

# A game of smoke and mirrors

In 2009, the former president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, described Waziristan as the “most dangerous place on earth”. Ironically, this grim observation came after continuous bombing and shelling of the region for an entire seven-year stretch, beginning in 2001, as part of the US’s ‘War on Terror’. The ascription, ‘dangerous’, to a place that had become a permanent battleground for the US and the Pakistani armies was a coded admission of the US’s military failures in the ‘war’ against ‘*jihadis*’ and the ‘*mujahideen*’. Waziristan could not be quelled.

Sameetah Agha’s book can be read as a ‘genealogy’ of the predicament faced by President Obama. For the US’s exasperation with Waziristan mirrored that of the British government more than a century ago in the context of the first serious attacks on its authority by the Pukhtun Resistance. Waziristan marked the limits of Empire in every sense of the term and Agha’s book rips apart the comforting certitudes of imperial historiography to tell that story from a fresh and compelling perspective.

What Agha describes as the Pukhtun Resistance is an account of three successive episodes of armed attacks on British military garrisons and frontier officers in 1897. First in Maizar, then in Swat and, finally, in Khyber. All three were deemed key defence positions in the imperial North West Frontier. The assaults resulted in heavy military casualties on the British side and were admitted failures of strategy and tactic on the ground. Yet, as Agha suggests, there is little in colo-



onial historiography that acknowledges the embarrassing failures of imperial defence on the frontier. The Pukhtun assaults are duly recorded but described mostly as “surprise attacks”, or wanton acts of “treachery”, or simple expressions of “fanaticism” by a bunch of warlike tribesmen. Agha holds up the account of the troubles on the frontier by the Oxford historian, C.C. Davies, as typical. With specific reference to the attack on Maizar, Davies wrote, “[s]o treacherous was this attack, and so utterly at variance with the Pathan code of honour, that frontier officers found the greatest difficulty in ascertaining the exact cause.” Davies’s account was heavily influenced by what Agha describes as “imperial explanations” for troubles on the NWF. These ‘explanations’ were largely cover-ups for not only the military failures on the ground but also the larger ‘forward policy’ of occupation

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## THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE: SUB-IMPERIALISM AND PUKHTUN RESISTANCE IN THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

By Sameetah Agha,  
Orient BlackSwan, Rs 695

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and annexation of the frontier provinces of the Punjab. Agha blows the lid off this orthodoxy both in the imperial archive and the imperial historiography by unearthing a huge cache of confidential documents that tell another story. These documents were mostly reports and dispatches sent to the Government in Delhi by the local Government of Punjab, apprising it of the inherent contradictions of Britain’s ‘forward policy’ in the region and the tensions it generated on the ground.

Agha navigates this hitherto unexplored reserve of confidential reports to give us a lucid, yet rigorous, account of the tortuous processes that marked the making of the imperial frontier in the North West through a complex web of negotiations among different tribal groups and their leaders in the Pukhtunwa region, between the Amir of Kabul and the Government of Punjab and between Government of India in Delhi and Whitehall. The imperative of entering into multiple negotiations was due to the region’s strategic location between the Kingdom of Kabul and the British territory of Punjab as well as its significance as a route of entry for

imperial defence forces against any eventuality of Russian aggression on the borders of India. The North West Frontier, as Agha argues, was an imperial creation. It referred to the mountainous borderland area between the previously Sikh-held territories and the Kingdom of Kabul. To Agha, the “frontier was a continual project in the making that operated as a ready alibi for imperial military expansion”.

Between 1849-1947, the area was the scene of endemic violence and warfare marked by a hundred punitive military expeditions known as “butcher and bolt” and “burn and scuttle”, named after the tactics the colonial military deployed as sanctions against the various tribes. Yet in Whitehall, official imperial policy *vis-à-vis* Waziristan and, more importantly, the Yousufzais, who, among many others, inhabited this stark mountainous terrain, was meant to be one of non-interference. These tribes, although nominally under the suzerainty of the Amir of Kabul, lived on terms of complete autonomy. The Amir never levied taxes nor disrupted their political institutions like the ‘*jirga*’. The Government of Punjab had cautioned the authorities in Delhi that any policy of military advancement in the region had to be taken with care. Yet, by the 1890s, the imperial government, even while maintaining that it never had any intentions of annexing the territory of these frontier tribes, embarked on an interventionist policy that included the building of military garrisons, the levying of taxes for salt extracted from the nearby mines, the initia-

tion of a system of allowances for tribal *maliks* to win their support and the imposition of a rule of law that came with a series of penalties and sanctions. The apparent calm acceptance of these conditions by the negotiating tribal groups, however, could not contain the deep resentment that simmered within. The frontier officers chose to misrepresent these realities to their superiors and the ensuing game of smoke and mirrors resulted in an anti-colonial upsurge on the frontier that took both the military officers on the ground as well as strategists in Whitehall by surprise.

Agha turns the “imperial explanation” of 1897 on its head by linking what she describes as the “sub-imperial” or the local frontier archive together with Pukhtun narratives of resistance immortalized in songs called ‘*tapas*’.

Imperial historiography failed to acknowledge the limits of Empire and left an account of the rebels on the frontier as either “treacherous savages” or mindless fanatics who transgressed the cardinal codes of Pukhtun honour. Agha’s poignant reconstruction of their struggles, however, reveals them as distressed subjects of military aggression who refused to give up without a fight. Her book leaves us with the compelling argument that the Western imagination of Waziristan as the most ‘dangerous place’ in the world regrettably fails to acknowledge that this ‘dangerous place’ is also one of the most brutalized and vulnerable regions of the world.

Madhumita Mazumdar