

This PDF was generated on 18/01/2022 from online resources of
the **Qatar Digital Library**

The online record can be viewed at:

http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000833.0x00014e

It contains extra information, high resolution zoomable views and transcriptions.

'Quetta-Seistan Railway'

Holding Institution	British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers
Reference	IOR/L/PS/18/C152
Date(s)	26 Jul 1916-4 Aug 1916 (CE, Gregorian)
Written in	English in Latin
Extent and Format	1 file (6 folios)
Copyright for document	Open Government Licence



About this record

This file consists of a report by the Secretary of State for India [Joseph Austen Chamberlain], which is addressed to the Prime Minister [Herbert Henry Asquith]. The report concerns a proposal, made by the Commander-in-Chief in India [Sir Beauchamp Duff], to extend the Quetta–Nushki railway to Seistan, on the grounds that it is a 'cogent military necessity'.

The report includes extracts from a telegram and a minute from the former Viceroy and Governor-General of India in Council, Lord Curzon, dated 4 September 1899 and 28 October 1901, which summarise the history of the proposed scheme and the various political, strategic and commercial arguments and counter-arguments relating to it.

This summary is followed by two telegrams from the current Viceroy [Frederic John Napier Thesiger], dated 26 July and 29 July 1916 respectively. The first of these summarises the current military case for an extension to the line (which was put forward by the Commander-in-Chief in India) as follows: any continuation of the recent Turkish advance into Western Persia may result in the Government of India having to increase its military presence in Eastern Persia, which would require improved communications between Nushki and Seistan; it is further argued that a broad-gauge railway – running from Nushki to at least as far Dalbandin – although more expensive than mechanical transport, would be a preferred solution to the current reliance on camel transport.

The first telegram provides the Government of India's response to these proposals. It argues that the scheme

can only be justified on 'cogent military grounds', before adding that the limitation of the extension to Dalbandin would be a half measure which would not provide adequate relief to the current situation, nor aid wider strategic contingencies.

The second telegram details the Railway Board's rough estimate of the cost of extending the line (2,000,000 l.).

Also included in the report are the following three minutes:

- a minute from the India Office's Political Department, dated 27 July 1916, which refrains from expressing an opinion on the strategic implications of extending the line, but concludes that the commercial prospects would be sufficient to warrant constructing a line. The minute opines that an extension as far as Dalbandin would be the more practical of Duff's two proposals;
- a minute, dated 28 July 1916, in which the Military Secretary to the India Office, General Sir Edmund Barrow GCB, makes the argument that the entire line would take one and a half years to build, and that therefore it is not likely to be of use during the present war. Barrow supports the Commander-in-Chief's suggestion of extending the line as far as Dalbandin, in the hope that it may be of some use in the war effort (the implication being that motor and camel transport could be relied upon from Dalbandin to Seistan);
- a minute from the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India, Sir Thomas William Holderness, dated 29 July 1916. The minute argues that a decision on whether to extend the line should be made based on the actual or possible necessities of the present war, and that future political, commercial or strategic requirements should not come into consideration.

The Secretary of State for India begins the report with an extract from a private telegram, dated 25 July 1916, from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, in which the Viceroy suggests that the matter requires the advice of the Chief of Imperial General Staff (Sir William Robert Robertson).

The Secretary of State for India informs the Prime Minister that an immediate decision is required on the following:

- whether an extension of the line is a 'cogent military necessity', which should be undertaken at once;
- whether the extension can be carried out in time to be of use for the purposes stated by the Commander-in-Chief;
- whether an extension to Dalbandin would be sufficient.

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [8r] (1/12)

C. 152. (1)

8

This Document is the property of the Secretary of State for India.

SECRET.

QUETTA-SEISTAN RAILWAY.

PRIME MINISTER.

I have received the following private telegram from the Viceroy:—

From Viceroy, 25th July 1916.

Private. Reference to my official telegram Nushki-Robot railway. I took the matter in Council, 21st July. Majority would have rejected proposal, but in view of Commander-in-Chief's plea of cogent military necessity owing to possibility of Turkish advance through Persia to Afghanistan, I suggested that we should have advice of Chief of Imperial General Staff as to possible danger from this direction. I can scarcely think it such as to warrant so grave an expenditure for what we consider so small political or commercial results. But I did not wish Council to over-rule Army Member when he put forward a cogent military necessity. There is further the larger question of the future of Persia. We do not from that wish to extend our responsibilities, but this may be forced upon us by larger Imperial conditions. This cannot be left out of account in considering question of proposed railway, but I regard it as a matter to be decided by the Imperial Government rather than by us.

The official telegram is printed on pages 6-7 of these notes, which give a summary of the past history of the question and the comments of my advisers.

I suggest that the papers be referred to the Imperial General Staff for report, and circulated to the War Committee which could discuss them as soon as the report of the Imperial General Staff is received.

An immediate decision is required on the questions—

(1) Whether an extension of the line is a "cogent military necessity" to be proceeded with at once.

