Abstract

In November 1878, British Indian armies invaded Afghanistan for the second time in a generation. The political outcome of the war left Afghanistan as a sovereign state bound however, by treaty concluded in July 1880, to accept British direction in its foreign policy and British military protection against external threat or invasion. But this Second Anglo-Afghan War escalated and prolonged a running British argument over how to defend India along its Northwest Frontier that evolved into the first modern effort, in an open parliamentary polity, to place decisions on defence policy ‘above politics.’ In the process, it revealed much about contemporary attitudes towards what was then seen as ‘science’ and the making of both public policy and imperial defence. The core of the issue was the notion that there was such a thing as a ‘scientific frontier,’ and the object of British policy for the defence of India should be to identify and operationalize this frontier. This argument ran from the mid-1860s through the turn of the century, and became a political football for partisan and ideological debates over imperial defence. This study will analyze this British debate over the ‘scientific frontier,’ discuss what it was, how and why it escalated, what effect it had on imperial defence, and especially what it tells us about attitudes towards ‘science,’ politics, and policy making, and how each influenced the others.

About the Speaker

Brian P. Farrell is Professor of Military History at the National University of Singapore, where he has been teaching since 1993. His research interests include the military history of the British Empire and the history of the Western military experience in Asia. Recent publications include *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942* (2015 second edition) and the two-volume series *Empire in Asia: A New Global History* (2018), for which he was Series Editor and Co-Editor of both volumes.