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KHIVA AT THE EDGE: ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AND RUSSIAN ENCOUNTERS, 1806–1825

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Abstract: *This article examines the multifaceted interactions between the Khivan Khanate and the Russian Empire during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I (1806–1825). Through an integrative analysis of Persian, Chagatai and Russian diplomatic correspondence, frontier administrative records, and manuscript evidence from Central Asian and Eastern European archives, this study argues that Khiva’s diplomatic praxis was neither passive nor reactionary but rather a calibrated strategy of negotiated sovereignty. Investigating the institutionalization of diplomacy, economic negotiations, and frontier governance mechanisms, the article demonstrates how Khiva managed asymmetrical power relations through adaptive engagement. These findings recalibrate conventional imperial narratives and foreground Khivan agency within the broader dynamics of 19th-century Eurasian politics. This article examines the multifaceted interactions between the Khivan Khanate and the Russian Empire during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I (1806–1825). Through an integrative analysis of Persian, Chagatai, and Russian diplomatic correspondence, frontier administrative records, and manuscript evidence from Central Asian and Eastern European archives, this study argues that Khiva’s diplomatic praxis was neither passive nor reactionary but rather a calibrated strategy of negotiated sovereignty. In addition to institutional and procedural innovations, the study highlights the role of individual agency, showing how Muhammad Rahim Khan I personally shaped envoy selection, linguistic framing, and the timing of negotiations to maximize strategic leverage. By examining temporal management, ritualized communication, and archival preservation as instruments of statecraft, the article reveals a nuanced form of frontier diplomacy where Khiva actively molded its engagements with a more powerful empire. These findings recalibrate conventional imperial narratives, foreground Khivan agency, and demonstrate that the Khanate’s strategic choices were*



grounded in both immediate political concerns and a long-term vision for sustaining autonomy in 19th-century Eurasian politics.

Key words: *Khivan Khanate; Russian Empire; Muhammad Rahim Khan I; diplomacy; Central Asian frontier; negotiated sovereignty.*

INTRODUCTION

The early nineteenth century marked a period of intensified interaction between the Russian Empire and the political entities of Central Asia. Among these, the Khivan Khanate occupied a distinctive position due to its strategic location along trans-regional trade routes and its control over key nodes connecting the Caspian basin, the Aral Sea, and Transoxiana. The reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I coincided with Russia's gradual transition from episodic diplomatic engagement to more structured imperial interest in the region.¹

Existing scholarship has often portrayed Khiva as a passive object of Russian expansion or as a peripheral polity resisting external influence. Such interpretations obscure the agency of the Khivan political elite and underestimate the complexity of its diplomatic culture.² This article seeks to challenge these assumptions by reassessing Khiva–Russian relations through the lens of frontier diplomacy and pragmatic statecraft.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Russian expansion into Central Asia, the diplomatic agency of the Khivan Khanate during the early nineteenth century remains insufficiently theorized. Existing studies tend to

privilege imperial archives while treating Khiva primarily as a reactive frontier polity.³ This article addresses this gap by foregrounding Khivan diplomatic practices and decision-making processes during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I. Its central contribution lies in demonstrating that Khiva's engagement with Russia constituted a coherent strategy of negotiated sovereignty rather than episodic resistance or isolation.⁴

Manuscript Evidence and Archival Silences

A significant contribution of this study lies in its use of manuscript materials that have remained marginal in the historiography of Khiva–Russian relations. Persian and Chagatai texts produced within the Khivan administrative milieu provide insights not only into events but into the cognitive frameworks through which diplomacy was understood.⁵

Notably, several diplomatic episodes referenced in Khivan manuscripts are absent or only briefly mentioned in Russian archival records. These silences should not be interpreted as evidence of insignificance but rather as indicators of asymmetrical documentation practices. While Russian sources prioritized outcomes relevant to imperial



administration, Khivan texts emphasized legitimacy, honor, and continuity of rule.⁶

This divergence underscores the necessity of reading imperial and indigenous sources as complementary rather than hierarchical.⁷

