1942, IOR, L/PS/12/3249.)

<sup>87</sup> Final copy of evidence given by Lieutenant-General Thomas Corbett to the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938-39, 22 December 1938, CCAC, Corbett papers, CORB 1/15.



arrived at no definite conclusions, recognizing the diversity of opinion about frontier policy:

The evidence, in fact, embraced every shade of opinion, ranging from those who were prepared in the main to accept the present state of affairs, through those who advocated changes of method—some slight, some substantial and some entirely radical—to one or two who even favoured a complete abandonment of the Forward Policy because its proper application within any reasonable time was, in their view, impracticable on account of the prohibitive cost and the diplomatic difficulties it would create with Afghanistan.<sup>88</sup>

The Committee criticized the government for lacking set measures for maintaining a forward policy or gauging its success, and it entertained the possibility of withdrawing troops from the frontier and quelling tribal unrest by economic and social means. However, Chatfield ultimately concluded that policy needed further consideration, which the viceroy addressed through his aforementioned, similarly inconclusive, June 1939 memorandum.

Militarily, the Committee questioned the continued presence of regular troops on the frontier, citing the drains of frontier service on the defence forces and budget, though it provided no alternatives. It did, however, laud the use of the Air force on the frontier, advocating air action to limit ground operations, though firmly rebuffing suggestions for unrestricted deployment, which could 'give rise to allegations of inhumanity, however unjustified'.<sup>89</sup> A large number of troops would remain garrisoned in the region; the Committee calculated that in Waziristan alone, unrest might require one district headquarters, one striking force headquarters, five brigade headquarters, one Indian cavalry armoured regiment, two troops of field artillery, one medium artillery battery, seven mountain artillery batteries, three field companies of sappers and miners, three British infantry battalions, 20 Indian infantry battalions, and one Indian states forces infantry battalion.<sup>90</sup> The constant threat of unrest fostered either by tribes or a foreign power meant the region still drained India's defence resources, despite efforts to economize or limit offensive action.

Before the recommendations of the Chatfield Committee could be enacted, war broke out in Europe and the spread of the conflict

<sup>88</sup> 'Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39', 30 January 1939, PRO, CAB 24/287.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

across the globe meant that India's own security became deeply intertwined with the imperial war effort. The Chatfield Committee had concluded that deploying Indian troops abroad would best ensure the subcontinent's defences, and military planning early in the war implemented security measures for India accordingly. General Archibald Wavell's campaigns against the Axis powers in North Africa and the Middle East demanded Indian troops soon after war broke out and throughout 1940–42, particularly when Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel began his counteroffensive against the British. As early as September 1939 the 11<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigades and a Divisional Headquarters had already left for Egypt.<sup>91</sup> The Middle East campaigns drained the subcontinent of trained, equipped manpower, though the government of India demanded that 'adequate forces' remain for service on the North-West Frontier and in case of internal unrest.<sup>92</sup> Between 1 October 1939 and 1 January 1942 the Indian Regular Army stationed abroad expanded from 16,315 personnel to 268,327, while in India it increased from 178,058 to 565,238.<sup>93</sup>

World war succeeded where the Chatfield Committee had failed: it reconciled the defence of the North-West Frontier with the Indian Army's imperial responsibilities. The North-West Frontier emerged as a potential theatre in the Second World War when the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact came to light, forcing strategists hastily to create contingency plans in case war erupted between the Soviet Union and Great Britain. These plans specifically involved the frontier military establishment, the setting of a would-be Soviet assault on India, but had wider repercussions for British war plans. The government of India's Defence Department recognized that if the Soviet Union struck at the frontier, overseas aid would be impossible because of fighting in the Middle East and Europe; meanwhile, a lack of experienced troops and equipment in India—'the necessity for giving time for our expansion programme to materialise' and the 'increased rapidity of operations due to mechanised warfare and air supply'—would further weaken frontier defences.<sup>94</sup> India had become the Far Eastern bastion

<sup>91</sup> Prasad, *Defence of India*, p. 63.

<sup>92</sup> Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'Preparation of more troops in India for service overseas', 25 July 1940, PRO, CAB 66/10/22.

<sup>93</sup> Prasad, N. (1956). *Expansion of the armed forces and defence organisation 1939–45*. *Official history of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45*, Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, Calcutta, pp. 400–03.

<sup>94</sup> Decypher of telegram from Government of India, Defence Department, to Secretary of State for India, 29 October 1940, IOR, L/WS/1/116.

of the Middle Eastern war theatre and, as a result, as early as 1939 officials included reviews of policy towards Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier in Middle Eastern military strategy.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, new tribal unrest on the frontier required vigilance; one serviceman noted: '[I]ast week we had 16 more casualties one day, in fact we are losing more here than the Army is in France!'<sup>96</sup> As Britain struggled through the first three years of war, the viceroy reflected:

As the Middle East and Mediterranean conflict develops, it becomes progressively clearer that it behoves us to take further stock of our position on the North-West Frontier and in Afghanistan. The Frontier problem has to be viewed against the perspective of India's role as a political and strategic base for strengthening resistance to German (and possibly Russian) inroads on the whole range of Middle East Powers, of which Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier form, as it were, the Eastern buttress.<sup>97</sup>

Despite criticism expressed by the Chatfield Committee about the North-West Frontier's demands on India's military resources, the subcontinent's defence plans affirmed a forward policy for the North-West Frontier in the first three years of war as a means not only to prevent tribal unrest from undermining Afghanistan or the war effort abroad, but also to maintain the region as the local platform for any operations needed to thwart foreign aggression towards Afghanistan or even India itself. Maintaining peace on the frontier gained even greater significance as military planners feared that a resurgence of tribal violence would distract the subcontinent from the imperial war effort. The incorporation of the North-West Frontier in British military strategy for the Middle East necessitated troop deployment on India's borderlands. As late as July 1942, after the War had extended into the Pacific, with the fall of Singapore and Burma's occupation by the Japanese, the British deployed two Indian infantry brigades, two infantry battalions, two mountain regiments, two squadrons of the Royal Air Force, and two squadrons of the Indian Air Force to counteract a tribal insurgency in the northwest.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>95</sup> See report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'Review of military policy in the Middle East', 5 December 1939, PRO, CAB 66/3/48.

