

Oxus, a distance of 250 miles, which would give her a second railway to the Afghan frontier. But that railway has not yet been begun. Its construction would occupy three or four years.

If this railway were built it would enable the Russians to overrun the plains of Afghan Turkestan, but as a means to a serious southerly advance it is quite impracticable. Only one pass can be kept open in the winter, and it is safe to assert that no Russian army could be carried over the frontier and kept in supplies. No railway will be constructed over the Hindoo Koosh.

One of Lord Selborne's railways may, therefore, be put out of consideration. The only possible line of advance is the railway from Merv to Kara Tapa. That railway might be prolonged to Herat. It would take seven months. It would take less time to extend the line from Chaman to Kandahar. It is only this line of advance that concerns England. And along this route they have the advantage over Russia for it is much easier for Britain to pour men north from Kurrachee than it is for Russia to pour men south from Moscow.

As a matter of fact nobody can seriously consider what this advance would mean without realising that Lord Selborne's 400 miles are no measure at all of the distance that separates India from Russia. First of all the country is overwhelmingly adverse. The Russians would have to strike not in Afghan Turkestan but through the hills. The railway would have to make diversions and pass through Sabzawar and Farah; the country round Herat abounds in fierce rivers, and nobody who has read Colonel Hanna's history of the Afghan war can fail to remember what a part the rivers play in the defence of Afghanistan. If the country is adverse, what of the population? A generation ago Britain found

the Afghans difficult enough in the war (and to-day the Ameer's force is a most formidable army. When Lord Selborne talks of nothing separating India from Russia but 400 miles and the independent State of Afghanistan, he really means that the Russians can meet the British when they have built and maintained a railway in the country inhabited by the fiercest passion for independence in the world, and made by nature to be its fastness. British failures should be a warning against panic. We were unable to advance beyond Kabul, and when Sir Donald Stewart was consulted about the retention of the province of Kandahar, he replied that the province could not maintain a Russian or British army of occupation of twenty thousand men. How many hundreds of thousands would be needed to build and guard a railway from Herat to Kandahar in those hostile hills? If the reader could imagine an expanse of country as long as from London to Edinburgh, piled up with mountains twice as big as the wildest Swiss ranges, defended by the most virile and stubborn fighters in the world, he would have some conception of the kind of task that has to be achieved before Russia becomes a neighbor.

It seems to us extremely unlikely that Russia would ever attempt that task, however disposed her military party might be to pretend to set about it, in order to embarrass and complicate British policy. Nothing would suit an Anglophobe party better than to draw Britain into a costly and unnecessary system of defence. But, in any case, railways are not built in a day, or in secret, and the facts that alarm Lord Selborne do not seem to make a Russian invasion an imminent danger and to demand the imposition of fresh burdens on the heavily-taxed people of India.