Manuscripts as Administrative Testimony

Manuscript sources produced within the Khivan Khanate during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I represent a distinct category of historical evidence that differs fundamentally from both narrative chronicles and later historiographical reconstructions. These texts, often preserved in composite codices, include diplomatic drafts, internal memoranda, copies of correspondence, and formulaic expressions of sovereignty. Their value lies not merely in the events they reference but in the administrative logic they reveal.⁸

Unlike court chronicles intended for legitimizing dynastic authority, administrative manuscripts reflect routine governance and diplomatic normalization. Several such texts, preserved in manuscript collections in Istanbul and Tashkent, demonstrate consistent stylistic conventions when addressing external powers, including Russia.⁹ The repetition of honorific formulas, calibrated expressions of deference, and precise delineation of reciprocal obligations indicate that diplomatic communication followed established norms rather than improvised practices.¹⁰

These manuscripts thus function as institutional artifacts, documenting the operational grammar of Khivan diplomacy.

Chagatai and Persian Diplomatic Registers

A noteworthy feature of Khivan documentary culture during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I is the parallel use of Chagatai Turkic and Persian in diplomatic documentation. While Persian retained its prestige as the language of high administration and transregional legitimacy, Chagatai increasingly appeared in internal registers, copies of outgoing correspondence, and administrative memoranda.¹¹

This bilingual practice was neither accidental nor merely traditional. Persian functioned as a language of symbolic sovereignty, embedding Khiva within the broader Islamic political world, while Chagatai facilitated clarity and continuity within the khanate's administrative apparatus.¹² The coexistence of these linguistic registers indicates a deliberate differentiation between external representation and internal governance.

Russian officials encountered Khivan correspondence almost exclusively through translations produced by frontier interpreters in Orenburg and Astrakhan. Marginal notes attached to these translations reveal recurrent difficulties in rendering metaphorical expressions of authority, obligation, and reciprocity.¹³ Such linguistic mediation constituted a critical, though rarely



acknowledged, layer of frontier diplomacy.

Archival Evidence from the Orenburg Frontier Administration

Russian archival materials from the Orenburg frontier administration provide an indispensable, albeit fragmentary, counterpart to Khivan manuscript sources. Reports, memoranda, and correspondence produced by frontier officials were shaped primarily by imperial administrative priorities rather than by an interest in documenting Khiva as an autonomous diplomatic actor.¹⁴

Several Khivan diplomatic initiatives extensively documented in indigenous manuscripts appear only marginally in Russian records. When referenced, they are frequently reclassified as routine border management or commercial correspondence rather than formal diplomacy.¹⁵ This reframing reflects a structural asymmetry in archival logic: Khiva preserved diplomatic texts as assertions of sovereignty, whereas Russian authorities absorbed them into bureaucratic routines.

Such discrepancies caution against privileging imperial archives as comprehensive repositories of historical reality.

The Politics of Omission and Selective Recording

Archival silences are not neutral absences but products of institutional selection. Russian frontier officials were accountable to ministries concerned with

security, trade regulation, and imperial order. Diplomatic exchanges lacking immediate strategic consequences were often condensed or excluded entirely.¹⁶

Khivan archival practice followed a contrasting logic. Copies of correspondence were preserved as symbols of legitimacy, continuity, and recognition. Diplomatic documentation thus functioned as political capital within the khanate's administrative culture.¹⁷

Recognizing this divergence allows historians to reinterpret absence not as insignificance but as evidence of competing epistemologies of governance.

Materiality and Circulation of Diplomatic Texts

The material characteristics of Khivan manuscripts—paper quality, calligraphic precision, seal placement, and layout—offer further insights into diplomatic culture. Documents addressed to Russian authorities often display meticulous calligraphy and standardized seals, signaling their formal status.¹⁸

Multiple copies of identical texts found across manuscript collections in Tashkent and St. Petersburg suggest deliberate internal archiving. These practices ensured linguistic consistency and policy continuity across successive diplomatic exchanges.¹⁹

Diplomacy thus emerges not merely as correspondence but as an institutionalized administrative domain.

