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Manchanda Nivi

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Rendering Afghanistan legible: Borders, frontiers and the 'state' of Afghanistan

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Nivi Manchanda

The London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

The aim of this article is to show how the partial colonisation of Afghanistan and its 'frontier status' have generated discourses of state failure, which have led to the construal of Afghanistan as a zone of exception and of permanent crisis. The main argument is that colonial spatialisations have an enduring legacy that continues to structure the ways in which we experience and think about the Afghan state today. The construction of Afghanistan today as a 'failed state' has emerged through a historical (Anglophone) discourse that has relied heavily on the trope of the 'frontier' to make sense of the place between India and Central Asia. Thus, the 'frontier' has played a formative role in defining Afghanistan as a state and space and this plays out in how we interact – through representation, policies, and intervention – with the state in the global realm today. The import of this extends far and wide and has ramifications for our understanding of coloniality and liminality in contemporary international relations (IR), including scholarship on sovereignty, statehood, and borders. It also has implications for a range of states and places that are considered 'fragile', 'failing', or 'failed'.

Keywords

Afghanistan, borders, empire, knowledge, state

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Introduction

In the present world order, characterised by crises and interventions, how has Afghanistan come to be construed not only as the place 'where empires come to die' but also where 'exceptionally bad things happen'? How has it become so closely associated with the notion of state collapse? These questions have a significance that extends much beyond

Corresponding author:

Nivi Manchanda, Department of International Relations, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: n.manchanda1@lse.ac.uk

Afghanistan. The aim of this article is to show how the partial colonisation of Afghanistan and its 'frontier status' have generated discourses of state failure, which have led to the construal of Afghanistan as a zone of exception and of permanent crisis.

My main argument is that colonial spatialisations have an enduring legacy that continues to structure the ways in which we experience and think about the Afghan state today. The state in Afghanistan did not fully materialise as a 'principle for reading reality' or 'scheme for intelligibility'; it was never completely exposed to the application of governmental reason that occurred in Europe and – to a lesser degree – in parts of the 'properly' colonised world. In keeping with the themes of this Special Section, I foreground the claim that exclusionary understandings of Afghanistan must be comprehended as violent and racialised. In turn, 'crises', 'invasions', and 'interventions' are not hermetically or temporally sealed 'events' but are instead produced as such in dominant international relations (IR) narratives, in order to explain didactically, to provide short-term solutions, and to gloss over the messy complexities that arise out of an enduring imperial power/knowledge nexus. The crux of this article is that the construction of Afghanistan today as a 'failed state' has emerged through a historical (Anglophone) discourse that has relied heavily on the trope of the 'frontier' to make sense of the place between India and Central Asia. Thus, the 'frontier' has played a formative role in defining Afghanistan as a state and space and this plays out in how we interact – through representation, policies, and intervention – with the state in the global realm today. The import of this extends far and wide and has ramifications for our understanding of coloniality and liminality in contemporary IR, including scholarship on sovereignty statehood and borders. It also has implications for a range of states and places that are considered 'fragile', 'failing', or 'failed'.

Starting from the premise that empires are 'scaled genres of rule' (Stoler, 2006) that produce and rely upon differing degrees of sovereignty in their spheres of influence, Afghanistan emerges as a particular imperial formation, but not quite a unique one. The labels applied to the Afghan state – 'buffer', 'rogue', or 'failed' – are essential elements in a story of imperial sense-making. And yet, Afghanistan's long lineage of constructed deviance confounds established narratives of colonisation and equally elides the state failure literature because they both under-appreciate peripheries, frontiers, and zones of exceptions. After situating Afghanistan in the wider critical IR literature on the state, the discussion traces the genealogy and cartographic lineage of 'Afghanistan' from its appearance 'on the map' to the current delineation of its borders, including the idea of 'Af-Pak' that has gained traction in both policy and academic milieus.

Afghanistan and sovereign 'failure'

Afghanistan is, for all practical purposes, considered a 'failed state'. The zealous state-building projects undertaken after the intervention in 2001, many abandoned in the face of high costs, disillusionment, and a wavering commitment to, and often half-baked conception of, 'nation-building' are all irrevocably mired in a vocabulary of state fragility, failure, collapse, and corruption as almost inherent and a priori conditions of Afghanistan as a political (and territorial) entity. Stanizai (2014) strikes a chord with many when he asks whether we can 'afford another failed state in Afghanistan' and cautions that its 'fragile political structure, presently held together by a scaffolding of American military and economic assistance, could collapse into a failed state overnight'.

The danger of Afghanistan returning to its 'failed' status quo – as under the Taliban – has animated, and continues to ignite, the concerns of leaders in the Western world. In

2002, for example, Tony Blair indicated Britain's apparently positive influence on Afghanistan in his news conference with George Bush, arguing that the West must 'root out the last remnants of the Al Qaida terrorist network in Afghanistan' while helping the country 'go from being a failed state, failing its region and its people, to a state that offers some hope of stability and prosperity for the future' (quoted in American Presidency Project (APP), 2002). German Chancellor Angela Merkel underlined the incalculable value of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Afghanistan in 'protecting NATO member states from being attacked by other countries', since, 'as a failed state' Afghanistan is 'a safe haven for terrorist groups', allowing 'attacks against our alliance' that should be prevented (quoted in American Presidency Project (APP), 2009).