<sup>96</sup> Letter by H.V. Lewis, 24 November 1939, Imperial War Museum, London, Lewis papers, IWM 74/48/1.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Linlithgow to Cunningham, 22 April 1941, IOR, Linlithgow papers, Mss Eur F1 25.

<sup>98</sup> A. Hartley, 'Report by His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief in India on operations carried out in Waziristan between the 1st October 1941 and 31st December 1942', 2 August 1943, IOR, L/WS/1/1526; 'Report for the month of August

## Conclusion

The interwar years saw a prolonged struggle between the governments in Great Britain and India over the duties of the Indian Army. This clash mirrored debates occurring within the empire as Britain sought military forces to serve throughout its holdings. Britain's own demobilization—largely impelled by the country's financial straits and public opposition to a large military—meant that Britain's army was incapable of taking on all of the empire's policing, particularly as it faced new unrest in the Middle East and the growing threat of war in Europe. Thus, unable and unwilling to muster an appropriate force at home, Britain reached out to its imperial subjects for help. Britain supported the creation of a small Iraqi Army, turned colonial African battalions into field units, and established a Middle East Reserve Brigade to subdue local unrest and combat advancing European forces.<sup>99</sup> As Britain realized how ill prepared it was to face Germany, while maintaining peace in the empire, it turned again to India for military support.

Despite its willing participation in the Allied military effort during the Great War, the Indian government was determined to retrench at the end of the War, reducing its swollen defence budget and military to a force responsible primarily for the security of the subcontinent. The British government, in contrast, adamantly maintained that the Indian Army should continue to participate in imperial defence and serve throughout an empire that was larger than ever. In the debates that ensued, the government of India succeeded in obtaining British agreement that the Indian Army's main responsibility was the subcontinent. While Britain accepted this arrangement during the 1920s, it demanded alternative agreements as another world war drew near.

British administrators made a series of agreements with the government of India in the 1930s that extended its imperial military responsibilities. However, the age-old debate over army finance again prevented the widespread deployment of Indian soldiers. Renewed

1942 for the Dominions, India, Burma and the colonies and mandated territories, (undated) September 1942, PRO, CAB 68/9/43.

<sup>99</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western imperialism in the Middle East*, p. 102; Clayton, A. (1999). "Deceptive might": Imperial defence and security, 1900–1968', in Brown, J.M. and Louis, W.R. *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, New York, Oxford University Press, Vol. 4, p. 284; Kolinsky, *Britain's war in the Middle East*, pp. 40–41.

violence on India's North-West Frontier, moreover, occupied tens of thousands of soldiers who otherwise could have served abroad. As the frontier conflict threatened to grow even after a wide-scale 1936–37 revolt, India was in danger of needing fresh soldiers on its own borders rather allowing them to police the empire. The British, desperate to fortify their pitiful armed forces, ultimately went so far as to finance the complete modernization of the Indian Army in return for an expanded imperial fighting force.

Chatfield's Expert Committee on the Defence of India marked the most distinct shift in interwar Indian military policy. While it built on decisions made by earlier commissions like the Garran Tribunal, the Expert Committee was the first to oppose totally the subcontinent's unconditional focus on local defence; instead, Chatfield made imperial security the top priority of the Indian Army, requiring a vast new force to serve abroad. Perhaps more importantly, the Chatfield Commission succeeded in gaining approval in India for this drastic policy change because it required Great Britain, not India, to pay for the vast majority of modernization and mechanization. While previous committees, determined to limit Britain's military spending at home and abroad, had demanded that India maintain its forces abroad, the Chatfield Committee recognized that forces used throughout the empire became the responsibility of Britain. Britain, moreover, had little choice but to accept as the alternative would have forced Britain to face Germany and its allies virtually unarmed.

Through the Chatfield Committee's conclusions, local and imperial defence strategies blended, and traditional financial and military divides within the empire came to an end. The threat of world war was great enough that Britain and India agreed to compromise: recognizing that the empire's very survival was in jeopardy, India agreed to send troops abroad while Britain agreed to finance them. The governments in Delhi and London overcame opposition—from nationalists in India and financial advisers in Britain—to provide the empire with vital manpower.

Though acceptance of the Chatfield Committee's recommendations initiated India's total participation in the imperial war effort, leading the viceroy to go to war with Germany shortly after Great Britain's own declaration, it also ultimately helped pave the way for Indian independence. The nationalist backlash against the war effort coincided with Britain's growing reliance on India's military and industrial resources, leaving the government of India in a delicate position as the war progressed. Indian independence immediately

after the War meant that the provisions of the Chatfield Committee no longer applied, again removing the subcontinent's troops from the imperial garrison and necessitating new negotiations between Britain, India, and Pakistan about South Asia's military role in the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, independent Pakistan faced the same balancing act as the government of India had done under the Raj: deploying its army to maintain peace on the North-West Frontier while facing threats from abroad as well. While the Chatfield Committee ensured that India took part in the Allied effort during the Second World War, it provided no lasting principles for the involvement of the subcontinent in global military affairs in ensuing years.