Informal Observations and Unpublished Travel Accounts



In addition to formal archival materials, unpublished travel notes and personal observations preserved in museum archives provide supplementary perspectives. Russian merchants, military officers, and intermediaries recorded impressions of Khivan court ceremonies, audience protocols, and diplomatic rituals.²⁰

While such accounts require critical scrutiny, their descriptions of ceremonial order, gift exchange, and protocol align closely with patterns evident in Khivan manuscripts.²¹ These convergences reinforce the interpretation of Khivan diplomacy as systematic rather than episodic.

Negotiated Authority without Formal Treaties

A defining feature of Khiva–Russian relations between 1806 and 1825 is the relative absence of formal bilateral treaties. Rather than reflecting diplomatic incapacity, this absence points to a preference for flexible negotiation. Manuscript correspondence reveals repeated reaffirmations of goodwill, restraint, and mutual benefit without juridical codification.²²

This diplomatic mode allowed Khiva to preserve autonomy while engaging pragmatically with an expanding empire. Russian authorities accepted such arrangements as sufficient for maintaining frontier stability.²³

Diplomacy functioned here as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome.

Theoretical Framework: Frontier Diplomacy and Negotiated Sovereignty

This article adopts frontier diplomacy as its principal analytical framework. Recent scholarship conceptualizes imperial frontiers not as zones of unilateral domination but as negotiated spaces where sovereignty was continuously recalibrated.²⁴

Within this framework, sovereignty is understood as performative and relational rather than static. Khiva's survival depended on its capacity to engage selectively with imperial structures while maintaining internal legitimacy.²⁵

Applying this perspective enables a departure from binary models of resistance and submission, foregrounding adaptive strategies instead.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study combines comparative textual analysis with contextual archival reading. Persian and Chagatai manuscripts are analyzed as normative administrative documents rather than purely narrative sources. Russian archival materials are examined with attention to bureaucratic genre, institutional context, and rhetorical framing.²⁶

Cross-referencing indigenous and imperial sources mitigates retrospective imperial bias and allows for reconstruction of diplomatic interaction from multiple perspectives.

METHODS



Political Landscape under
Muhammad Rahim Khan I

Muhammad Rahim Khan I inherited a polity characterized by internal factionalism and external vulnerability. His reforms prioritized centralization while preserving flexibility in foreign relations. Unlike his predecessors, he institutionalized diplomacy by appointing specialized envoys and formalizing communication procedures.²⁷

Khiva's strategy can thus be characterized as selective engagement: openness to negotiation without juridical subordination.

Institutionalization of Diplomatic Practice

Manuscript evidence indicates the emergence of standardized diplomatic routines during this period. Procedures for receiving envoys, drafting correspondence, and archiving texts suggest an evolving bureaucratic culture.²⁸

These developments challenge assumptions that Central Asian diplomacy was ad hoc or personalistic. Diplomacy functioned as a structured component of governance.

A Diplomatic Exchange as Case Study

A close reading of correspondence between Khivan envoys and Russian frontier officials illustrates the mechanics of negotiated authority. Assertions of sovereignty were embedded within expressions of reciprocity and goodwill.²⁹

Russian responses, though assertive, acknowledged these conventions, indicating tacit recognition of Khiva's diplomatic standing.³⁰

This exchange exemplifies how asymmetrical power relations were managed symbolically.

DISCUSSION

Temporal Management in Diplomatic Relations

Diplomatic engagement unfolded in cycles of intensification and restraint. Periods of active correspondence were followed by deliberate pauses, reflecting strategic recalibration rather than disengagement.³¹

Temporal management thus emerges as a diplomatic tool in its own right.

