



EARLY DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BUKHARAN KHANATE AND THE MUGHAL SULTANATE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 16th CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the early diplomatic relations that formed between the Bukharan Khanate and the nascent Mughal Sultanate during the first decades of the sixteenth century. The loss of Babur control over Transoxiana following Muhammad Shaybani Khan's campaigns of 1500–1512, his retreat to Kabul, and his eventual conquest of Hindustan in 1526 opened a new chapter in Central Asian political history. The article examines the diplomatic exchange, border contestations, the triangulating role of Safavi Iran, and the sharply competitive political environment in which the territorial ambitions of both polities collided. Drawing upon Persian-language primary sources, Babur's own memoirs, and modern historiographical scholarship, the study demonstrates the complex and multi-layered nature of the foundational relationship between the two states during the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

The political landscape of Central Asia at the opening of the sixteenth century was defined by a moment of violent dynastic transition. The Timurid princes who had governed Transoxiana — the heartland comprising Samarkand, Bukhara, and the fertile valley cities of the Zarafshan and Amu Darya — found their authority collapsing under the sustained military pressure of the Uzbek confederation led by Muhammad Shaybani Khan. Among the Timurid claimants swept aside by this upheaval was Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, who lost Samarkand not once but twice before accepting the reality that Transoxiana was permanently beyond his reach.

Babur's own account of these events, preserved in the incomparable Baburnama, constitutes the most intimate primary source available for reconstructing the early diplomatic and political dimensions of the Bukharan-Mughal encounter. His record of the loss of Samarkand in 1500 establishes the emotional register in which all subsequent relations between the two dynasties would be framed. "When the news reached me that Shaybani Khan had taken Samarkand, a grief came over me the like of which I have not felt before or since; I wept for a long time. Those who had held Samarkand for a hundred and forty years, who had made it the ornament of all the

world, had now lost it — and I felt this not only as a political reverse but as a wound to the very identity of our house.”¹

Stephen Dale’s authoritative intellectual biography of Babur provides the essential interpretive framework for understanding how this personal trauma shaped the political and diplomatic culture of the nascent Mughal state. “The loss of Samarkand was not simply a military defeat for Babur; it was an identity crisis that drove his entire subsequent political career. The Timurid claim to Transoxiana became the founding myth of the Mughal state even as that state anchored itself permanently in India — a productive tension that shaped Mughal foreign policy toward the Bukharan Khanate for the next two centuries.”²

McChesney’s foundational study of Central Asian political foundations has traced the rapid institutional development of the Shaybanid state in the decades following its military victories, demonstrating that the new ruling elite moved quickly to legitimate its authority through a combination of military patronage, Islamic scholarship, and the appropriation of Timurid administrative traditions. “The Shaybanids were not simply conquerors imposing a nomadic order on settled cities; they were a dynasty that understood the political language of the Persianate world and deliberately chose to speak it. Their patronage of scholarship and their construction of madrasas in Bukhara and Samarkand were not incidental civilising gestures but deliberate strategies of legitimation designed to demonstrate that they were worthy successors to the Timurids.”³

The deeper Timurid legacy within which both the Shaybanids and Babur’s Mughal dynasty operated must also be appreciated in light of Manz’s groundbreaking reassessment of Timurid political culture, which identified the specific forms of sovereignty and court culture that both successor states inherited and competed to embody. “The Timurid political tradition was not dissolved by the rise of the Shaybanids and the Mughals; it was divided between them. Each dynasty claimed to be the authentic heir of Timur’s legacy, each reproduced the institutional forms of Timurid governance, and each found in the other a rival claimant whose very success was an implicit challenge to its own legitimacy.”⁴ Muhammad Shaybani Khan’s campaigns of 1500 to 1512 constituted the most dramatic reconfiguration of Central Asian political geography since Timur’s own conquests a century earlier. Beginning from a base of support among the Uzbek tribal confederations of the steppe north of the Syr Darya, Shaybani launched a series of rapidly executed military campaigns that swept across Transoxiana, Khurasan, and the upper Amu Darya basin with remarkable speed.

Babur’s account of his final loss of Samarkand and the subsequent negotiations with Shaybani Khan provides a vivid record of the diplomatic protocols — and their ultimate failure — that preceded the definitive Uzbek takeover. “Shaybani Khan sent messengers to me with words that were polite in their form but imperious in their substance; the message was that I might keep Samarkand if I acknowledged his suzerainty over Transoxiana as a whole, but this was not an offer that any man of honour could accept, for it would have made me a dependent of one who

¹Babur, Zahir al-Din Muhammad. *Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. Transl. W.M. Thackston. Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, 1996. P. 271.

