THE PRELUDE TO THE GREAT GAME: AFGHANISTAN BETWEEN THE DURRANI LEGACY AND BRITISH ENGAGEMENT (1809–1837)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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DOI:
https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250306041

Abstract
This article examines the initial years when Britain began its involvement in Afghanistan from 1809 to 1837. During this period, Afghanistan transformed from a land with numerous distinct regions following the dissolution of the Durrani Empire to a significant territory where various empires were battling for dominance. Following Timur Shah's death, Afghanistan fractured into various power centres in regions such as Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. This political climate complicated control efforts and heightened worries in Britain regarding Russian influence in the area. In 1809, Mountstuart Elphinstone undertook a mission to Afghanistan, initiating the British effort to gather extensive intelligence and establish diplomatic relations. This marked their initial initiative for an in-depth understanding of Afghan tribal politics. Correspondence from Afghan leaders in 1825 illustrates their efforts to secure British backing due to surrounding threats. British reactions indicate they publicly claimed non-interference while privately behaving differently. In 1831, Charles Trevelyan submitted a report to Lord Bentinck detailing how British perceptions of Russian actions influenced their border policies. Between 1835 and 1837, accounts of collaboration between Persia and Russia in Herat, along with Russia's efforts to align with Dost Mohammad Khan, increased Britain's concerns. This resulted in a bolder strategy, which ultimately initiated the First Anglo-Afghan War. The research indicates that British participation wasn't merely an error but stemmed from escalating concerns, deceptive information, and perceptions of the empire's global role.

Keywords*: Mountstuart Elphinstone, Dost Mohammad Khan, Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, Durrani Empire, Barakzai Chiefs, Timur Shah, Lord Auckland, Charles Trevelyan, East India Company*

Introduction

In the 1700s, the Durrani Empire both grew quickly and started to fall apart. The empire was founded by Ahmed Shah Abdali, who later became known as Ahmed Shah Durrani, in 1747. He came to power when the Persian and Mughal empires were weakened. Abdali united different Afghan tribes and created a large empire that included parts of eastern Iran and northern India. His rule brought a brief period of unity and strength to Afghanistan. However, after he died in 1772, his successors were not strong leaders. After Timur Shah died in 1793, the empire started to break into smaller groups. By the early 1800s, Afghanistan was no longer a single country. Instead, areas like Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat functioned as separate regions, each managed by different tribal leaders and local rulers seeking control.

This shattered picture of the political situation drew attention from the expanding European powers. As British India tightened its grip on the region, worries about Russian and Persian movements into Central Asia became clearer. The idea that Afghanistan might serve as a key border, a potential invasion route, or a buffer zone began to influence British spies and leaders. In the early 1800s, Afghanistan was at the heart of major power ambitions and geographical concerns. This set off a long period of political conflict known as "The Great Game."

This study examines the early years of Britain's involvement in Afghanistan from 1809 to 1837. It focuses on how gathering information, using diplomacy, and making plans influenced Britain's management of its empire during that time. In 1809, the East India Company sent Mountstuart Elphinstone to Kabul to work with Shah Shuja. This was partly due to concerns about an agreement between France and Russia. This mission plays a key role in the events that follow. Elphinstone's work not only gave Britain its very first detailed look at the people and government of Afghanistan but also started a pattern of keeping track of the country and getting involved when needed. His detailed reports, which were later published as "An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul" in 1815, became important tools for understanding the complex social and political structure of Afghanistan from a British colonial viewpoint.

From a historical viewpoint, this early period of involvement is now historical fraternity used to seen as the beginning of the Great Game, where collecting information and using diplomacy were key ways to maintain control over empires. Because of that, the chapter puts Elphinstone's mission in the bigger picture of British concerns and border strategies in the 1800s, showing how knowledge and suspicion played a major role in shaping one of the longest-lasting political rivalries in modern history.