The widespread use of claims such as this rests on a largely unproblematised notion of the 'state' and its *sine qua non*, 'sovereignty'. While the need to question the accuracy of these ahistorical conceptions remains urgent, serious interventions have already been made in the discipline and elsewhere. Steinmetz (2008) and Ferguson and Gupta (1998), for instance, have shown how the state, insofar as 'it' can be said to 'exist', is a mythologised, contradictory, and constantly challenged entity. Grovogui (1996) and Hobson and Sharman (2005) have demonstrated that imperial hierarchy and Eurocentric modes of thought resolutely underpin notions of 'statehood'. Mitchell (1991) has advocated rethinking the state as a 'rhetorical effect' rather than, as per mainstream accounts, as a self-generated and governing stable structure. Hill (2006) and Gruffydd-Jones (2014) have examined the fundamental assumptions that fortify discourses of statehood, state failure, and good governance and have deftly highlighted their fundamentally orientalist makeup. Similarly, 'sovereignty' has come under the close scrutiny of scholars working in the field of IR and in the groves of academe more generally. Bartelson (1993) has examined the historical contingency of sovereignty in some depth, to take one prominent example, while Krasner (1999) has labelled the sovereignty regime 'organized hypocrisy' because it is an international norm that is routinely flagrantly violated but is nevertheless held up as a determining precept of the postcolonial world order. Benton (2009), on the basis of a historical study of European empires between 1400 and 1900, argues that Europeans imagined imperial space as 'networks of corridors and enclaves', and that they constructed sovereignty in ways that merged ideas about geography and law.

In spite of this extensive and burgeoning body of literature, much of the contemporary work on Afghanistan remains doggedly married to discourses of state failure and collapse. This has consequences for our understanding of the Afghan state and also contributes to the perpetuation of the unreflexive grammar of 'failure' and 'lack' in IR more generally. Talk of state failure is often laden with the same normative assumptions that accompanied the more explicit racial biases and ethnocentric baggage intrinsic to colonial propaganda and conceptualisations of world order. The mainstreaming of 'state failure', then, is a prominent instance of the manner in which an 'ontology of difference' (Gruffydd-Jones, 2014) persists in subliminally structuring the current world order, with all its material and ideological reverberations. In addition, Afghanistan is the site where discourses of state failure are ligatured with discourses of savagery, deviance, Islamic fundamentalism, and chronic instability. The Afghan state is not only a failure, it is also constructed as spineless – in constant danger of being hijacked by terrorists, it is a morally, socially, and politically bankrupt space of contestation. It is at once part of an excluded South fomenting international instability through terrorism, criminal activity, and conflict associated with the 'axes of evil', and a failure in terms of being able to cater to its own population, as evinced in the form of human development indicators and corruption indices.

Theorising the failed state

The modern European state had at its disposal both force and information, to be used towards its population in the manner it saw fit. Its strategies of governance were exported to the colony, and sometimes finessed within, albeit not without violence or resistance. Governmental reason, through the application of technique and the production of statistics, made a host of resources available at the behest of the state (Foucault, 2007; Stoler, 2006). However, in Afghanistan, there was a palpable lack of statistical knowledge within the state, leaving officials unable to formulate techniques or 'tactics' that organised or positioned 'things so that this or that end may be achieved through a certain number of means' (Foucault, 2007: 96). Foucault termed the application of tactics to arrange and achieve desired end as the 'arts of governance' or 'governmentality', the significant historical effect of which was the governmentalisation of the state (Hevia, 2012: 6). Instead of being based on classical notions of divine sovereign right, the arts of governance focused attention on the preservation of the state as a sovereign entity, as opposed to the continuation of a monarchical line. This notion of state preservation is central to contemporary understandings of the state as both actor and set of practices.

The Afghan state has yet to complete a full census, while maps of the country remain woefully inadequate. 'Ethnic maps' are used regularly in place of conventional geographical ones. No cadastral surveys or major countrywide infrastructural projects were completed. Indeed, the establishment of cadastral maps in Afghanistan remained a top priority of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan. This is not to argue that there were no moves towards statistical or empirical knowledge of the Afghan socio-political universe. The attempts to 'governmentalise' the Afghan state certainly prefigure the contemporary notions of state failure, arguably during Abdur Rahman Khan's reign but most notably in the period between the colonial era and the Soviet Afghan war. This period of 'high modernisation' attempted to render Afghanistan legible through projects carried out in Southern Afghanistan by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Knudsen, USAID and some German companies (Cullather, 2002; Nunan, 2016). Ironically enough, the United States used road maps they had drawn in the 1960s to plan the (re)'modernisation' of Afghanistan in the 21st century. However, because these projects were piecemeal and abandoned, the prosaic everyday social processes we recognise and name as the state were never fully institutionalised in Afghanistan. Boundaries were demarcated and delineated, some were respected and many persist, but with no authority – neither the British or Russian invaders nor the native Afghan governments that mediated between these empires and inherited the 'state' – exercised complete control over them.