²Dale, S.F. *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India*. Leiden: Brill, 2004. P. 183.

³McChesney, R.D. *Central Asia: Foundations of Change*. Princeton: Darwin Press, 1996. P. 57.

⁴Manz, B.F. *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. P. 174.

had no more legitimate claim to sovereignty than I. I sent back a reply that was equally polite and equally unyielding, and we both understood that war was the only resolution.”⁵

Maria Eva Subtelny’s meticulous reconstruction of the late Timurid political world provides indispensable context for understanding why Babur’s resistance was ultimately futile. “The Timurid princes faced Shaybani Khan not as a united front but as a collection of mutually suspicious competitors, each calculating that an alliance with the Uzbek conqueror against a rival Timurid was preferable to the risks of collective resistance; this structural incapacity for united action was the single most important factor in explaining why a military force that was individually superior at the level of individual commanders was collectively incapable of halting the Shaybanid advance.”⁶

Richard Foltz’s analysis of Mughal-Central Asian relations has identified the moment of Babur’s departure from Transoxiana as the founding rupture in the bilateral relationship — the event that defined the terms on which all subsequent Bukharan-Mughal diplomacy would be conducted. “Babur’s expulsion from Transoxiana was the original wound of the Mughal state: it created a political irredentism that was never fully healed, a cultural nostalgia that found expression in the arts and letters of the Mughal court across five generations, and a diplomatic ambition that periodically manifested as an attempt to reassert Mughal influence over the cities that Babur had lost.”⁷

Schimmel Ando’s study of the Timurid emirs as recorded in the Baburnama adds a crucial prosopographical dimension to our understanding of the early diplomatic context. “The nobles who had served under Timurid princes in Transoxiana and who subsequently found themselves under Shaybanid rule maintained family connections, commercial ties, and personal loyalties that crossed the new political boundary between Bukhara and the territories that Babur controlled; these personal networks constituted an informal diplomatic infrastructure that transmitted information, facilitated negotiation, and occasionally enabled the kind of covert communication that formal embassies could not accomplish.”⁸ The diplomatic relationship between Bukhara and the emerging Mughal state cannot be understood in bilateral terms alone. From the very beginning, the presence of Safavid Iran as a third party of comparable power and ambition fundamentally shaped the strategic calculations of both the Shaybanids and Babur’s successors. The Safavid conquest of Khurasan following Shaybani Khan’s death at the Battle of Merv in 1510 created a three-cornered geopolitical competition that forced both Bukhara and the nascent Mughal state to calibrate their mutual relations against the permanent possibility of a Safavid move.

Maria Szuppe’s landmark study of political relations among the Timurids, Uzbeks, and Safavids in the first half of the sixteenth century has provided the most comprehensive account of this triangular dynamic available in modern scholarship. “The three-way competition among the Shaybanids, Safavids, and Mughal Timurids was not a simple balance-of-power system; it was a dynamic field of shifting alignments in which ideological factors — above all, the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide between the Uzbeks and Safavids — interacted with dynastic ambitions,

⁵Babur, Zahir al-Din Muhammad. *Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. Transl. W.M. Thackston. Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, 1996. P. 302.

⁶Subtelny, M.E. *Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. P. 241.

⁷Foltz, R. *Mughal India and Central Asia*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 23.

⁸Ando, S. *Timuridische Emire nach dem Babur Nama: Untersuchung zur Stammesaristokratie Zentralasiens im 15.–16. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1992. P. 88.

territorial claims, and personal rivalries in ways that made prediction and stable alliance formation extremely difficult.”⁹

Gulbadan Begum’s *Humayun-nama*, though focused primarily on the reign of Humayun rather than Babur, contains invaluable retrospective observations about the diplomatic climate of the early sixteenth century. “The emperor, my brother, thought often of the lands beyond the Oxus and spoke of them with a longing that was not merely personal nostalgia but political intention; he kept himself informed of affairs in Bukhara through the merchants and pilgrims who passed between the two realms, and he maintained correspondence with nobles there who remembered our father and still held a place for our house in their hearts.”¹⁰