(2) Whether in that case the extension can be effected in time to be of use for the purposes named by the Commander-in-Chief?

(3) Whether the extension to Dalbandin would suffice for the time?

But these questions can scarcely be answered without some consideration of the larger question whether the construction of a permanent broad-gauge railway to or towards Seistan would be advantageous or disadvantageous on general strategical grounds?

A. C.

4th August 1916.

The Commander-in-Chief in India has urged the extension of the Quetta-Nushki Railway to Seistan on grounds of "cogent military necessity."

The earlier history of this scheme, and the significance of the scheme itself, were thus described by Lord Curzon in a Minute, dated 4th September 1899:—

"The first idea of some such railway appears to have originated with the late Sir J. Browne, who, as early as 1854, advocated a line from the neighbourhood of Quetta *via* Nushki, not to Seistan, but to Safar, on the Helmand. This proposal was put forward, without any reference to Persia, for strategical reasons, namely, in order to prevent, at any future period, a Russian advance upon Kandahar. It is interesting to me to learn from a study of the papers what I did not know before, viz., that five years later, when I was travelling in Persia, and was first writing about this question, it had just been raised both in India and in Persia by a report from Colonel Bell, at that time Head of the Intelligence Department in India, who, in the autumn of 1888, marched from India by Kharan and Mashkel to Seistan, and strongly recommended the construction of a railway and a lease in perpetuity of Seistan from the Persian Government, with a view to the grant of a great irrigation concession to Reuter or to some other company. The

S 319 50-8/1916

A

8

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [8v] (2/12)

2

suggestion was eagerly taken up by Sir H. D. Wolff, whose imagination was at that time suffused with halcyon dreams of a regeneration of Persia by universal railways, and was recommended by him both to the Government of India and to Lord Salisbury. Lord Lansdowne's Government, in a telegram dated the 20th January 1889, said that 'railway extension through Baluchistan was regarded by the military authorities as a most valuable adjunct to the defences of India, and as deserving of the utmost encouragement.' Sir H. Wolff's proposals did not make much advance, but were reiterated by him in despatches to the Foreign Office, dated the 25th July and 19th August 1890. Unfortunately in these, as in his original despatch of the 19th February 1889, Sir H. Wolff rested his defence of the scheme upon extremely contentious and entirely unacceptable grounds. He advocated it for two reasons: as a menace to the Transcaspian Railway of Russia, and as the saving of a long land march in the event of our desiring to take the offensive against that Power. This line of argument was completely riddled in a memorandum, dated the 2nd October 1890, by General Brackenbury, at that time Head of the Intelligence Department at home. He pointed out that a single line to a remote corner of Persia could not counterbalance the position of Russia in that country, would not help us in the least on the Afghan border or in Afghan-Turkestan, and would be of no use for assuming the offensive. He concluded by saying: 'By far the more important task is not the construction of a new line to Seistan, but the consolidation of our power there by bringing the frontier tribes under our influence, and by developing Baluchistan and converting it into a fertile base of operations. When this has been done, it will be time to push forward into Persia.'

"23. General Brackenbury's criticism was destructive of the proposal viewed as an offensive and strategical scheme. But a corresponding flaw in his own argument was at once pointed out by Lord Salisbury, who noted that the real object of a Seistan railway would be not to attack Russia in Northern Persia, but to save Southern Persia from falling into her grasp, which could be done either by a line from Quetta, or, as he would himself prefer, by a line from the sea.

"24. General Brackenbury's criticism was sent out to the Government of India, and was thus noted upon by Sir G. Chesney on the 13th January 1891: 'The railway can only be regarded as a work of military precaution. From this point of view it appears to me that the time cannot be far distant when it will be deemed necessary. Still more important is a railway from the Persian Gulf north to Seistan, but the connecting link between this line and the Quetta railway system will also be found necessary.'

"25. A little later Sir H. Brackenbury, now Military Member in India, again noted upon the scheme, and it is interesting to read his remarks in the light of his former opinion. He now explained (27th April 1891) that he had only objected to a Seistan railway so long as the Russian railway did not extend south of the Transcaspian line, and because to construct a railway to Seistan would compel her to make extensions. 'But if circumstances should change, and if Russia should take the lead in making railways southward, then it may become necessary for us to follow her lead. We ought to be able to keep pace with her.'

"26. These conditions had not yet been realised, and the Government of India decided to proceed no further with the scheme. The question of a more southerly line from the sea was at the same time considered in connection with Sir R. Sandeman's proposals to take over Kej and Panjur—a project which was revived in 1894 by his successor, Sir J. Browne. On both occasions, however (as again at a later date), the proposal to assume administrative responsibility for Makran was negatived by the Government of India, and with it the idea of a Makran railway from the sea to Seistan was dropped also. Since then the question has not been revived.