As Mitchell (1991: 94) has argued, the establishment of a territorial boundary and the exercise of absolute control over movement across it is crucial in order for the state to exist as a viable political, social, and imaginative entity. The 'mundane arrangements' of boundary drawing and policing (including the modern social practices of continuous barbed-wire fencing, passports, immigration laws, inspections, currency control, etc.) 'help manufacture an almost transcendental entity', an entity that is 'something much more than the sum of the everyday activities that constitute it, appearing as a structure containing and giving order and meaning to people's lives' (Mitchell, 1991).

Likewise, Scott (1998) articulates these practices as the 'state simplifications' needed for grasping a 'large and complex reality'. In order for officials to be able to apprehend aspects of the ensemble, this complex reality must necessarily be reduced to what he calls 'schematic categories'. On Scott's account, the 'only way to accomplish this is to reduce an infinite array of detail to a set of categories that will facilitate summary descriptions,

comparisons, and aggregation' (Scott, 1998: 77). This is a key to making citizens out of subjects, making societies legible so as to prepare them for benevolent governance or authoritarian exploitation, as the case may be. It is perhaps inevitable then, that the Afghan populace is often portrayed as disconnected from and indifferent to the central government. While some of the 'illegibility' of the Afghan citizenry can be attributed to acts of resistance of the sort Scott (1990) analyses, and often romanticises, this also stems from the feeble and patchy attempts at the institutionalisation of a viable state structure in a polity that was territorially only delineated in the late 19th century and technically came into being in the 20th century. This is most evident when Afghanistan is compared with British India during the same period. While the 'tribe' as an analytic category was *enunciated*, it was not quite *operationalised*, and epistemic and on-the-ground engagement with 'tribes' in Afghanistan remained cursory and sporadic (Hopkins, 2008; Hanifi, 2011; Lindholm, 1980). Although the notion of 'caste' played much the same role in India as did 'tribe' in Afghanistan, and both were imagined to be socially sanctioned, ingrained traditions and putative lynchpins for the Indian and Afghan socio-political universes, respectively, only India's 'caste system' was documented, scrutinized, and dissected. Indeed, caste was 'systematised' in India, while the 'tribe' was not subjected to the same kind of ethnographic and empirical knowledge.

The British experience of attempting to govern the North-west Frontier was no doubt productive of certain limited forms of census taking and ethnographic mappings. The period saw the production of military handbooks containing genealogical trees and tribal customs and there was heavy reliance on the survey data gathered by European explorers, most notably Alexander Burnes and his commercial survey mission of 1836–1837. Nonetheless, this category of tribe was not the subject of sustained state simplification in the way that 'caste' in India was (Dirks, 2001). Through these practices of abstraction, sovereign power crystallised disparate modes of thought, contradictory elements, and dispersed forms into schematic formulaic knowledge or what Anson (2014) has termed the 'technics of politics'. In Afghanistan, there was often an initiation of or move towards schematisation especially for military purposes, but it was almost always abandoned in favour of less profuse engagement, leading to 'quasi-colonial' statehood: a state that was formed by colonial diktat but not occupied by colonial order, as it were.

Mapping Afghanistan: The production of a 'periphery'

The drawing of boundaries and the establishment of borders through formal and informal colonialism in the 'third world' was rarely smooth or homogeneous, and while sometimes these marches dislodged and replaced indigenous notions of space and subjectivity, more frequently autochthonous communities grappled with imposition through a spectrum of strategies ranging from subversion to internalisation – strategies that usually resulted in the creation of a hybridised political and social order. The presence and suppression of peripheries and grey zones within the colonial periphery, although overlooked or dismissed in much of the literature, were necessary for the core to define itself and to represent itself as a stable and stabilising force. These liminal spaces and amorphous frontiers were a source of friction and potential decentering for the colonial Self and hence needed to be delimited as exceptional aberrations for the fulfilment of the symbolic order that the colonial state saw itself as embodying and projecting outwards.

Like other liminal zones and situated frontiers (Maroya, 2003; Todorova, 2009; Winichakul, 1994), the emergence of Afghanistan as a bounded territorial space was a long and contested process and exemplified the messy and often contradictory realities of its

'proto-colonial' inception. The country's colonial bordering took 26 years, ending in 1893 when Mortimer Durand's eponymous line was delineated on the ground between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Beattie, 2002; Gopalakrishnan, 1982; Hanifi, 2014: 2; Hopkins, 2007: 70–113). This now notorious border was the heftiest concession paid to the British by Amir Abdur Rahman and entailed splitting the region in half, through the surveying of a 'scientific frontier', the 1200-mile boundary plotted in 1893 that bisected local homelands and the seasonal migration routes of 3 million pastoralists (Cullather, 2002: 516). The asymmetrical power relations between the British and the Afghans were never in question; the Durand Line deliberately followed a topographic ridgeline that could be held at strong-points blocking mountain passes that the British ascertained as crucial to the defence of their empire (Cullather, 2002: 517; McMunn, 1929).