Trade, Captivity, and Economic Pragmatism

Economic considerations lay at the core of Khiva–Russian relations. Trade caravans facilitated not only commerce but information exchange. Disputes over captives, often framed as humanitarian concerns, were embedded in broader economic negotiations.³²

Khivan authorities employed the release of captives as leverage to secure trade concessions, demonstrating calculated pragmatism.³³

Regional Context and Multilateral Balancing

Khiva's diplomacy must be situated within its relations with Bukhara, Kazakh elites, and Qajar Persia. Muhammad Rahim Khan I positioned Khiva as an



intermediary rather than a subordinate actor.³⁴

This multilateral balancing underscores Khiva's agency within Central Asian geopolitics.

Khiva's diplomacy during the reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the broader regional environment of Central Asia and its adjoining political spheres. The khanate operated within a complex and fluid constellation of powers that included the Emirate of Bukhara, Kazakh steppe elites, Qajar Persia, and, indirectly, the Ottoman Empire. Rather than aligning itself rigidly with any single actor, Khiva pursued a strategy of multilateral balancing that enabled it to preserve autonomy while extracting material and symbolic benefits from competing relationships.³⁵

This strategy was neither improvised nor purely defensive. Manuscript correspondence and archival records indicate that Khivan political elites possessed a sophisticated understanding of regional power dynamics and consciously positioned the khanate as an intermediary node within overlapping diplomatic networks.³⁶

Khiva and the Emirate of Bukhara: Competitive Proximity and Managed Rivalry

Relations between Khiva and Bukhara during the early nineteenth century were marked by a combination of rivalry, pragmatic accommodation, and symbolic competition. Although both

polities shared Islamic political traditions and Persianate administrative culture, their geopolitical interests frequently diverged, particularly with regard to control over trade routes and influence among Turkmen and Uzbek tribal groups.³⁷

Khivan manuscripts from the period record repeated diplomatic exchanges with Bukhara that focused on boundary disputes, caravan security, and the status of intermediary tribes. Notably, these exchanges reveal a careful calibration of language: assertions of Khivan sovereignty were framed in terms of mutual stability rather than outright dominance.³⁸

Russian archival reports corroborate this pattern, noting that Khivan envoys often invoked Bukharan actions as justification for independent diplomatic initiatives toward Russia.³⁹ By positioning itself as a counterweight to Bukharan influence, Khiva enhanced its strategic value in the eyes of Russian frontier officials without committing to formal alliance.

This triangular dynamic—Khiva, Bukhara, and Russia—created a diplomatic environment in which Khiva could leverage regional rivalries to its advantage.

Kazakh Steppe Elites and the Politics of Intermediation

The Kazakh steppe constituted a critical intermediary zone between Khiva and the Russian Empire. Rather than viewing Kazakh elites merely as



obstacles or security concerns, Khivan authorities treated them as diplomatic actors whose allegiance could shape regional stability.⁴⁰

Manuscript correspondence preserved in Khivan collections includes references to negotiated arrangements with Kazakh sultans concerning caravan passage, tribute, and mediation in disputes involving Russian frontier posts. These arrangements were often informal yet highly structured, relying on personal guarantees and ritualized exchanges rather than written treaties.⁴¹

Russian administrative reports from Orenburg reveal an acute awareness of Khiva's influence among steppe elites. Officials frequently complained that Khivan envoys "preempted" Russian initiatives by securing Kazakh cooperation through gift-giving and symbolic recognition.⁴² Such observations underscore Khiva's capacity to operate as a diplomatic broker rather than a peripheral actor.

Importantly, Khiva's engagement with Kazakh elites also served as a buffer against direct Russian pressure, reinforcing the khanate's intermediary role.

Qajar Persia and the Southern Diplomatic Horizon

Khiva's relations with Qajar Persia added a crucial southern dimension to its diplomatic strategy. Although geographically distant, Persia represented both a cultural reference point and a

potential counterbalance to Russian influence.⁴³

Persian archival materials and Khivan manuscripts attest to periodic exchanges of envoys and letters emphasizing shared Islamic legitimacy and concerns over regional stability. These communications rarely resulted in concrete alliances but served an important symbolic function: they embedded Khiva within a wider Islamic diplomatic sphere beyond Russian reach.⁴⁴

Russian officials monitored these contacts closely. Reports from the Orenburg administration express concern that Khivan appeals to Persian authority might complicate Russian influence in the Caspian region.⁴⁵ This perception, whether exaggerated or not, enhanced Khiva's diplomatic leverage.

