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THE ROLE OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE KHANATE OF KHIVA AND AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The Khanate of Khiva was one of the important political entities in the history of Central Asia. Its foreign policy was not limited to military conflicts or peaceful relations with neighboring states. It encompassed a broad range of political, military, economic, and diplomatic activities involving the Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Kokand, Iran, the Russian Empire, Turkmen, Kazakh, and Karakalpak tribes, as well as control over trade routes and border territories. Owing to its geographical location along the lower reaches of the Amu Darya, in the Khorezm oasis, the Aral Sea region, and the surrounding desert and steppe areas, the Khanate's foreign policy was consistently shaped by issues of water resources, trade routes, nomadic tribes, border security, and pressure from major empires.

Keywords: Khanate of Khiva, Afghanistan, British Empire, Russian Empire, Great Game, Abdur Rahman Khan, Muhammad Rahim Khan II, Herat, Central Asia, foreign policy, diplomatic relations, geopolitical rivalry, Anglo-Afghan relations, trade relations.

Introduction

Relations with Afghanistan occupied a distinctive place in the foreign policy of the Khanate of Khiva. The Khivan rulers expressed their positions on British activities in Afghanistan. In the nineteenth century, the Khanate of Khiva and



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Afghanistan sought to coordinate their responses to the colonial policies of imperial powers amid the changing political circumstances of the region.

In 1843–1844, the leader of the Sariq tribe wrote a letter to the Khan of Khiva requesting financial assistance in connection with the surrender of Herat to the British and the distribution of funds among soldiers who had been persuaded to join the opposing side. In particular, the letter reported that, following British military campaigns in Iranian territories and the capture of several cities, the Qajar authorities had handed Herat over to the British and ceased hostilities. Herat was subsequently restored to Afghanistan with British assistance.

In 1854, an informant named Oqosiy sent a report to an official named Muhammad Avazbek stating that the war between Iran and Afghanistan was being brought to an end through British mediation. The report also indicated that an agreement had been reached to transfer Herat to the Afghans and that the son of Dost Mohammad Khan had been appointed its governor.

Trade relations between the Khanate of Khiva and Afghanistan also existed. Historical accounts indicate that fifteen Afghan families lived in Khiva. They had primarily come to the city for commercial purposes, although some also worked as physicians.

Friendly letters from the Afghan amir Abdur Rahman Khan to Muhammad Rahim Khan II of Khiva are preserved in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The archival file consists of three pages: the first and third contain the original text, while the second contains its translation. Since the letters are undated, the memoirs of Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901, provide a supplementary source for establishing their historical context. The original text of Abdur Rahman Khan's memoirs was written in Persian, and an English translation was published in London in 1900. According to the publisher's note, the manuscript was brought from Kabul to England by Miss



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Lillias Hamilton, who served as the amir's medical adviser, and translated into English by Sultan Muhammad Khan, a Muslim representative associated with the British presence in Afghanistan. These details are recorded in the publisher's note included in the book.

Abdur Rahman Khan (1844–1901) was the grandson of Dost Mohammad Khan. After losing the struggle for the Afghan throne, he moved to Turkestan in 1869. During the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–1880, he returned to his homeland and established his authority in northern Afghanistan. On July 31, 1880, he was recognized as the amir of Afghanistan at Zimma, according to the historical account cited here.

Abdur Rahman Khan sought to preserve Afghanistan's territorial integrity. However, under British pressure, he was compelled to recognize the Durand Line as Afghanistan's eastern boundary. As a result, territories inhabited by substantial Afghan populations came under British Indian control. Despite these constraints, Abdur Rahman Khan consolidated internal authority and created conditions for strengthening the country's economy.

Information in Abdur Rahman Khan's memoirs concerning the years 1867–1870 indicates that he visited Mashhad and informed its governor of his intention to travel to Turkestan via Tajan and Urgench. After arriving in Khiva, he met Muhammad Rahim Khan II (1864–1910). The Khan of Khiva stated that his grandfather, Muhammad Amin Khan (1845–1855), had maintained close relations with Abdur Rahman Khan's father, Afzal Khan (1849–1863), during the latter's governorship of Balkh. Muhammad Rahim Khan II also recorded in his memoirs that he intended to provide Abdur Rahman Khan with 100,000 cavalymen to assist him in capturing the city of Balkh.

In conclusion, the foreign policy of the Khanate of Khiva developed under complex historical circumstances. Its geographical position between deserts,



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steppes, and irrigated oases meant that its external relations were consistently influenced by security concerns, trade, and territorial ambitions. The Khanate competed politically with Bukhara, experienced disputes with Iran over border issues and tribal affairs, maintained complex relations with Turkmen, Kazakh, and Karakalpak groups, and initially pursued trade and diplomacy with Russia before entering into military confrontation with the Russian Empire.

One of the most significant characteristics of Khiva's foreign policy was its rulers' determination to preserve the Khanate's independence. However, the expansion of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century ultimately undermined this objective. In 1873, Russia conquered Khiva and transformed it into a protectorate. Consequently, the Khanate's independent foreign policy effectively came to an end.

The Khanate of Khiva also maintained relations with more distant foreign states, and diplomatic missions were periodically exchanged. Historical sources record, for example, that during a period of political unrest, Khivan ruler Hojimuhammad Khan fled to the Ottoman Empire, where he temporarily sought refuge. Another source records that Muhammad Amin Khan (1845–1855) dispatched an envoy to the Ottoman Empire. The account states:

“Furthermore, Qutbiddin Khoja, the Shaykh al-Islam, and Shukrullo Oqo, both serving the exalted court, had departed for Rum to meet the Caliph on a diplomatic mission. As mentioned previously, Qutbiddin Khoja died along the way, while Shukrullo Oqo delivered the letter and gifts sent by the Caliph to the seat of the Caliphate in the middle of the month of Dhu al-Qi'dah of that year (1851).”

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that, by the nineteenth century, intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian empires in Central Asia, commonly known as the “Great Game,” had a direct impact on the



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fate of the Khanate of Khiva. Russia viewed the Khanate as a strategic component of its southward expansion, whereas Britain approached Khiva primarily from the perspective of protecting its interests in India. Against this backdrop, the Khivan rulers attempted to pursue a policy of diplomatic balancing by taking advantage of tensions between the two empires.

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