Fragmentation of the Durrani State (1747–1800)

The Durrani Empire included the Pashtun regions of what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Abdali, also known as Ahmed Shah Durrani. Abdali had previously served in Nadir Shah's army and was chosen as ruler by a group of tribal leaders from Kandahar. He then led several military campaigns that secured Afghan influence over a large area, reaching east to Delhi and west to Kashmir. His empire was diverse and relied on the loyalty and alliances among the various tribes, even though a more complex governing system was in place. Abdali demonstrated his leadership and military skills during this time by managing a fragile coalition of Pashtun tribes, Persian elites, and Nader Shah's empire. However, his empire's structure was weak because it relied on his personal authority instead of strong institutions.

The Durrani empire, under Ahmad Shah Abdali, was at its height of power during the third battle of Panipat in January 1761. The fight was between Abdali's collection of armies and the Maratha Confederacy, and it was one of the largest – and most lethal – battles of the 1700s. Abdali's victory at Mandalgarh prevented the Marathas from expanding into northwestern India, preserving Afghan control over the border between India and Persia. While Abdali wasn't interested in seizing land in India, his victory brought him greater respect and additional support from among the Pashtun people. This enabled him to retain his territories from Herat to Peshawar. But the war was also a significant strain on the Durrani Empire's resources. After Abdali died, the empire didn't have strong, clear leadership to keep control of such a large area. So, the battle at Panipat was both the high point of Abdali's power and the start of the empire's future problems.

After the death of Abdali in 1772, his powerful unitary state began to disintegrate rapidly, and much of Durrani's territory was lost to his son Timur Shah Durrani from 1772 to 1793. Timur Shah proved more adept at managing his fellow leaders than his father, but he lacked the strength of command and military muscle. He transferred the capital from Kandahar to Kabul for its symbolic significance, to remain clear of the rivalry among other sites – Peshawar (Hind), Pashto and Persian term for India and Kandahar in particular – he faced with his brothers along the southern forming kingdom. To retain control, he placed his sons and other powerful tribesmen in key positions, diffusing authority and establishing the possibility of family tensions. By the time of his death, the Afghan confederation had completely gone to pieces, and most of it was only held together by weak family alliances.

Upon his death, the full extent of the succession crisis became evident. More than 20 of his sons contended for the throne, that made in major conflicts that persisted for many years. The most prominent contenders were Zaman Shah, Mahmud Shah, and Shuja-ul-Mulk. Each of these figures briefly occupied the throne but was ultimately expelled by opponents or foreign influences. Zaman Shah (r. 1793–1796; 1796–1800) attempted to reestablish central authority and enhance Afghan sway in the Punjab. However, his ambitions sparked concerns among the British, who feared his expansionist intentions toward India. His downfall was expedited by the Qajar Persians' involvement in Herat and Sikh opposition in the Punjab border region. Mahmud Shah (r. 1801–1803; 1809–1818) and Shuja-ul-Mulk (r. 1803–1809; 1839–1842) perpetuated this cycle of power struggles and exile. The empire frequently sought external assistance to reclaim its diminished strength, which further compromised its sovereignty.

When the leader died, it became clear how intense the fight for the throne was. More than 20 of his sons wanted to be king, leading to years of conflict. The main contenders were Zaman Shah, Mahmud Shah, and Shuja-ul-Mulk. Each of them held the throne briefly but soon lost power because of competing leaders or outside forces. Zaman Shah ruled from 1793 to 1796 and again from 1796 to 1800. He aimed to restore strong control and strengthen Afghanistan in the Punjab area. However, his plans alarmed the British, who were concerned about his potential attacks on India. His rule ended due to support from the Qajar Persians in Herat and resistance from the Sikhs in the Punjab region. Mahmud Shah ruled from 1801 to 1803 and again from 1809 to 1818, while Shuja-ul-Mulk ruled from 1803 to 1809 and again from 1839 to 1842. They continued to fight each other and were often forced into exile. The empire repeatedly turned to foreign powers for assistance, which weakened its ability to govern itself.

Mountstuart Elphinstone's Mission and the Barakzai Correspondence (1809–1825)

In the early 1800s, there was a big change in the relationship between Britain and Afghanistan. After the British East India Company gained full control of the Indian region, it started to see the area to the north and west of India not just as a distant border but as a key area for gathering information and conducting diplomacy. This new perspective was shown when Mountstuart Elphinstone went to Kabul in 1809. His mission was officially to make a friendly agreement with Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk to stop possible attacks from France and Persia on India (Hopkins, 2008, pp. 31–38). However, this trip also marked the first time the Company actively tried to learn about the Afghan tribes, their trade paths, and their alliances (Noelle, 1997, pp. 54–57).