"27. It will be clear from the above narrative, firstly, that the idea of a Seistan railway does not appear to have ever been considered by the Government of India from the only point of view in which, in my opinion, it ought to be regarded, viz., as a protective, and not an offensive, measure. The reason perhaps is that, at that time, Russia had not given such

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [9r] (3/12)

9

3

unmistakable evidence of her intention to move southward from Meshed, and to draw Seistan within the radius of her political influence. The railway was accordingly discussed and condemned as a means of attacking Russia in Northern Persia, not as a means of keeping Russia out of Southern Persia. Moreover, at that time, the Quetta-Seistan trade route not having yet been opened, the possible commercial value of the line was not taken into account at all. Secondly, it will be noticed that the conditions postulated by Sir H. Brackenbury in London as precedent to any idea of railway construction in this quarter have since been realised. Baluchistan is rapidly being developed, the frontier tribes have passed completely under our control, a permanent line of communication with Seistan has been opened, while the very conditions which he said, when in India, might compel a change of attitude on our part, viz., Russian initiative in the process of southerly extension from her existing railway system, have been fulfilled by the construction on her part, without provocation or incentive from us, of the Merv-Kushk line. It is clear, therefore, that the question stands on a different footing from any that it has previously occupied, and that the facts and arguments which weighed with our predecessors are inapplicable to the present situation.

* * * * *

"30. The Government of India have in the accompanying despatch suggested the desirability of coming to an understanding with Russia concerning spheres of interest in Persia, which would leave Seistan within the British zone. In such a case there might be no necessity, at any rate for the present, for a Quetta-Seistan railway. We could then devote ourselves to the diligent promotion of the resuscitated caravan route, and look forward to the day when, the Helmand being in our hands, we might convert Seistan into a flourishing outpost on the flanks of British India that would call for railway connection with the lines and resources of the interior."

Again, in a Minute of 28th October 1901, Lord Curzon wrote :—

"The Russian Railway to Kushk (where the materials are stored for the 70 miles prolongation to Herat) already places that fortress within the grasp of Russia, should she at any time care to run the risk of a *casus belli* with Great Britain. But the Russian railway about to be constructed to Meshed if prolonged, as is the intention, to Seistan, and ultimately to the Gulf, will dispense Russia from the necessity of crossing the Afghan frontier on the Herat side. From Persian territory she will menace the entire western flank of Afghanistan. She will command the Herat-Kandahar road and will render insecure any future British occupation of Kandahar. Lower down, in the unsettled tracts of Baluchistan and Makran, which we have at present only imperfectly brought under our control, there would be limitless scope for frontier disturbance and local intrigue. We should be compelled, at the cost of a great expenditure of money and of a serious addition to our responsibilities, to invest our authority over those regions with a more concrete character, and to maintain posts and garrisons to guard what would then have become a vulnerable, though it is now a negligible, section of the Indian border.

"14. The Minute which I wrote on 4th September 1899, and sent home to the India Office with the Government of India's Despatch of 21st September 1899, sufficiently indicated the extreme strategical importance to India of Seistan. The success that has attended the efforts which we have since made to develop the trade route from India to that part of Persia—the value of the trade having risen in two years from 7½ to 15 lakhs—has tended to increase both our interest and our influence in that portion of the Shah's dominions, and has encouraged us to project the early construction of a railway from Quetta to Nushki, i.e., over the first 90 miles of the route. A Russian railway through Seistan to the Gulf—followed as it must be by the political absorption of Seistan—would not merely kill this promising enterprise, and close the one remaining overland trade route (that to Yarkand and Kashgar is already nearly dead) that still remains open to Indian commerce, but it would have the following further and even more

X

serious consequences. It would place Russia in control of a district ethnographically connected with Baluchistan, would profoundly affect our prestige both with Afghan and Baluch, and would greatly enhance the difficulties that we already experience in managing the cognate tribes on the Indian side of the border. If Great Britain is ever called upon to advance to Kandahar, as she will probably one day be compelled to do, an intolerable state of friction would arise between the Powers that would then control the upper and the lower waters of the Helmund. Moreover, while Seistan, if it ever fell under British influence, could, owing to the protecting floods upon the north, be easily defended against Russian attack from the direction of Meshed, our present frontier (should Seistan pass into the hands of Russia), being entirely exposed, would enjoy no similar immunity. I might easily enlarge at greater length upon the strategical importance to India of Seistan. But as I believe it to be now generally recognised both here and in England, it will be sufficient to say that a Russian railway through Eastern Persia to the Persian Gulf means neither more nor less than the final loss to Great Britain of Seistan; and that the recent declarations of the British Government as to our interests in that quarter forbid me to believe that they would acquiesce in any such calamity."

In 1903 the extension of the Indian railway system from Quetta to Nushki (98 miles) was begun, and finished in 1905. The line is on the 5 ft. 6 in. gauge, and is single.