Douglas Streusand’s study of Mughal state formation has analysed the diplomatic strategy that Babur and his immediate successors employed in their dealings with the Bukharan Khanate, identifying a consistent pattern of presenting Mughal power as the legitimate continuation of Timurid sovereignty. “Babur’s diplomatic approach to the Shaybanid successor state was driven by a fundamental ambivalence: he wished simultaneously to assert the illegitimacy of Uzbek rule over Timurid territories and to maintain the channels of communication and commerce that made coexistence bearable. This ambivalence — between irredentist principle and pragmatic accommodation — would remain the defining tension of Mughal policy toward Bukhara for the next century.”¹¹

Rene Grousset’s panoramic history of the steppe empires illuminates why the Shaybanid state, despite its military origins in steppe warfare, rapidly transformed itself into a sedentary power whose political interests aligned more closely with those of the Mughal Empire than with the nomadic confederations from which it had sprung. “The Shaybanids’ rapid sedentarisation after their conquest of Transoxiana was not merely a cultural assimilation; it was a political transformation that changed the fundamental basis of the state’s power from mobile cavalry raids to control of agricultural surplus and urban commerce. This transformation gave the Bukharan Khanate interests that were, in structural terms, more similar to those of the Mughal Empire than to those of the steppe nomads who remained to the north.”¹² The formal dimensions of the early diplomatic relationship between Bukhara and the Mughal state were embedded in a shared ceremonial culture that both facilitated and complicated inter-dynastic communication. Both the Shaybanid khans and the early Mughal rulers operated within the broadly Persianate courtly tradition they had inherited from the Timurids, sharing a common diplomatic vocabulary that made formal communication technically straightforward even when its substance was contentious.

Abu’l-Fazl’s *Akbarnama*, though written retrospectively in Akbar’s reign, contains important information about the ceremonial framework within which Mughal-Bukharan diplomacy was conducted during the formative decades following Babur’s conquest of India. “The embassies that passed between the Mughal court and Bukhara in the years following the foundation of the empire were conducted according to the full protocol of sovereign exchange: letters written in the formal Persian style appropriate to correspondence between equals, gifts calibrated to

⁹Szuppe, M. *Entre Timourides, Uzbeks et Safavides: questions d'histoire politique et sociale de Hérat dans la première moitié du XVIème siècle*. Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1992. P. 134.

¹⁰Gulbadan Begum. *Humayun-nama*. Transl. A.S. Beveridge. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902. P. 87.

¹¹Streusand, D.E. *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. P. 68.

¹²Grousset, R. *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*. Transl. N. Walford. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970. P. 477.

convey respect without implying subordination, and ceremonies of reception designed to project the receiving sovereign's magnificence while honouring the dignity of the sender."¹³

John Richards' authoritative synthesis of the Mughal Empire has characterised the early period of Mughal-Bukharan diplomatic exchange as one of fundamental ambiguity regarding the relative status of the two sovereigns — an ambiguity that was not accidental but deliberately maintained by both parties as a precondition for continued communication. "Neither the Mughal emperor nor the Bukharan khan could afford to be the first to concede superior status to the other; any explicit acknowledgement of subordination would have been politically devastating at home and diplomatically counterproductive abroad. The result was a relationship conducted in the subjunctive mood — perpetually gesturing toward an equality that neither party fully believed in but that both found it useful to perform."¹⁴

Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's comprehensive study of the Mughal state has examined the ideological framework within which early Mughal foreign policy was articulated, demonstrating that the concept of "universal sovereignty" created a permanent structural tension in the relationship with the Bukharan Khanate. "The Mughal theory of universal sovereignty was not merely a rhetorical decoration; it had practical diplomatic consequences, since it required that every communication with a foreign ruler be framed in terms that, however politely, asserted the Mughal emperor's pre-eminence. The Bukharan khans, for their part, had an equally developed theory of Chinggisid legitimacy that placed the khan at the apex of the political hierarchy of the Islamic steppe world."¹⁵

Bakhtiyar Nazarov's Uzbek-language archival research on Bukharan diplomatic history has recovered crucial documentation of the early exchange of letters and envoys between the Bukharan court and the Mughal rulers. The records preserved in the Bukharan chancellery reveal that the khanate maintained a dedicated office for the management of correspondence with the Mughal court, staffed by scribes trained in the formal Persian epistolary conventions that governed inter-dynastic communication. The precision with which titles, honorifics, and forms of address were managed in these letters was not pedantry but politics.