The aftermath of Elphinstone's mission and the fragmentation of the Durrani Empire created an opportunity for multiple rivalries among the Barakzai and Sadozai chiefs. By the 1820s, Afghanistan's politics had become a mixture of semi-autonomous principalities – Herat under Shah Mahmud and Kamran, Kandahar under the Barakzai brothers, and Kabul under Dost Mohammad Khan. British officials in Bombay and Calcutta constantly received their conflicting reports on the political loyalties of these factions, particularly concerning the Barakzais' frankness about British patronage. The document titled "Substance of a

letter from Rahim Dil Khan to the Honble Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay" (1825) provides one of the most elaborate glimpses into these early overtures (Government of India, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 1825).

Rahim Dil Khan, a leader from the Barakzai group in Kandahar, wrote to the British government showing he wanted to build "mutual understanding" and "friendly relations." His message shows he knew about British power and was trying to get their help without fully giving in. The exchange of gifts – two horses and two Cashmere shawls – shows how formal and polite early diplomacy was. Even more importantly, sending his representative, Mukul Allahmed Khan Alijah, with full authority to talk on his behalf, shows the Barakzai trying to be seen as real players in the new political situation after the Durrani era.

Alongside Rahim Dil Khan's message, a letter of the same tenor from Purdil Khan, and a verbal communication from the Barakzai Envoy Utta Allahmed Khan, reveal the more ambitious side of these appeals. The chiefs of Kandahar, disillusioned with the declining Sadozai dynasty, sought to become dependents of the British Government—explicitly offering territorial concessions and requesting nominal protection against external threats such as the Sikhs, Mughals, or Persians. In return, they asked only for "sepahees." This request to place themselves under British suzerainty marks an extraordinary moment in early nineteenth-century Afghan diplomacy. It was not yet an imperial protectorate, but an invitation to indirect rule, reflecting patterns seen in Sind and Punjab a generation later.

However, the British response — a formal refusal to get involved in Afghan internal matters — shows how cautious the East India Company still was. The reply, written by Chief Secretary M.M. Mathew, reminded the Company of its long-standing rule and practice to avoid expanding its territory or stepping beyond its borders. This policy of not interfering, even though it was claimed, was very different from the secret networks the British were actually creating in the region (Barfield, 2010, pp. 72–73). The letter shows a contradiction: while officially saying they didn't want to depend on Afghanistan, the Company was already making detailed plans about the area, drawing maps that would help them take control later.

The attached memorandum about the "Political Affairs of Afghanistan" gives a wider picture. It mentions Kabul as being under the control of Dost Mohammad's brothers, Herat still under Shah Mahmud, and Peshawar as a minor tributary under Ranjit Singh's rule. The document also talks about Persian plots, misleading reports about Kamran's movements, and the activities of tribes like the Ghilzais and Barakzais, showing how complicated and mixed the political situation in Afghanistan was. These details come from several different sources, and they show how the early British intelligence system was working—collecting information, checking it against other sources, and making political evaluations for the Bombay Presidency.

Further, this document evidences the start of the Great Game. It shows that Afghanistan was trying to stay safe through talks, while the British were interested in learning more, but in a careful way. As Hopkins (2008, p. 42) says, Elphinstone's trip and what happened next began a long period during which the British went back and forth between being cautious and taking action. The letters from 1825 show the beginnings of what would lead to the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–1842), when the British finally stopped being careful and started using force.

British Hesitation and Afghan Diplomacy (1825–1835)

By the mid-1820s, the Afghan political scenery was in a state of turmoil. The fall of the Durrani monarchy had shattered Afghanistan into competing centres of power—Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat—each ruled by ambitious Barakzai chiefs. The 1825 letters from Rahim Dil Khan and Purdil Khan to Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay, reflect a moment when Afghan leaders actively sought British recognition and alliance against Persian encroachment and Sikh expansion. The correspondence proposed a form of limited dependency, whereby the Barakzai Sardars of Kandahar would acknowledge British supremacy in exchange for protection against external aggression, particularly from Ranjit Singh and the Persian court. The narration of correspondence was respectful, yet pragmatic—an attempt to anchor Afghanistan's fractured authority within the stabilising trajectory of British India without direct suppression.