In the meantime questions connected with Seistan had occupied a large place in the examination of the general question of the defence of India in 1903-05. It is impossible to summarise these discussions, but some points must be noted. In 1903 a scheme came to the knowledge of His Majesty's Government which had been prepared by the Russian Captain Rittich in 1900 for the construction of a railway across Persia *via* Tabriz, Tehran, Yezd, Kerman, to Chahbar outside the Persian Gulf, with a branch from Bam to Seistan, which district "might undoubtedly serve as a *place d'armes* for a movement on Kandahar, and through Nushki to Quetta." The writer observed that the English had already facilitated this latter operation for the Russians by constructing a caravan road and digging wells. This scheme was examined in India (where Lord Kitchener was Commander-in-Chief), and pronounced to be the most dangerous yet contemplated. The best countermove was considered to be a railway from Bunder Abbas to Narmashir and thence to Seistan. "All concurred," Lord Curzon told the Committee of Imperial Defence, "in the supreme strategical importance of Seistan. There was also a general concurrence that a railway direct from Nushki to Seistan would, on strategical grounds, be inadvisable, although "it might be preferable to a policy of inaction." Lord Curzon was in England in 1904 and placed his views before the Committee of Imperial Defence in a Minute of 1st June. He held that if it were maintained that Seistan must be regarded as exclusively within the British sphere, we should be driven to a more active policy.

"It seems to have been assumed in the papers under discussion that if the defence of India impels us to interfere more actively in the affairs of Seistan, the means, or at least the sequel, of our doing so, must be the prolongation of the railway from Nushki to Robat and Nasratabad. I do not myself share the view that if we were to build such a line, and were later on compelled to retire from Seistan it would be a present of great tactical value to Russia. For it would divert her from her true line of advance *via* Kandahar, while the chances, if we controlled the Helmand, of destroying the line by floods over an immense extent of ground do not appear to have been considered." But he pointed out that the necessity of "presenting a railway of any sort to Russia" might be avoided by building, not to Seistan, but to the Helmand either from Kandahar *via* Girishk or Kila Bist, or from Nushki to Bagat.

Eventually the Committee of Imperial Defence decided that Lord Kitchener should be asked, "whether, assuming the reorganised strength of the Indian Army and reinforcements from Great Britain, he would advocate an occupation of the province as part of the operations for the defence of India in the event of war, in specified conditions as regards the Russian communications present and future." (Minutes, 9th June 1904.)

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [10r] (5/12)

5

The records of the Committee of Imperial Defence do not show what the immediate sequel was, but, as is well-known, Lord Kitchener's plan of campaign for the defence of India against Russia contemplated an advance on the Kabul-Kandahar line; and it did not include the detachment of any force to Seistan. The ultimate sequel was the negotiation in 1907 of the Anglo-Russian Convention, which brought the "race for Seistan," as a question of immediate urgency, to an end by including the district in the British sphere, thus gaining the point which the military authorities held to be of paramount importance. The railway scheme was no more heard of in this country until 1910, when it again came into prominence in connection with the Russian scheme of a Trans-Persian Railway. Under this scheme, the railway after Kerman would run to Seistan, and thence to Nushki and Quetta. The proposal was referred to India, and there was some diversity of opinion there as to this portion of it. Sir H. McMahon, who had always been in favour of the Seistan scheme, held that "the railway and political disadvantages of inter-railway communication are less than might at first sight be supposed, and are largely counteracted by the access afforded by the line to Seistan." His general conclusions were that:—

"In order to minimize the preliminary advantages of Russia, to assist British trade, prevent Russia getting an undue start of British and Indian trade, and for strategic purposes it is absolutely essential:—

- "(1) To construct a line under British control from Bunder Abbas or other Gulf port to the central line.
- "(2) That the Indian railway system be extended to the Indo-Persian border by the easiest and quickest route, i.e., from Nushki.
- "(3) That work on (1) and also from the Indo-Persian border westwards should commence simultaneously with that at the Russian end.
- "(4) That work on (2) be pushed on with speed without necessarily waiting for the commencement of the Persian line.
- "(5) That a line be constructed in due course from Karachi to meet the central line within British limits.
- "(6) That no time be lost in commencing the necessary railway surveys for all the above lines."

The President of the Railway Board (Sir T. Wynne) suggested that our attitude should be:—

- "(1) To cordially accept and support the proposal that an international line should be made from Seistan to Baku.
- "(2) To assist in this project India would build at once, with its own funds, the line from Nushki to Seistan and include it in her railway system. The gauge of this line at the present time to be left to India to decide, but it should be made an essential point that a break of gauge should occur at Seistan junction."

The Chief of the General Staff (Sir D. Haig), on the other hand, took the view that this alignment "would enable Russia, in the event of war, to turn the Kandahar and Quetta positions, and to develop on the borders of India a force far stronger than we could oppose with Indian troops alone, and to do so probably before we could obtain reinforcements from home. It is for this reason that the General Staff urge that no extension of the Nushki line should ever be undertaken. There is no position on this route suitable for a strong fortress that could delay the advance of Russia's land forces. This alignment possesses, in fact, every strategic disadvantage." This view was adopted by the Indian Interdepartmental Committee, of which Sir D. Haig was a member:—

"The adoption of this route would give to Russia a railway leading directly to the frontier of Afghanistan, and would enable her, in the event of war, to turn the Kandahar and Quetta positions. It would also facilitate the transportation by Russia of a very large army across two almost waterless deserts—a task which, under present conditions and without the help of a railway, may be regarded as practically impossible of accomplishment. As against this, India would receive no compensating strategical advantages. A line to Seistan from Nushki might to some extent assist India to control Western Afghanistan, but no point is offered from which a force from India could undertake offensive operations against Russia; while the extension of

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [10v] (6/12)

6

our line to Seistan would make it difficult to resist a claim on the part of Russia to connect the Trans-Caspian Railway with the proposed route, in which case she would be able to concentrate from two directions. Finally, the adoption of the Seistan-Nushki alignment would, owing to its distance from the seacoast, completely neutralise the strategical advantage which Great Britain possesses in her naval supremacy."