Khiva thus employed Persia not as a patron but as a reference point, reinforcing its image as a sovereign actor with multiple diplomatic options.

Trade Routes as Instruments of Regional Power

Trade constituted a central axis around which Khiva's multilateral diplomacy revolved. Control over caravan routes linking Russia, Bukhara, Persia, and the steppe endowed the khanate with economic and diplomatic leverage.⁴⁶

Archival documents indicate that Khivan authorities deliberately manipulated access to these routes, offering preferential treatment to certain partners while restricting others. Such



measures were frequently justified in diplomatic correspondence as responses to security concerns, thereby avoiding overt political confrontation.⁴⁷

This economic pragmatism allowed Khiva to translate geographic position into diplomatic capital, reinforcing its intermediary role within Central Asian geopolitics.

Symbolic Hierarchies and the Performance of Sovereignty

Multilateral balancing was not limited to material considerations; it also involved symbolic negotiation of status. Diplomatic rituals, titulature, and gift exchange played a critical role in signaling relative standing among regional actors.⁴⁸

Khivan correspondence demonstrates careful attention to the hierarchy implied by honorifics used in addressing Bukharan, Persian, and Russian authorities. Variations in titulature reflect nuanced assessments of each relationship rather than rigid ideological commitments.⁴⁹

Such symbolic calibration enabled Khiva to assert sovereignty without provoking unnecessary conflict, reinforcing its position as a flexible diplomatic actor.

Russian Perceptions of Khiva's Regional Role

Russian frontier officials increasingly recognized Khiva's intermediary function, even as imperial policy aimed at expanding influence. Internal memoranda describe Khiva as a

"necessary interlocutor" in managing relations with the steppe and southern neighbors.⁵⁰

This recognition did not imply equality, but it constrained Russian options by acknowledging Khiva's regional embeddedness. As a result, Russian authorities often opted for negotiation over coercion during this period.

RESULTS

Multilateral Balancing as a Survival Strategy

Taken together, these regional engagements reveal multilateral balancing as a deliberate survival strategy rather than an incidental outcome of geography. Khiva's diplomacy operated on multiple levels—local, regional, and symbolic—allowing it to navigate asymmetrical power relations without formal subordination.⁵¹

Muhammad Rahim Khan I emerges as a ruler who understood diplomacy as an integrative practice, aligning economic interests, symbolic authority, and regional politics into a coherent strategy.

Implications for Central Asian Geopolitics

This reassessment of Khiva's regional diplomacy challenges teleological narratives of inevitable imperial domination. It demonstrates that Central Asian polities actively shaped their geopolitical environment through adaptive engagement.⁵²

Khiva's experience underscores the importance of examining regional



networks and intermediary roles in understanding imperial encounters.

Inter-Imperial Awareness and Strategic Anticipation

One of the defining features of Khiva's multilateral diplomacy under Muhammad Rahim Khan I was its acute awareness of inter-imperial competition beyond immediate bilateral relations. Khivan political actors did not perceive Russia, Bukhara, or Persia as isolated interlocutors, but rather as components of an interconnected regional system in which shifts in one sphere reverberated across others. This awareness is evident in manuscript marginalia and internal memoranda that record assessments of external developments rather than mere reactions to them.⁵³

Several Khivan administrative manuscripts include annotations referencing Russian–Persian tensions in the Caucasus and Caspian regions. These notes suggest that Khivan officials interpreted Russian military movements not only in relation to Central Asia but also as part of broader imperial strategies.⁵⁴ Such anticipatory reasoning indicates that Khiva's diplomacy was informed by strategic foresight rather than short-term expediency.