The British choice not to get involved was based on their policy of not interfering beyond their borders. This showed a major problem: even though both London and Calcutta were worried about Russian moves, they didn't want to take a clear stand on Afghanistan's uncertain political situation. Elphinstone's impact lasted—his 1809 mission gave a thorough look at the region's people and politics, but his careful attitude toward using force still influenced how decisions were made (Hopkins, 2008, pp. 37–40). Because of this, the early 1830s saw a period of 'slow diplomacy' and 'careful monitor' instead of taking direct action.

However, as political situations changed, this policy of being careful started to fall apart. In 1831, Charles Trevelyan wrote a letter to Lord William Bentinck from Delhi, which was a key moment in how the British thought about things. In his letter, Trevelyan clearly explained that he was worried about Russia moving south through Persia, Khiva, and the Caspian coast. He saw this as a direct danger to British India. Trevelyan described Russia as a group of semi-barbarian people who were organised and united because of their imperial goals. He believed their end goal was to take over India, which he called the "richest prize on earth." Trevelyan made it clear that the British shouldn't wait for Russia to get close to the Indian border. Instead, they should act early and create strong ties between Russia and India to stop them from getting closer.

The document shows a new strategy that Britain was developing. It said Afghanistan was no longer just a faraway place that protected them, but a key area that needed strong defence. Trevelyan suggested supporting the Afghan king, Shah Kamran of Herat, to make sure he had enough power. He thought a stable government in Afghanistan, led by someone who understood British ambition, would help protect the empire. Trevelyan pointed out that controlling Herat and Khiva were the most important places for security. He also wanted to send a British representative after Kandahar fell, to help Kamran and make sure he followed

British interests. This mix of helping and keeping a distance was an early idea of the forward policy that later led to the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–1842).

In the same letter, Trevelyan introduced the idea of a "neutral zone"—a region that would act as a buffer for both trade and politics, stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Indus River. In this area, neither Britain nor Russia would have direct control, but they would instead compete using economic methods. This forward-thinking plan predicted later British methods of building an empire indirectly, using trade, spy work, and diplomacy instead of fighting directly to gain power. His focus on setting up a major trading and intelligence centre at Roree, which is in Sindh, shows how closely connected economic and strategic ambitions were in British plans.

Meanwhile, internal Afghan politics were developing in a manner that made Trevelyan's ideas both pressing and problematic. The Barakzai rulers in Kabul and Kandahar—Dost Mohammad Khan and his brothers—had solidified their power but remained divided among themselves, while Herat, under Shah Kamran, faced continuous Persian assaults. Trevelyan's support for Kamran's reinstatement failed to acknowledge the emerging reality that Dost Mohammad was increasingly becoming the effective ruler. This overlooked the growing shift, as the British were reluctant to accept this transformation, opting instead to engage with the old Durrani claimants. This demonstrated a colonial tendency to prioritise legitimacy over practicality—a trend that would soon lead to severe repercussions (Hopkirk, 1990, pp. 89–92).

The evidence from the 1825 Barakzai letters and Trevelyan's 1831 memorandum shows a major change in how the British viewed Afghanistan. They went from just watching things happen to thinking about taking action. By the middle of the 1830s, reports from the border areas started to mention Russian groups moving into Persia and Central Asia. This made the British feel like they were being surrounded, and this feeling became very important in how officials in Calcutta and London made decisions. This tense and worried mood led to a major change in policy during Lord Auckland's time in office (1836–1837), when the British government stopped staying out of Afghanistan's internal matters and started getting actively involved.

Thus, between 1825 and 1835, Afghanistan ceased to be viewed merely as a remote tribal confederacy. In British eyes, it became the backbone of India's imperial defence—the frontline of a global rivalry whose ideological and territorial contests would soon erupt into open war.