George Nathaniel Curzon, Viceroy of India between 1898 and 1905 and British Foreign Secretary from 1919 to 1924, was responsible for the security and defence of the North-west Frontier in its entirety and remains the colonial authority most intimately associated with the politics of the region (Gilmour, 2004). It was Curzon who moulded the greatly malleable and shifting 'Afghan frontier' by filling out the last 'gaps' and 'fixing' it at the end of the 19th century. While arguably what constituted the frontier changed in the British spatial imagination after the creation of the state of Afghanistan, 'frontier thinking' continued to inform the ways in which the British viewed the Afghan state. Curzon spoke of 'enormous sums' having been spent 'fortifying the independence of' Afghanistan, resulting in, 'a threefold Frontier': an administrative border, with British India; the Durand Line, a 'Frontier of active protection', and the Afghan border, 'the outer or advanced strategical Frontier' (1907).¹

Curzon's 'Romanes Lecture' from 1907 provides the classic, if often overlooked, statement on the geopolitical imagination of colonial officials on the subject of frontiers. He prefaces this key text by pointing out that he had been in charge of a land frontier that was 'certainly the most diversified, the most important, and the most delicately poised in the world', and that he had, as Viceroy there, 'been called upon to organize, and to conduct the proceedings of, as many as five Boundary Commissions' (Curzon, 1907: 2). He then lays out in meticulous detail the pivotal function of the frontier in the imperial imaginary, betraying a sense of disquietude and urgency in the need to deal with frontier issues generally and the 'Indian Frontier Problem' more specifically (Curzon, 1907: 1–2).

The critical importance of the subject of frontiers for Curzon and, by extension, for British India cannot be overstated. Frontiers 'are the chief anxiety of nearly every Foreign Office in the civilized world', and they are 'the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, or life or death to nations' (Curzon, 1907: 2). In his rendering of events, the problems faced by the Empire were primarily those that were in some way related to frontiers, and this was certainly the case with Afghanistan. Discussing the 'controversies', 'passions', and fallen 'reputations' the 'Indian Frontier Problem' provoked (Curzon, 1907), Curzon lays the intellectual ground on which the Afghan-Pakistan frontier was to be imagined by both future generations of colonial dignitaries and by the wider audiences that continue to be exercised by the problems posed by refractory frontiers and their peoples. Colonial forms of knowledge about the frontier, and the tropes that constitute the arsenal of this body of knowledge, continue to inform and be energised by military studies, popular commentaries and journalistic reports on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border today (Stewart, 2013).

In this vivid colonial imagination, the frontier demands a specific kind of response because it is delineated as a particular space constituted by a certain breed of person. For

Curzon (1907: 23), the frontier life engenders certain ‘types of manhood’ in its inhabitants, ‘savage, chivalrous, desperate, adventurous, alluring’, enjoining those level-headed servants of the empire that are at once sensitive and masculine enough to reign in the passions and violence of frontier peoples. The frontier’s construction, both deliberate and inadvertent, as a ‘violent geography’ therefore has a long lineage, one that is constantly built upon and reinscribed (Gregory and Pred, 2006). Indeed, Curzon’s justification for colonial involvement in the dangerous periphery is reproduced almost verbatim in the plea for ‘nation-building’ and ‘solving’ the Afghanistan–Pakistan border ‘problem’ in the war against terror (Hira, 2009; Weede, 2007; Weinbaum, 2004). Very similar logics could be seen in action in the Balkans in the 1990s (Campbell, 1998).

The powerful emotive force of the frontier has been instrumental in setting forth a series of policies that both simultaneously attempt(ed) to make Afghanistan intelligible to its colonial authors and incorporate(d) strategies of distancing that produced the country as a black hole, forever impenetrable to its imperial audience. An obsession with the institutionalisation of geographically ‘scientific’ boundaries established a cognitive order for the British, allowing them to converse in a political language with which they were familiar (Bayly, 2014; Hopkins and Marsden, 2011). The boundary-making process was also constitutive of identities, of people on both sides of the frontier as well as for the British Empire.

Frontier (govern)mentality

Governance on the Afghan/Indian frontiers relied on multiple modalities and was far from homogeneous. What distinguished it from the colony ‘proper’ was the lack of ethnographic knowledge that accompanied more penetrative and holistic colonial projects, and thus the notions of mystery, terror, and chaos that it begot. Whereas the ethnographic or colonial state sought to define and document each aspect of the area and peoples under its jurisdiction, on the Afghan frontier the British were concerned largely with the management of unruly tribesmen, never seriously intending to convert them into compliant subjects of empire. This frontier, as a discursive formation, was left fundamentally incomplete, its contours outlined but its substance hazy. The practices of codification, classification, disciplining, and surveillance crucial to not merely the colonial, but also the modern, state were substituted for perfunctory policies that ensured a level of order and acquiescence that the British state deemed appropriate. The absence of the institutionalisation and operationalisation of a coherent apparatus of categorisation and repression is now singled out as the prime culprit in the ‘failure’ of the Afghan state.