Khiva as an Informational Hub

Beyond formal diplomacy, Khiva functioned as a regional center for the circulation of information. Merchants, pilgrims, envoys, and intermediaries passing through the khanate transmitted intelligence that informed policy

decisions. Russian archival materials repeatedly mention Khiva as a conduit through which news from Persia, the steppe, and Transoxiana reached Russian frontier administrators.⁵⁵

Khivan manuscripts corroborate this role, recording the reception of reports from travelers and the subsequent adjustment of diplomatic language and timing. The deliberate synchronization of diplomatic correspondence with regional developments underscores Khiva's role as an informational hub within Central Asia.⁵⁶

Managing Overlapping Allegiances

Multilateral balancing required navigating overlapping and sometimes contradictory allegiances. Khivan diplomacy did not seek exclusive loyalty from regional actors but rather accepted fluid affiliations as a structural reality. This approach is particularly evident in Khiva's dealings with tribal elites whose loyalties shifted depending on economic and security considerations.⁵⁷

Russian documents note frustration with Khivan tolerance for such ambiguity, interpreting it as duplicity. However, Khivan sources frame this flexibility as pragmatic governance in a region characterized by mobility and negotiated authority.⁵⁸ This divergence in interpretation highlights differing political cultures rather than deceptive intent.

Temporal Sequencing of Diplomatic Engagements



Khiva's multilateral strategy also relied on temporal sequencing—deliberately staggering diplomatic initiatives to avoid overcommitment or provocation. Manuscript correspondence reveals intervals of calculated silence following periods of intense negotiation.⁵⁹

These pauses allowed Khivan authorities to assess responses from multiple actors before proceeding further. Russian officials occasionally misread such silences as indecision, yet subsequent correspondence demonstrates that they were integral to Khiva's diplomatic method.⁶⁰ Temporality thus functioned as a strategic resource.

Peripheral Actors and Indirect Influence

Khiva's balancing strategy extended beyond major polities to include peripheral actors such as Turkmen confederations and semi-autonomous communities along caravan routes. Rather than exerting direct control, Khiva employed symbolic recognition and negotiated privileges to secure cooperation.⁶¹

Archival reports indicate that Russian authorities often encountered resistance indirectly mediated through Khivan-aligned intermediaries. This indirect influence enhanced Khiva's bargaining position while minimizing overt confrontation.⁶²

Economic Diversification as Diplomatic Insulation

Economic diversification constituted another pillar of Khiva's multilateral

balancing. By maintaining trade links with multiple partners, Khiva reduced dependence on any single external power. Customs records and correspondence reflect conscious efforts to redirect caravans in response to political pressures.⁶³

Such measures provided Khiva with leverage during negotiations and mitigated the risks associated with regional instability. Economic flexibility thus complemented diplomatic adaptability.

Symbolic Geography and Spatial Diplomacy

Khivan diplomacy also operated through symbolic geography. References to sacred sites, historic routes, and ancestral territories appear frequently in correspondence, reinforcing claims to regional relevance.⁶⁴ These spatial narratives functioned as diplomatic tools, situating Khiva within a shared historical landscape that transcended contemporary political boundaries.

Russian translations of such texts often struggled to capture these nuances, reducing them to administrative concerns. This translational gap further illustrates how Khiva's symbolic diplomacy operated on registers not fully legible to imperial administrators.⁶⁵

Negotiating Asymmetry without Submission

Despite clear power asymmetries, Khiva avoided gestures that would signal submission. Instead, diplomatic language emphasized reciprocity and mutual



benefit. Manuscripts reveal consistent avoidance of terminology implying dependency, even when concessions were made.⁶⁶

Russian officials, while aware of this rhetorical resistance, frequently accepted it as a pragmatic compromise. This tacit accommodation allowed diplomacy to proceed without forcing symbolic capitulation.⁶⁷

Crisis Management through Multilateral Channels

Periods of crisis—such as border incidents or disputes over captives—tested Khiva's balancing strategy. Rather than escalating conflicts bilaterally, Khivan authorities often invoked third-party relationships to de-escalate tensions.⁶⁸

For example, correspondence indicates that appeals to shared Islamic norms or references to Bukharan mediation were employed to defuse Russian pressure.⁶⁹ Such multilateral crisis management reflects diplomatic sophistication rather than weakness.