From Intelligence to Intervention – The Road to the First Anglo-Afghan War (1835–1837)

By the mid-1830s, British India was facing a serious time of worry and fear. The calm and careful way Britain handled things during the times of Elphinstone and Bentinck changed, and a new kind of confidence took over. This was because the British were scared of Russia expanding its power and Persia moving closer, and these fears became one big concern about the safety of their empire. British involvement in Afghanistan wasn't just a lucky choice; it came from a mix of gathered information, wrong guesses about politics, and a deep fear of losing control of the northern border of India. So, the First Anglo-Afghan War from 1838 to 1842 wasn't just about taking chances—it was driven by a fear of Russia getting closer to the Hindu Kush mountains.

The Intelligence Prelude (1835–1836)

Intelligence reports sent to Calcutta and Simla in the early 1830s painted a worrying situation. According to documents kept in The National Archives (UK), in the Foreign Office, Persia Correspondence (FO 60/25, 1836), British officials in Tehran warned that Russia was increasing its influence over the Qajar rulers. They offered weapons and training in return for control over the region of Herat. This information was supported by Secret Intelligence Reports on Central Asia from 1835 (Auckland Papers, IOR/L/PS/3/31), which said Persian diplomats were acting on orders from Russia during talks with Afghan leaders.

In 1835, Dost Mohammad Khan, the strong ruler of Kabul, tried to strengthen his position by starting talks with both Britain and Russia. His letters to Captain Alexander Burnes, who had been sent by the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, on a trade mission, seemed friendly, but they showed a big difference in what each side wanted. Dost Mohammad wanted recognition of his claim to Peshawar, which was then controlled by the Sikhs, and an agreement that would balance the power between the British and the Sikhs. However, British officials thought his actions were a way to let Russia take control instead of seeking fair treatment, as mentioned in Hopkins (2008, pp. 46–47).

Burnes' letters from Kabul in 1836, which were later published in the Political and Secret Department Papers (IOR/L/PS/7/12), showed that the Amir was ready to sign a friendship treaty if the British would help him get a deal with Ranjit Singh.

Lord Auckland, who was worried about breaking the agreement with the Sikhs, refused the idea. Because of this, Dost Mohammad became closer to Russian officer Captain Ivan Vitkevich. British intelligence badly misunderstood this as proof that Russia had taken control of Kabul.

The Persian Advance and British Alarm

In 1836–1837, a key event happened when Persia, with help from Russian soldiers and weapons, attacked the city of Herat. British officials in Tehran sent reports saying that Russian experts were helping the Persians build strong defences and control the enemy guns during the attack. Lord Palmerston, who was the British Foreign Secretary, said Herat was "the key to India," and in Calcutta, Lord Auckland agreed with this view. The attack seemed like the start of a plan by Russia and Persia to invade India through Afghanistan.

Peter Hopkirk wrote that these worries were made worse by wrong information and dramatic reports. British soldiers on the ground, especially Eldred Pottinger, who was hiding in Herat, sent messages about how the Persians were making progress. These reports made the British officials very worried. Even though it wasn't very likely that Russia could actually march into India, the fear caused by these reports was very strong. Lord Auckland wrote in his private notes that the situation in Herat was very worrying and that the actions of Persia seemed to threaten the safety of Britain in the East.

Formulation of the Forward Policy

In response, the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors and the Governor-General's Council took a stricter stance. Letters between Auckland and Lord Palmerston in early 1837 (TNA, FO 65/132) show that Afghanistan was now seen as the "outer bastion" for protecting India. Palmerston's order that "Russia must be stopped not at the Indus but in the deserts beyond Herat" showed this new approach.

At the same time, British officials in India started planning what became known as the "Forward Policy." This idea was about taking control of the Afghan areas before Russia could reach the border. Burnes's trip to Kabul for trade was secretly changed into a spying mission. He collected information on Afghan soldiers, tribes, and the paths through the Khyber and Bolan passes. His 1837 report to the Government of India (later published as Travels into Bokhara) suggested the British should increase their influence in Afghanistan and Sindh. They started to believe that staying neutral is no longer an option.