Today the Afghan–Pakistan frontier is regularly depicted as the foremost site of brutality and criminality, ‘an incubator of chaos and radicalism which threatens the stability of all who come into contract with it’ (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011: 1). This pervasive image of the Frontier is based not only on an intellectually lazy historiography of the region but also on conceptually crude assumptions that underlie what ‘frontiers’ as contested spaces, areas of undefined jurisdiction, and amorphous physical form are taken to symbolise. The Durand, a porous border with a troubled history and disputed present has, perhaps predictably, been at the centre of the production and (re)presentation of Afghanistan, both topographically and demographically, as a space with an innately violent disposition.

If in 1837, Governor-General Auckland bewailed the ‘haze of confusion’ that existed beyond Lahore, in the 2000s it is customary to claim that ‘[t]he most remote place on earth has become the most dangerous’ with respect to the Afghan–Pakistan frontier (Johnson and Mason, 2008: 73). For most of the late 19th to early 20th century, Afghanistan

was a thorn in the side of the British Empire, a politically chaotic non-state that the empire concentrated on isolating, rather than an entity that legitimated any sort of routinised engagement. Even after all its borders had been demarcated and ‘Afghanistan’ emerged as a unified state, there remained an element of equivocation as to what exactly it was; not only was there tension owing to the fact that British commitment to Afghanistan wavered, but also Afghanistan as a society, polity, and an ideated space retained more than a trace of ambiguity. Imagined and installed as a ‘type’ of political entity by the British, it often failed to conform even to that standard. In fact, although Afghanistan is now apprehended as a typical buffer state, for much of its existence it did not function as one. It only became a buffer state as the British struggled to define the scope and nature of the authority they were projecting over a space they largely failed to comprehend (Bayly, 2016).

The Indian frontier – demarcated by the Durand Line – was a manifestation of two distinct types of imperial control. As Hanifi demonstrates, the Durand Line represented an increasingly violent international state system that took shape via the twinned forces of global capitalism and imperialism. The Pashtun regions straddling the Durand Line were generically referred to as the ‘tribal areas’ and since their inauguration, these areas, marked out by colonial fiat, have been periodically subject to administrative reconfiguration to include under their ‘jurisdiction’ other ‘ungovernable tribal spaces’. Not only were these permutations of the tribal areas legal grey zones, where the Frontier Crimes Regulations Acts (FCR) was enacted haphazardly in lieu of standardised civil and criminal codes, the Durand Line also noticeably altered market relations to the detriment of the Afghans. This colonial frontier politically isolated and diverted capital away from Afghanistan and towards British India (Hanifi, 2014: 4–6). This impoverishment of Afghanistan through a deliberate policy of market exclusion is another facet of Afghanistan’s ‘quasi-colonial’ status – it did not reap the ‘benefits’ of colonialism, to the degree that they can be said to have existed in colonial South Asia.

Furthermore, the articulation of state power experienced by the Pashtuns on the southern and eastern side of what was to become the North-west Frontier was bureaucratised, whereas the Pashtuns in Afghanistan experienced a highly personalised and autocratic form of state power. Without wishing to romanticise or standardise the experience of the Indian colonial subject(s), those on the ‘right’ side of the Durand Line found themselves in a privileged position, especially with regard to the ability to tap into the global circulations of colonial capital vis-à-vis their Afghan counterparts. For the British, Afghanistan was a space of exception provoking a ‘frontier governmentality’ in response (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011; Wong, 2010). A disparate set of policies that the British applied in order to govern adequately the frontier region in particular and all of Afghanistan in general, this frontier governmentality was paradoxical both in theory and in practice: it reduced the frontier to *yaghestan*, an ungovernable tract of land characterised by disorder and haunted by the interminable spectre of chaos, rather than recognising the multiplicity and diversity of the social, moral, political, economic, and linguistic forms that populate the region. It also essentialised the frontier as a land of unruly Pashtun tribes that needed to be curtailed and managed, although always from a distance. This amounted to an elision and distortion that precluded the acknowledgement of the frontier’s lived reality – the frontier had never been the sole domain of a single ethnic or tribal group – and also the fact that it was composed of orderly administered states as well as by regions beyond state or federal jurisdiction.

In actuality, the nature of British control on the frontier was not one of sharp demarcation but of gradations of authority and dominance, with the colonial state abandoning ‘its

pretence to power' in spatial degrees (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011: 62). These shades of imperial sovereignty, not reflected accurately on colonial maps, were formative for both the delineation of the frontier and the lifeways of the people inhabiting the region. What was distinctive about frontier governmentality, however, was not the fading degree of colonial authority, but rather the firm belief that the frontier was of a peripheral and, at best, instrumental concern to the British Indian state, a point little explored in scholarship on the region. Although the colonial state invested ample time and effort in delineating a scientific border, the frontier on the whole remained for it a source of 'essential confusion', resulting in a lethargic separation between 'settled' (read civilised) and 'hill' (read wild) populations (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011: 62). The colonial state attempted to grasp the 'meaning' of the frontier in reductive terms and failed, unsurprisingly, in this venture. Those outside the ambit of a few invasive colonial systems and other localised organised systems of governance were cast as social, political, and economic pariahs, their history consigned to the figurative ash heap.