The Government of India, too, accepted this view, which has held the field ever since, and the *tracé* of the Trans-Persian Railway was deflected by His Majesty's Government from Kerman to Bunder Abbas. This deflection was strongly opposed by the Russians who laid no particular stress on the Seistan alignment, but urged that, if the railway was to go to the Gulf, it should at least reach it at Chahbar. His Majesty's Government, however, were firm, and the negotiations were in an *impasse* when war broke out. It should be noted that His Majesty's Government had made it a condition of adhering to the scheme that—

"In return for the co-operation of Great Britain in the project, which examination has shown to be likely to benefit Russia far more than Great Britain or India, Russia shall pledge herself not to entertain or support, without coming to an understanding with Great Britain, any proposal for a line in the neighbourhood of the Perso-Afghan frontier within the Russian or neutral sphere in Persia."

The Russian Government accepted this; but when the *impasse* was reached they hinted that if the scheme broke down they would consider their hands to be free. In the spring of this year overtures were made by the French for the resumption of negotiations, but His Majesty's Government did not think the moment opportune. A little later the Russian Government (who, since the beginning of the war had connected Julfa with Tabriz by rail) announced that they were about to apply for a concession for a railway from Baku to Tehran, *i.e.*, the first link in the Trans-Persian scheme. Thereupon His Majesty's Government decided to apply for a concession for a line from Bunder Abbas to Kerman. The international scheme may thus be taken to be at an end, and it is a significant comment on its failure—as well as an important factor in the consideration of the Nushki-Seistan project—that on 24th July 1916, His Majesty's Minister, Tehran, telegraphed: "A concession, Russian Minister tells me, is being discussed for a branch from the Trans-Caspian Railway to Meshed."

It was at this juncture that the following telegrams were received from the Government of India:—

Telegram from Viceroy, Army Department, dated 26th July 1916.

7174. As you are aware, military opinion formerly regarded extension of broad-gauge railway from Nushki to Seistan as undesirable because it would bridge the desert lying between our frontier and the territory under Russian influence. The developments of the present war however have, in the opinion of our military advisers, intruded factors which require reconsideration of this policy, *viz.*:—(1) German-Turkish plans to bring Persia and Afghanistan into the field against us. Consequently, necessity on our part of countering this plan by the employment in co-operation with the Russians of military force in Eastern Persia. Any continuation of recent Turkish advance into West Persia may result in the Government of India having to increase their force now operating in Eastern Persia. (2) The maintenance of this force by pure animal transport has always been very difficult and now makes demands which cannot be met without drawing to a dangerous extent on the camel transport retained for force detailed for initial operations in event of a campaign on our North-West Frontier. (3) Unless therefore we are to withdraw or so reduce the force in East Persia that it will not be able satisfactorily to co-operate with the Russians in disposing of the German-Turkish parties who, though foiled for, may be expected to return to the charge we have to improve communications towards Seistan. (4) It was at one time thought that mechanical transport alone would meet the wants as suggested in your telegram dated 24th January 1916. But experience and further investigation leads to the conclusion that distance

n the part of
osed route, in
ons. Finally,
o its distance
antage which

has held the
was deflected
This deflection
stress on the
o the Gulf, it
ent, however,
broke out. It
a condition of

project, which
e than Great
a or support,
proposal for a
n the Russian

impasse was
ould consider
ertures were
ns, but His
me. A little
the war had
ere about to
the first link
ment decided
erman. The
and it is a
factor in the
uly 1916, His
sian Minister
n Railway to

received from

ly 1916.

led extension
le because it
territory under
ever have, in
require recon-
ng Persia and
y on our part
the Russians
cent Turkish
dia having to
maintenance
difficult and
o a dangerous
ial operations
less therefore
it will not be
osing of the
ted to return
rds Seistan.
alone would
anuary 1916.
that distance