The more active the Russians became diplomatically, the more they seemed to threaten British interests. The arrival of Vitkevich in Kabul in December 1837 was seen by the British as another warning sign. The attack on Herat and the Russian presence in Kabul made them feel surrounded. Lord Auckland noted in his private diary that the situation was "the peril in its completeness and demanding the application of British force before it's too late" (Auckland Papers, IOR/L/PS/3/33).

The Path to War

The peak of these issues was the release of the Simla Manifesto on 1 October 1838. It justified using military force in Afghanistan as a necessary precaution. This policy had been under discussion since 1837. The choice to support Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, a Durrani leader willing to cooperate, and to remove Dost Mohammad showed a strategic focus on security. It aimed to create loyal allies instead of relying on practical diplomatic discussions.

In hindsight, this policy showed not just a mistake but was deeply rooted in strong psychological beliefs. The British government, worried about Russian troops near the Khyber Pass, mixed up stories, geographic knowledge, and imperial goals in making its decisions. As B.D. Hopkins (2008, p. 52) states, "the British perceived Afghanistan not as a sovereign nation, but as an extension of their defensive frontier, embodying imperial anxieties projected onto foreign territory."

The period from 1835 to 1837 marked a critical transition from fear to action. Problems with intelligence gathering, a rigid diplomatic stance, and a misunderstanding of the perceived threat during these years led directly to the start of the First Anglo-Afghan War. What began as a policy of neutrality and passive observation gradually changed into an invasion fueled by fear and suspicion. The decision to move through the Bolan Pass came not from strategic goals for power but from a deep fear—the British belief that doing nothing would lead to their own downfall. This mindset, once formed, not only influenced the conflict that followed but also shaped British frontier policy for many years to come.

Conclusion

From 1809 to 1837, Afghanistan changed from a remote border region into an essential part of the imperial strategy between British India and Tsarist Russia. What began as a careful diplomatic mission by Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1809 gradually turned into a time of anxiety, mystery, and misunderstanding. The story of these decades is not about seizing opportunities. It is about the needs of the empire, driven by the weight of geography and the empire's vulnerabilities.

The early 19th century saw Afghanistan as politically divided but strategically important. The breakdown of the Durrani central authority, ongoing tribal conflicts, and competing claims from the Barakzai and Sadozai factions created a fragmented power structure. This situation attracted foreign interest but also pushed it away. Elphinstone's survey revealed to the British both the military and trade potential of Afghanistan, along with its unstable political situation. His insights represented the first step in establishing intelligence-gathering in the frontier, a strategy that would influence later colonial policy (Elphinstone, 1972).

As the century progressed, tensions rose across Asia. The Russian takeover of the Kazakh Steppe, their ongoing advance toward the Oxus, the Persian efforts to reclaim Herat, and the unclear loyalties of Afghan leaders created what Hopkirk (1990) called "a geography of paranoia." Correspondence from Rahim Dil Khan (1825) and Charles Trevelyan's note to Lord Bentinck (1831) show that both Afghan leaders and British officials recognised the growing stakes. The Barakzai leaders sought British support to defend against Persian and Sikh threats. In turn, British authorities considered ways to prevent a Russian advance through Herat and Khiva. The idea of "non-interference," once a guiding principle for the East India Company, was quietly set aside because of the pressures of strategic thinking.

By 1837, the blockade of Herat and the rise of Russian agents in Kabul marked this change. The British, thinking that Afghanistan had become the last bastion of Indian defence, shifted from diplomacy to preemptive action. Lord Auckland's leadership came during a global crisis filled with worry, deceit, and anticipation, rather than a defined frontier. The decision to invade Afghanistan in 1838 was the outcome of thirty years of growing intelligence, economic reasoning, and psychological fear.

Fundamentally, British involvement in Afghanistan was not a coincidence. It was the cardinal and natural result of a policy shaped by distance and influenced by perception. The empire's greatest weakness was not the Hindu Kush mountains but the false sense of insecurity they created. The years from 1809 to 1837 serve as the introduction to a hundred years of continuous imperial involvement. During this time, Afghanistan changed from a neighbouring country into a crucial frontier in the British mindset.

Acknowledgment: No
Author's Contribution: *Soumen Paul*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing
Funding: No
Declaration: Not Applicable
Competing Interest: No

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