Frontier governmentality in sum was essentially an exercise in delegitimising certain 'tribal' mindsets and ways of being. By relegating the frontier to the land of mystery and bedlam, the colonial state carved the frontier, and Afghanistan more generally, as a space of *insufficiency*. If questions of power always already inhere in questions of knowledge and vice versa, the frontier remained a space of exclusion from power and a place of 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 2003: 11) in which the British comfortably rendered some peoples less governable than others.

'Af-Pak' as exception(able)

The production of Afghanistan as liminal and exceptional historically continues to have far-reaching and deep-seated ramifications today. Afghanistan as a political entity is tenuous; it is 'a space, not a place, as the territory is sandwiched high on the frontier of the Indian subcontinent' (Allan, 2001: 545). As a buffer-state, a moribund political formation particularly susceptible to 'state death' (Bayly, 2016: 4), there have been calls to merge part of Afghanistan with Pakistan, most powerfully captured with the coining of the neologism 'Af-Pak' or AfPak (Taheri, 2009). Talking to a military conference in Munich in 2008, Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan and the man credited with inventing the term, explained Af-Pak as an attempt to indicate a singular 'theater of war', marked by the Durand Line and 'straddling an ill-defined border', with the sovereign, but terrorist-filled, territory of Pakistan on the East and the arena of action for NATO and 'other forces' on the West (cited in Quinon, 2009).

In this final section, I want to propose that 'Af-Pak' is not, as some of its proponents are prone to claim, a retrospective concession that has taken into account the complex realities of the region and its residents, and which has acknowledged the need for a unified homeland for the Pashtun people. Holbrooke's description seems, on the surface, the most straightforward way to cut the Gordian knot, recognising the artificiality of the Durand Line and, more generally, the arbitrary processes of imperial boundary-making to which the genesis of modern Afghanistan may be traced. The popularity of 'Af-Pak', as attested to, principally but not solely, in the US foreign policy discourse, can, however, more convincingly be read as an expedient measure in dealing with the Afghan or Pashtun 'problem'. Albeit less unsavoury than the alternative 'Talibanistan' (Bergen and Tiedemann, 2012), 'Af-Pak' is a lightly camouflaged racist and, as I explain below, a state racist, manoeuvre that seeks forcefully to homogenise a border and its inhabitants in an

attempt to 'isolate the chaos' both intellectually and on the ground. By cordoning off the region in this way, it becomes easier to sanction and implement certain types of knowledges, in order to justify political and military policies that would otherwise be considered objectionable or as infringing upon the sovereignty of a nation state. Finally, following directly from the point above, 'Af-Pak' in both its framing and its purported aims is an exercise in rendering Afghanistan a 'space of exception', a place where a temporal suspension of the rule of law has become the permanent order, producing a 'zone of indistinction' (Agamben, 2000). Such zones are non-spaces where 'everything is truly possible' and the people living in them are considered outside the remit of 'politics', abandoned subjects, not quite animal but not fully human, leading lives that are expendable, or 'bare life' (Agamben, 2000: 38; Agamben, 1998). For Agamben, 'the camp' exemplifies this permanent transitional zone of indistinction, but the Afghanistan–Pakistan border zone fits equally well here. Not quite colonised, not quite a sovereign state, and not even a designated political precinct, Afghanistan is a 'non-space', produced as a liminal zone in both academic inquiry and in its practical administration and made 'exceptional' because of its social, or its 'tribal' composition.

The mainstreaming of Af-Pak extends beyond popular ventures such as the *Foreign Policy* magazine's 'AfPak' channel and military projects like the US Department of Defense's 'AfPak Hands Program', which was created in 2009 to 'develop a cadre of military and senior civilian experts specializing in the complexities of Afghanistan and Pakistan – the language, culture, processes, and challenges' (Miles, 2012). The Af-Pak Hands programme is marketed as a 'knowledge base' that works to get 'expertise from the theater into key billets' (Miles, 2012). Both these undertakings treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as a singular challenge to be surmounted, or a unified theatre of war, possessing one 'language and culture'. Similarly, *Foreign Policy*'s 'Ultimate AfPak Reading List' is a comprehensive guide to 'Af-Pak' compiled by Peter Bergen (2013), handpicked from his course syllabi at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. I mention this not as a minor cavil about a hastily crafted, seemingly inconsequential neologism, but to point to an axiomatic manifestation of 'discourse in/as action'. India's leading newspaper, *The Hindustan Times*' explicit reference to 'AfPak' as a 'geography of terror' and the bleak future it augurs in an article published in 2014 betrays exactly these logics.