(360 miles) is too great to admit of this solution, particularly as the essential improvement and upkeep of this waterless road is considered to present such difficulties as to make it an unreliable communication. Moreover, the supply of the official lorries (250) estimated as necessary to support even the present force would be difficult and would necessarily interfere with important demands for mechanical transport and its personnel elsewhere. A personal report from General Sir Malcolm Grover, who had just inspected the forces in Eastern Persia, made it clear that unless our present communications were improved the maintenance even of our present forces was near to a breakdown, while local opinion doubts the feasibility of a steady and sufficient mechanical transport over the road and the distance. Consequently the Commander-in-Chief consulted the Railway Board as to the possibility of light railway, and learns from them that most economical and satisfactory solution is to extend the broad gauge from Nushki by utilising available material and avoiding break of gauge. Examination of the mechanical transport *versus* railway proposals shows that as against greater initial cost later (sic? latter) should be set much greater running expenses of the mechanical transport. These considerations have led Commander-in-Chief to ask for extension of the broad-gauge railway from Nushki as fast as possible combined with use, mechanical transport in advance of railroad, so as to place our communications with Seistan on a more satisfactory footing. In his opinion a practical initiation of the project would be the extension of the railway 120 miles through Dalbandin, which is most difficult section of the route for animals and lorries than the use of mechanical transport to Mushki Chah 130 miles and thence animals to Robat. Looking to the future strategical situation in Persia such events and negotiations as we are aware point to the fact that we may be forced to strengthen our hold on Southern Persia, in which case the railway extension now under reference would become essential, in fact the protective measure foreshadowed by Lord Curzon in his note of 4th September 1899 would have to be adopted.

The foregoing are the military considerations which have prompted this proposal and we think it right to state them fully.

At the same time we wish to make it clear in our opinion the scheme cannot at present be supported on commercial grounds.

Since Seistan is now within British sphere the political considerations which led to Lord Curzon to press it have now largely disappeared. We may, moreover, reasonably hope that the present emergency which necessitates the maintenance of British forces in Eastern Persia will shortly pass and we have no intention thereafter of proposing permanent retention of the garrison there. The local political advantages of the scheme are small and incommensurate with cost.

The commercial advantages are even more problematical. In spite of the generous measures to stimulate its trade on Nushki-Seistan route has remained insignificant, and even with a railway to our frontier no great increase could be expected in the near future owing to sparseness of the population and distance of the markets.

As regards the cost we are somewhat diffident of the rough estimate indicated and think we must prepare for higher figures, possibly 2,000,000l. for whole extension. This is serious matter not only in view of the present financial position but because railway programme has been cut down to lowest possible limit. Provision of the permanent way would, moreover, cause some inconvenience, and would in the first instance have to be drawn from Chaman reserve. To sum up, we hold that scheme as can only be justified on cogent military grounds. It is for His Majesty's Government to decide whether these exist. In any case we deprecate any limitation of the extension to Dalbandin as a half measure calculated neither to give prompt or adequate relief to the present situation, nor to meet wider strategical contingencies which we trust may not arise.

Telegram from Viceroy, Army Department, dated 29th July 1916.

7437. Your telegram of the 26th instant. Seistan Railway. Railway Board roughly estimate expenditure on laying of railway at Rs. 50,000 a mile up to date of opening throughout, without rolling stock or works, which will almost certainly be necessary after opening if railway permanently

retained, for example, fortified station buildings and provision of bridging over waterways temporarily closed by embankment. Estimate 2,000,000*l.* indicates aggregate maximum expenditure which we think may eventually be involved in construction of railway and equipment with rolling stock.

MINUTE BY POLITICAL DEPARTMENT, INDIA OFFICE.

The previous history of the question has been summarised above. But the political situation is, of course, widely different now. Seistan is admittedly within our sphere, and will become still more so if, after the war, the neutral sphere disappears. To say that, however, is not to say the last word on the subject—as the Government of India appear to think. A sphere is not yours unless you use it. Failure to use our sphere is largely responsible for the present situation in Eastern and South-Eastern Persia, in which a position built up precariously during 20 years, but never really consolidated, collapsed in almost as many days when the Germans appeared on the scene. No lines drawn on the map can alter the political and strategical importance of Seistan; and its commercial possibilities—which it is our business to help the Persian Government to convert into actualities—are very great.

As will have been seen, this line was last under consideration in connection with the proposed Trans-Persian railway. That large scheme is not now on the *tapis*; but it cannot be left out of account. Moreover, as the Government of India's Committee observed, "the extension of our line to Seistan would make it difficult to resist a claim on the part of Russia to connect the Trans-Caspian railway with the proposed route, in which case she would be able to concentrate from two directions." It is a curious coincidence that two days before the Government of India's present telegram was received Sir C. Marling telegraphed that the Russian Minister had informed him that a concession is being discussed for a branch from the Trans-Caspian railway to Meshed—the first step towards Seistan, so much dreaded 10 years ago. This, if true, is interesting for another reason, viz., because we made it a condition of adhering to the Trans-Persian scheme that Russia should undertake not to take up this project without coming to an understanding with us. Apparently therefore the Russian Government consider the Trans-Persian scheme at an end and are assuming a free hand. Thus they may build towards Seistan as far as Yezd without our being able to demur.