Reassessing Regional Hierarchies

Khiva's multilateral diplomacy challenges static notions of regional hierarchy. Rather than occupying a fixed position, the khanate's status fluctuated depending on context. At times, Khiva acted as a junior partner; at others, as a necessary intermediary.⁷⁰

This fluidity complicates imperial narratives that portray Central Asian polities as uniformly subordinate. Instead, Khiva emerges as a relational actor whose

influence derived from connectivity rather than coercion.

Implications for the Study of Frontier Governance

The expanded regional perspective offered here has implications beyond Khiva. It suggests that frontier governance in Central Asia was shaped by multilateral interaction rather than linear imperial expansion. Diplomatic agency resided not only in imperial centers but also in intermediary polities capable of navigating complexity.⁷¹

Khiva's experience invites comparative analysis with other frontier states that employed similar strategies to preserve autonomy.

SYNTHESIS

Taken together, these additional dimensions reinforce the interpretation of Khiva's diplomacy as a coherent system of multilateral balancing. Through informational control, temporal management, economic diversification, and symbolic negotiation, Khiva sustained a degree of sovereignty within an increasingly imperialized environment.⁷²

Muhammad Rahim Khan I's reign thus represents not a transitional phase toward subjugation, but a period of adaptive resilience grounded in regional engagement.

CONCLUSION

The reign of Muhammad Rahim Khan I constitutes a formative phase in Khiva–Russian relations defined by adaptive diplomacy and negotiated



sovereignty. Far from passive, the Khivan Khanate actively shaped its engagement with the Russian Empire through institutionalized practices, linguistic strategy, and temporal management.

By integrating underutilized manuscript sources with imperial archival materials, this study challenges deterministic narratives of Russian expansion. More broadly, it contributes to the historiography of Central Asian international relations by demonstrating how non-imperial polities navigated asymmetrical power structures through frontier diplomacy.

Beyond its immediate empirical contributions, this study underscores the importance of individual rulership in shaping diplomatic outcomes on imperial frontiers. Muhammad Rahim Khan I emerges not merely as a representative of Khivan political culture but as an active architect of its external strategy. His reign was marked by deliberate personnel choices within the court, including the elevation of scribes and envoys proficient in Persian, Chagatai, and Russian diplomatic idioms, which enhanced Khiva's capacity to operate across multiple political registers simultaneously. Such micro-level decisions had macro-level consequences for the durability of Khiva's external autonomy.

Equally significant is the khan's selective institutionalization of precedent. Diplomatic exchanges with Russia were carefully recorded, archived, and

referenced in subsequent negotiations, creating an internal memory of engagement that constrained arbitrary concessions. This practice suggests that Khivan diplomacy functioned not as ad hoc crisis management but as a cumulative process grounded in continuity and institutional learning. The preservation and reuse of correspondence reveal an awareness of historical time that challenges assumptions about the ephemerality of political decision-making in Central Asian polities.

The Khivan case also invites a reconsideration of agency under asymmetrical conditions. Rather than seeking parity with imperial power, Muhammad Rahim Khan I pursued strategic sufficiency: maintaining internal stability, securing commercial flows, and preventing the normalization of foreign presence. This objective recalibrates how success is measured in frontier diplomacy. Autonomy, in this context, was not absolute sovereignty but the sustained ability to delimit the terms, pace, and scope of external engagement.

Finally, the findings suggest that the trajectory of Khiva–Russian relations was neither linear nor inevitable. The diplomatic equilibrium achieved during Muhammad Rahim Khan I's reign demonstrates that imperial expansion was contingent upon temporal opportunity, regional alignment, and the erosion of local diplomatic capacity. Recognizing this contingency restores historical openness to a period often treated



retrospectively as a prelude to conquest. In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Central

Asian international relations, one that foregrounds choice, calculation, and restraint alongside power and coercion.

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