The 'integrated' solution – which asserts that the elision of two territories on either side of an 'ill-defined border' will help to dismantle the 'terror infrastructure' – expressly overlooks the very dissimilar types of states that have come to shape the region and the divergent forms of the modernising processes they have unleashed on its local denizens. The expression 'Af-Pak', as Hopkins and Marsden (2011: 3) uphold, 'offers little in the way of historical sensitivity or cultural knowledge'. The utilitarian (for American military and policy purposes) amalgamation of lived spaces is resented by Afghans and Pakistanis alike, inhabitants on both sides of the border consider the coinage insulting, as it ignores the manifold and elaborate self-identifications and socio-political allegiances that they claim (Hopkins and Marsden, 2011; Macdonald, 2009; Spiegel, 2009: 3). More perniciously, the 'theater of war [...] call[ed] AfPak' (Holbrooke quoted in Cooper, 2008) is used to blockade, raze, and declare the area 'dangerous' to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the 'West', as evidenced in Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Michael Hayden's 2008 assertion that the 'Af-Pak' border 'presents a clear and present danger to Afghanistan, to Pakistan, and to the West in general, and to the United States, in particular' (quoted in Tristram, 2009).

The politics of naming here is also explicitly linked to both a politics of shaming – Af-Pak is a non-state, a failed political project – and a politics built on the premise that some people need not be heard from, indeed that ‘their’ lives are more disposable than ‘ours’. Not only does ‘Af-Pak’ erase the modern history of Afghanistan by declaring it an ‘artificial state’, it portrays occupants situated on either side of the border as a homogeneous group inhabiting a single undifferentiated space, a move that is not only unhistoric but also one that has caused visible distress to the people inhabiting the region (Gould and Fitzgerald, 2011). ‘Af-Pak’, devised to signal the need to offer an ‘integrated’ solution to the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and its perceived Al Qaeda associates in Pakistan, has provided precisely the sort of apologia for increased militarism in the region that its inventors had in mind.

‘Af-Pak’ is best conceived as an exemplification of the phenomenon that Foucault referred to as ‘state racism’. In its attempt to erase the differences in cultural dispositions, religious affiliations, and political inclinations, to parenthetically lump people together as the ‘enemy’ or ‘terrorist’ populations for the purposes of war, ‘Af-Pak’ becomes a unified theatre of operations against which the chosen or ‘superior’ populations at the home front must be defended (Ricciardi, 2009). Foucault (2003: 254–255) argues that modern warfare is waged in the ‘name of life necessity’, in defence of a distinct population, one that is racialised as the predominant and worthy one. The marshalling and mobilisation of a superordinate population inaugurates in its wake a mechanism of ‘introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control’, a ‘break between what must live and what must die’ and ‘a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population’. That, for Foucault (2003), ‘is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras’.

State racism is a racism directed by a nation state against its own citizens, an ever-present authorised possibility of murder that is intrinsic to the biopolitical state. It is ‘inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States’ (Foucault, 2003: 254). Although Foucault himself examined the implications of state racism as practised by European states against their own citizens, using Nazi Germany as its grotesque exemplar, he nevertheless acknowledged that it was a broad concept, one that subsumed other political conflicts such as class struggle. State racism and its prerogative, the right ‘to make die’, what Mbembe (2001) calls ‘necropolitics’, finds its most deathly and surreptitious manifestation as a tactic applied on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Not only does state racism in this instance distinguish between ‘enemy’ populations and the liberal (Western) subject residing at ‘home’, but, more crucially, it separates the ‘civilian’ populations of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the ‘border’ populations, simplistically conceived of as tribal terrorists and mad jihadis. The hierarchised set of relations that effectively segregate ‘target’ populations in the creation of ‘Af-Pak’ is close to a perfect instantiation of the ways in which the historico-political discourses of war contain inherently the discourse of ‘race struggle’ that Foucault has expertly exposed in his lectures. As Reid (2006: 145) notes, there is a strong affinity between Fanon’s phenomenological lament in relation to the experience of race war and Foucault’s theorisation of state racism, since both focus on the subjugation of a particular population within the ‘racial epidermal schema’ of colonial and intra-state power relations, respectively. In ‘Af-Pak’ state racism appears to function at multiple levels – both at the level of the West fighting wars in the name of ‘life necessity’ so as to defend its own citizens, and also through the exportation of a state racism to the West’s designated theatre of war, by choosing the populations that have the right to live and those that must die.