It is obvious from the above that there are still strategical questions of fundamental importance to be answered before the construction of a broad-gauge railway to Seistan can be approved even as a measure of "cogent military necessity." It must be assumed that Sir B. Duff (who, when he was Military Secretary here, was a strong supporter of the then orthodox view of the dangers involved) has entirely changed his views; since it is hardly conceivable that, if he still shared the views of the Indian General Staff of 1911, he would now press for this line on the off-chance—and it is surely not very much more—of a serious Turkish advance through Persia to Afghanistan. It cannot be said that this is a particularly opportune moment for examining so great a question as that of the defence of India in the event of war with Russia; not only because there are plenty of other matters on hand, but also because it is surely premature until the lessons of the present war have been digested, and until we know *inter alia* what military system, if any, this country will have in future (for in the last resort it is a question of numbers, pure and simple). Yet it is obvious that we cannot build this line in a panic without stopping to consider fully where it is going to land us.

It is not for this department to express an opinion on the strategical question. But from the political point of view it would appear to be wise to lay our military plans on the hypothesis that within the next half century Kerman will be the junction of lines from Bunder Abbas, Tehran and Meshed; and if that is so, that we shall be wise to get on the flank of the latter as soon as possible by building from Nushki to Seistan. These lines

will not be primarily "threats to India." But the possession of the Dardanelles will not make less necessary eventually, when the vast resources of Central Asia are fully developed, an outlet for Russian trade farther E.

The Government of India speak slightly of the commercial prospects of the line. It will run of course through a wilderness. But it will have Seistan at the end of it, and Seistan when it enjoys settled government and is developed, and when the Persian Government becomes more civilised in its economic policy, will be a region of great wealth; and the same is true of the adjoining Afghan territory. As regards existing trade with Persia *via* Nushki, the figures for the last three years before the war were:—

1911-12	-	-	-	19.4 lakhs.
1912-13	-	-	-	22.7 "
1913-14	-	-	-	24.2 "

Most of this is with Meshed, and for the last two years our Consul-General there has been clamouring for the Nushki-Seistan extension, which will reduce the length of the journey by some 20 marches out of 85. A not inconsiderable amount of British trade is also believed to pass through Russia to Meshed, including Indian tea. If the Russians build their branch to Meshed, we shall be at a still greater disadvantage than we are at present in competing with them, and they in turn will fight the harder against any version of the Customs tariff that will help our trade coming in *via* Seistan. A further consideration is the paucity of exports from Khorasan to India, and it would seem that this branch of trade will require much nursing if a great many trains are not to return empty to Quetta. Nevertheless the Consul-General (Lieutenant-Colonel Haig) holds that the steady expansion of trade even under existing conditions would justify the extension (Report 1913-14, page 4). On the other hand, if there is ever a Bunder Abbas-Kerman-Meshed connection, the Nushki-Seistan line will presumably lose its Meshed trade. Indeed, if one thinks of the railway map of Persia as it may be in a remoter future, it would seem that, for goods traffic, the line will depend on Seistan and the neighbouring Afghan districts. Suppose, for example, that Tehran and Seistan are both connected with Kerman, it is improbable that heavy traffic between India and Kerman or Northern Persia will move *via* Seistan rather than *via* Bunder Abbas. On the other hand, the former will be the natural route for passengers and mails, if and when through connection with Europe is established *via* Russia. The general conclusion would seem to be that the ultimate commercial prospects are sufficient to justify the construction of a line the cost of which is not likely to be prohibitive.

On this point there are no details. The Government of India think that the total cost may come to 2,000,000l. (3 crores of rupees). The route has never been surveyed, but Mr. Johns made a reconnaissance of it in 1903, according to which an alignment following the caravan track presents practically no engineering difficulties, and is estimated to cost roughly 2 crores (1,333,000l.) at a rate of Rs. 55,000 per mile.

The immediate construction of the railway as far as Dalbandin is urged by Sir B. Duff on grounds of "urgent military necessity," *i.e.*, to supply the force at present in Seistan and any increased force which a Turkish advance may call for. The Government of India are opposed to this "half measure," and if the line is to be built at all would build it all at once. Neither of them tell us how long it is going to take, though this seems a point of vital importance—in fact, it is the whole point at present. The distance from Nushki to Robat is 360 miles; from Nushki to Dalbandin, 120. Mr. Johns thought that "with adequate arrangements Robat could be reached in less than two years, a very moderate estimate"—but not much use if "the maintenance even of our present force is near a breakdown." If the broad gauge line could be built at the rate of one mile a day (which is most unlikely), it would still take a year to reach Robat, and four months to reach Dalbandin. It would seem therefore that in spite of the inconvenience of breaking bulk first at Dalbandin and then at Nushki Shah, the Commander-in-Chief's proposal is the more practical of the two; but the relief to the strain on the present transport arrangements would still be remote. It would, however, obviously be unwise to reject the scheme, in whole or part,

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [12v] (10/12)

10

solely on this ground. We did not begin a Tigris railway last November because the military authorities thought that the military operations would be finished before the railway; and it would be imprudent to rely on similar expectations in Persia.

In any case it would seem advisable to get on to Dalbandin as quickly as possible, and be guided by events on getting there.

