The Second Anglo-Afghan War

After months of chaos in Kabul, Mohammad Akbar secured local control and in April 1843 his father, Dost Mohammad, returned to the throne in Afghanistan. During the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49), his last effort to take Peshawar failed.

By 1854 the British wanted to resume relations with Dost Mohammad, whom they had essentially ignored in the intervening twelve years. The 1855 Treaty of Peshawar reopened diplomatic relations, proclaimed respect for each side's territorial integrity, and pledged both sides as friends of each other's friends and enemies of each other's enemies.

In 1857 an addendum to the 1855 treaty permitted a British military mission to become a presence in Qandahar (but not to Kabul) during a conflict with the Iranians, who had attacked Herat in 1856. In 1863 Dost Mohammad retook Herat with British acquiescence. A few months later, Dost Mohammad died. Sher Ali, his third son, and proclaimed successor, failed to recapture Kabul from his older brother, Mohammad Afzal (whose troops were led by his son, Abdur Rahman) until 1868, after which Abdur Rahman retreated across the Amu Darya and bided his time.

In the years immediately following the First Anglo-Afghan War, and especially after the 1857 uprising against the British (known as the Sepoy Rebellion) in India, Liberal Party governments in London took a political view of Afghanistan as a buffer state. By the time Sher Ali had established control in Kabul in 1868, he found the British ready to support his regime with arms and funds, but nothing more. From then on, relations between the Afghan ruler and Britain deteriorated steadily over the next ten years. The Afghan ruler was worried about the southward encroachment of Russia, which by 1873 had taken over the lands of the khan, or ruler, of Khiva. Sher Ali sent an envoy seeking British advice and support. The previous year, however, the British had signed an agreement with the Russians in which the latter agreed to respect the northern boundaries of Afghanistan and to view the territories of the Afghan amir as outside their sphere of influence. The British, however, refused to give any assurances to the disappointed Sher Ali.

After tension between Russia and Britain in Europe ended with the June 1878 Congress of Berlin, Russia turned its attention to Central Asia. That same summer, Russia sent an uninvited diplomatic mission to Kabul. Sher Ali tried, but failed, to keep them out. Russian envoys arrived in Kabul on July 22, 1878 and on August 14, the British demanded that Sher Ali accept their mission.

The amir not only refused to receive a British mission but threatened to stop it if it were dispatched. Lord Lytton, the viceroy, called Sher Ali's bluff and ordered a diplomatic mission to set out for Kabul on November 21, 1878. The mission was turned back as it approached the eastern entrance of the Khyber Pass, thus triggering the Second Anglo-Afghan War. A British force of about 40,000 fighting men were distributed into military columns which penetrated Afghanistan at three different points. An alarmed Sher Ali attempted to appeal in person to the tsar for assistance, but unable to do so, he returned to
Mazar-e-Sharif, where he died the following February.

With British forces occupying much of the country, Sher Ali's son and successor, Yaqub, signed the Treaty of Gandamak in May 1879 to prevent a British invasion of the rest of the country. According to this agreement and in return for an annual subsidy and vague assurances of assistance in case of foreign aggression, Yaqub relinquished control of Afghan foreign affairs to the British. British representatives were installed in Kabul and other locations, British control was extended to the Khyber and Michni passes, and the Afghanistan ceded various frontier areas to Britain. An Afghan uprising opposed to the Treaty of Gandamak was foiled in October 1879. A noted historian, W. Kerr Fraser-Tytler, suggests that Yaqub abdicated because he did not wish to suffer the same fate that befell Shah Shuja following the first war.

Source: *U.S. Library of Congress*