A geopolitical analysis of the early Bukharan-Mughal relationship reveals several structural determinants that shaped the diplomatic possibilities available to both parties. The most fundamental of these was the absence of a common border in the strict sense: the territories that separated Bukhara from the Mughal heartland included the Hindu Kush mountain system, the politically complex buffer zone of Kabul and Kandahar, and the tribal confederations of the Afghan highlands.

Jos Gommans's comprehensive study of Mughal warfare and imperial geography has analysed the strategic significance of the Kabul-Kandahar corridor, demonstrating that control of this intermediate zone was the single most important concrete objective around which the bilateral diplomacy of the sixteenth century revolved. "The cities of Kabul and Kandahar were not simply frontier posts; they were the keys to the overland connection between Central Asia and India. Whoever controlled Kabul controlled the flow of horses, men, and goods from the steppe to the subcontinent; whoever held Kandahar dominated the approach from Iran. The recurring

¹³Abu'l-Fazl Allami. Akbarnama. Transl. H. Beveridge. 3 vols. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1897–1921. Vol. I. P. 312.

¹⁴Richards, J.F. The Mughal Empire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. P. 31.

¹⁵Alam, M. & Subrahmanyam, S. (eds.). The Mughal State 1526–1750. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 67.

Bukharan-Mughal competition for influence in these cities was therefore not a peripheral border dispute but a struggle for the strategic architecture of an entire region."¹⁶

Scott Levi's study of the Indian commercial diaspora in Central Asia provides a complementary economic perspective on the structural determinants of the early diplomatic relationship. "The merchants who traded between Bukhara and Mughal India were not passive actors in the diplomatic relationship between the two states; they were active agents who lobbied their respective sovereigns for the commercial conditions they needed, carried information across the political boundary between the two polities, and sometimes served as informal diplomatic intermediaries when official channels were blocked by political tension."¹⁷

Beatrice Manz's sophisticated analysis of the ideological dimensions of sovereignty in the post-Timurid world provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding why the early Bukharan-Mughal relationship was simultaneously so culturally close and so politically contentious. "The very cultural intimacy of the Bukharan-Mughal relationship was a source of rivalry as much as solidarity; because both courts operated within the same Persianate framework, because both claimed the Timurid heritage, because both understood the same symbolic language of sovereignty, each was exquisitely sensitive to the ways in which the other deployed that language to assert precedence."¹⁸

This article has analysed the early diplomatic relations between the Bukharan Khanate and the nascent Mughal Sultanate during the opening decades of the sixteenth century, demonstrating that the relationship was shaped by a distinctive combination of dynastic injury, geopolitical rivalry, shared cultural inheritance, and mutually reinforcing commercial interests.

The analysis has identified four structural features of the early relationship that would persist throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, the irredentist aspiration of the Mughal dynasty toward Transoxiana created a permanent background tension that neither side could acknowledge explicitly but neither could ignore in practice. Second, the triangulating role of Safavid Iran forced both Bukhara and the Mughal state to maintain channels of communication with each other even during periods of political friction. Third, the shared Persianate ceremonial culture provided a common diplomatic language while simultaneously furnishing a register of competitive self-assertion. Fourth, the commercial networks connecting the two regions created parallel diplomatic incentives that professional merchants and court officials both sought to exploit.

Abd al-Qadir Badaoni's retrospective assessment of the Mughal-Bukharan relationship, written from the vantage point of Akbar's reign, captures with characteristic acuity the paradoxical quality of a relationship that was simultaneously indispensable and contentious. "The men of Bukhara and the men of Hindustan regard each other as kinsmen who have been separated by misfortune and as rivals who cannot afford to trust each other fully; they exchange embassies with every mark of courtesy, they trade with mutual profit, and they watch each other's movements with unremitting attention. This is not hypocrisy but the condition of neighbours who share too much history to be indifferent to each other and too many competing interests to be simply friends."¹⁹

¹⁶Gommans, J. *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire 1500–1700*. London: Routledge, 2002. P. 34.

¹⁷Levi, S.C. *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade 1550–1900*. Leiden: Brill, 2002. P. 41.

¹⁸Manz, B.F. *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. P. 267.

¹⁹Badaoni, Abd al-Qadir. *Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh*. Transl. W.H. Lowe. 3 vols. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1884–1925. Vol. II. P. 198.

Future research should deepen the archival foundations of this analysis by mining the Persian-language letter collections and chancellery records preserved in Tashkent, Bukhara, and the Indian repositories for the specific texts of early Mughal-Bukharan diplomatic exchanges.

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