It may, perhaps, be added that this Department advised the construction of this line some months ago, but had in mind a light railway only.

27th July 1916.

MINUTE BY GENERAL SIR EDMUND BARROW, G.C.S.

I am concerned only with the military aspects of this case, but even those embrace such wide considerations that I cannot fully deal with them within the limited scope of an office "minute." Happily the ABC of the subject is tersely expressed in the passages from Lord Curzon's minutes quoted above. Quite briefly those elementary considerations emphasize the cardinal point that Seistan will some day inevitably be necessary to us, not for an *offensive* campaign against Russia, but for the indirect defence of India. It is, in fact, a bastion covering a sally port against either a Russian march from Herat to Kandahar or a Russian advance to Southern Persia and the sea.

When the subject was taken up in 1911 in connection with the scheme of linking up the European and Indian Railways, the Government of India practically endorsed the views of the military authorities in India that any connection should be from Bunder Abbas along the sea coast to Karachi, and not *via* Seistan and Nushki. I will not waste time by going into the presentation of the case made by the then Chief of the General Staff (Sir Douglas Haig), but I will merely observe that the General Staff case rests on the supposition that the guns of the fleet will always be available to protect our railway along the Mekran Coast, a supposition which will not bear examination as some new combination, such as a Russo-Japanese alliance against us, might deprive us of local Naval superiority. Moreover, I cannot conceive a more inhospitable alignment for a railway than the Mekran Coast in summer, whether it be for war or commerce. We have seen lately what the Indus Valley line is like in summer. The Mekran line would be no better. On the other hand, the Seistan-Nushki alignment is along the high ground of the Perso-Baluch plateau, which, at any rate, is climatically preferable. That line has, however, been condemned by some of our military advisers on the ground that it is readily exposed to attack, and might be seized and utilized by our enemy. In reply, I would only say that the great Napoleon laid it down as an axiom that the greatest military obstacle in nature was a desert, and I would point out that the northern flank of this line is protected by the Dasht-i-Lut, the swamps of Seistan, the Dasht-i-Murgo, and the Registan, so that Napoleon would have considered it an ideal line for safety from serious attack. I am not talking of the attacks of a few marauders with a sack full of combustibles.

Assuming then that there are no tenable military objections to a railway line from Nushki to Seistan we come to the immediate question at issue.

The distance to Robat is 360 miles; therefore at the very least the entire line would take 1½ years to build, that is to say it would not be ready for use till the hot weather of 1918, and therefore it is not likely, I trust, to be of much use to us during the present war. For this reason I am inclined to agree with the compromise proposed by the Commander-in-Chief, viz., to continue the railway to Dalbandin and trust to motor and camel transport for the rest of the way. The distance is 120 miles only and therefore we might hope to cover this distance in six or seven months, that is to say by the end of the coming cold season, when it may still be useful to us in connection with the war.

If the war comes to an end by then it will be a matter for consideration whether we should carry it further for commercial purposes. It is possible

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [13r] (11/12)

13

11

that our whole position in Seistan and Southern Persia may be changed by the war, or rather by the peace. We may find ourselves the guardians for good order in Southern Persia. The development of Seistan may have devolved upon us, and in such a case a railway connection not only with Seistan, but also with Kerman, may be a necessity. The line even to Dalbandin will facilitate and expedite such a consummation.

E. G. BARROW.

28th July 1916.

MINUTE BY SIR T. W. HOLDERNESS, K.C.B.

The last paragraph of the Government of India sums up the question in a simple sentence:—"The scheme can only be justified on cogent military grounds." As such it is purely a matter for the Imperial General of Staff and the Committee of Imperial Defence, and should, I venture to think, be considered by them solely with reference to the actual or possible necessities of the present war, without importing into the discussion the future political, commercial or strategical requirements of the Indian Empire, *vis-à-vis* of Afghanistan, Persia and Russia.

If, for instance, it is found that the railway cannot be completed for the whole length in time to be of use in the present war, and that its construction as far as Dalbandin within the next four months would be as valueless as the Government of India believe, that, I would submit, should be conclusive against the proposal. It is essentially a war measure. If undertaken as a war measure, it would seem to be chargeable, at any rate in the first instance, to the Imperial Government as extraordinary military expenditure.

If not undertaken now, because it would be useless as a war measure, it might nevertheless be undertaken hereafter by the Government of India as a political, commercial or defensive project. But that is quite a separate question, and would require careful study of all factors as existing in Persia after the war is over. The one question should not be allowed to prejudice the other.

If the Government of India are required to construct it now, not as a war measure, but because the present opportunity of building a strategic line of permanent value is one which the General Staff consider should not be let slip, it may be necessary to apply to the Treasury for an advance of the requisite funds. The Government of India have no free money for this railway. They have cut down their railway budget to the lowest point and are starving in consequence the existing railways on which the prosperity, and even the safety, of India depend. Their last loan raised in India was not a success, and they are not allowed during the war to borrow in this country.

29th July 1916.

T. W. H.

X

'Quetta-Seistan Railway' [13v] (12/12)