Equally significantly, this state racist homogenising of the border through the deliberate revoking of a segment of the population's 'right to have rights' (Arendt, 1966) is instrumental in carving out the border region, and Afghanistan more generally, as a space of exception. As I argue, here Agamben's 'bare life' is (re)created in all its minutiae: people inhabiting a lawless space randomly subject to drone strikes, transitive populations encamped, disenfranchised, and outside the discourse of citizenship. However, these zones of exception and in-between spaces are necessarily produced in the interstices of empire for the continued operation of the microphysics of power. 'Af-Pak' is much more than an arbitrary appellation: it is the social restructuring of the region through a historico-political discourse that stems from a racialized and exclusionary world order, which depends on the necessary production of zones of exception, violent geographies, marginalised peripheries and liminal, even suspended subjectivities. 'Af-Pak' can be thought of as a capstone in the anxious topology of power; not fully accepted into the official folds of empire, Afghanistan was nevertheless never quite out of what Stoler (2006: 140) calls 'imperial bounds', but more especially it has always been in an *imperial bind*. The state's trajectory from 'buffer' to 'failed' to 'non-' state is the distinctive but not unique story of a precarious empire's (both Britain's and America's) attempts at taxonomising and categorising. It captures the tension in colonial penetration of the region: at times invasive and intense, at others languid and abandoned.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has had 17 different national flags in the 20th century, apparently the greatest number of any country in the world (Allan, 2001: 545). To signal this varied and amorphous nature of the Afghan territory and polity, Lord Curzon surmised with reference to Afghanistan's northeastern border that 'these artificial expedients [...] have no durability, unless they are based upon some intelligible principle of construction or defined by a defensible line, and are administered by an authority capable of preserving order' (Curzon, 1907: 24). The Wakhan corridor, he suggested, 'can only last so long as the Amir of Afghanistan, to whom it was handed over, with a special subsidy from Great Britain, fulfils his undertaking to maintain order' (Curzon, 1907). Conventional wisdom's alluring construction of Afghanistan as a failed state thus stems almost tautologically from Afghanistan as a state born of failure. What is distinctive about Afghanistan today is not that it was an arbitrary colonial creation. The carving up of Afghanistan was much like most places in the colonial world. Indeed, arguably *all* states, like continents and other accepted geographically bounded entities, are discretionary constructs and only over time become reified. What makes Afghanistan atypical is its incessant re-creation as an arbitrary blip on the world map, its re-inscription as a space of exception on the fringes of humanity that demands 'special treatment'. The spatialisation of Afghanistan over time, moreover, is a story of imperial expedience. Its construal at various points as a buffer, or a failed state, or as a theatre of war, has meant that colonial power can intervene, bomb from a distance, nation-build, and leave, as it sees fit, with impunity.

The recursive representation of Afghanistan as somehow characterised by a 'lack', as defined by an absence of 'normality', is especially pronounced when it comes to discourses of statehood, nation-ness, and sovereignty. In these multiple constructions as 'failed', 'buffer', or 'frontier' – asserted in accordance with the needs of colonial power at different historical junctures – the Afghan state has been the focal point of much

analysis and has been almost always found wanting, making it easier to relegate it to the realm of exception and marginality. Together with other partially colonised liminal zones, including Siam (Thailand), Sudan, and Somalia, and possibly Persia (Iran) and the Balkans, Afghanistan is simultaneously produced as a known object and a quintessentially unknowable terrain. The presence of this periphery constitutes the symbolic Other against which a stable Self can be posited. The ambiguous political and geographical cartography of the Afghan state is necessary for the continued propagation of an empire that rests on the dense armature of hazy spatiolegal categories (Gregory and Pred, 2006: 4). It is also another instantiation of the colonial anxiety to impose order and render intelligible its 'doubles' in what Foucault (1986) called 'Other spaces'. Stoler's words on the creative and seemingly ambivalent idiom of US-led intervention in the 21st century are strikingly resonant in the discourse on Afghanistan. This lexicon of the US intervention, articulated most fervently in the war against terrorism, is revealing and 'suggests not a marginal imperial form but a more comprehensive picture of the varied and changing criteria by which empires sanction appropriations, occupations, and dispossessions' (Stoler, 2006: 141).

Afghanistan's status at the 'threshold of vague political status and territorial ambiguity', then, is fundamental to contemporary technologies of rule and biopolitical governance (Stoler, 2006: 141). This article has shown how knowledge production about Afghanistan is a living testament to the country's peripheral status, both in geographic and political terms, in the current world order. Afghanistan confounds mainstream postcolonial discourse, which draws its theoretical and empirical significance, research agendas and critiques largely from the experiences of major colonies such as India (for Britain) and Algeria (for France). The Afghan experience also highlights the complexity and ambiguity in colonial cartographic practices and the way in which 'tricky' spaces are rendered legible. Finally, by problematising mainstream IR approaches to notions of 'statehood' and 'state failure', this article opens up important avenues for future research into 'liminal spaces' and border-zones in global politics.

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Note

- 1 The Romanes Lecture, delivered annually since 1892 in Oxford, is a prestigious free public disquisition. Curzon (1907) lecture was a landmark speech not only on the subject of frontiers but also as a statement on the indispensability of British for the functioning of the Empire.

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Author biography

Nivi Manchanda is a London School of Economics (LSE) Fellow in International Relations Theory. Her research interests include race, gender, and the legacies of colonialism in International Relations. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge Production* which is based on her award-winning PhD thesis. She is co-editor of the book *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge, 2015) and co-convenor of the Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial British International Studies Association working group.