

THE GEOPOLITICS OF AFGHANISTAN AND TURKESTAN AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21124928>

Umarov Muhammadaziz Akramjon oglu

*Senior lecturer, Department of History of Uzbekistan,
Fergana state university*

Abstract

Based on historical archival records, this material analyzes the geopolitical dynamics and the intricate processes of establishing diplomatic relations between Turkestan and Afghanistan at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines the expansionist strategies of British imperialism in Central Asia and evaluates the detrimental impact of the coercive Treaty of Gandamak (1879) and the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) on Afghan sovereignty. Furthermore, the text highlights the profound influence of the October Revolution on the Afghan national liberation movement, the pioneering diplomatic initiatives undertaken by the Turkestan Soviet Republic to forge good-neighborly ties, and the subsequent recognition of Afghanistan's absolute independence under the reign of Amir Amanullah Khan.

Keywords

Turkestan Republic, Afghanistan, geopolitics, diplomatic relations, British imperialism, Treaty of Gandamak, unequal treaties, sovereignty, national liberation movement, Amanullah Khan, foreign policy.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Afghanistan's highly critical strategic position rendered it a perpetual target for the expansionist designs of British imperialism. Great Britain twice attempted to subjugate Afghanistan through military intervention, aiming to annex the territory into its colonial domain and transform it into a strategic military launchpad for further aggression into Central Asia. However, the resilient Afghan people resolutely defended their homeland's sovereignty against these encroachments, repeatedly bringing imperialist ambitions to a total collapse. Nonetheless, in 1879, Great Britain imposed the coercive Treaty of Gandamak upon Afghanistan, thereby stripping the nation of its sovereign right to establish independent diplomatic relations with foreign powers without British oversight.

Under the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, Tsarist Russia formally recognized Afghanistan as lying "outside the Russian sphere of influence" and committed to conducting all political communications with the Afghan government exclusively through the mediation of the British administration [1.179].

By the end of the First World War, Great Britain exercised absolute dominance over Afghanistan. However, in the wake of the Great October Revolution, British imperialists sought to utilize Afghan territory to prepare a military offensive against the Soviet Turkestan Republic. In July 1918, V.I. Lenin explicitly noted that the British, "having brought Afghanistan under their absolute control, have long established a strategic outpost both to expand their colonial possessions and to launch an assault on Soviet Russia" [2.27].

Conversely, the Great October Revolution exerted a profound influence on the populace of Afghanistan. The liberation of the peoples of Turkestan and other borderlands of the former Russian Empire from colonial oppression, coupled with the Soviet government's unilateral nullification of unequal treaties previously imposed on Eastern nations, deeply inspired the Afghan people to intensify their struggle for national independence.

Wali Khan, a prominent Afghan statesman and the government's ambassador to Turkey, assessed the significance of the October Revolution's ideals for the Afghan nation as follows : "Following the Russian Revolution, when the people of Russia liberated themselves, seized power into their own hands, and inscribed independence, equality, and the self-determination of nations upon their banners, these slogans reverberated all the way to Afghanistan. It was then that Afghanistan initiated its war for independence" [3].

On November 30, 1917, the Tashkent-based publication "Nasha Gazeta" published the Appeal of the RSFSR Council of People's Commissars "To All Toiling Muslims of Russia and the East". This manifesto soon penetrated Iran, from where, by the spring of 1918, it crossed into Afghanistan via a Persian (Farsi) translation.

During this period, the geopolitical situation within Afghanistan grew exceptionally tense. The British occupation of nearly the entire territory of neighboring Iran, alongside the seizure of the Transcaspian region by British interventionists, posed an imminent threat not only to Soviet Central Asia but to Afghanistan as well. This peril was further compounded when British forces occupied Kushka, a critical stronghold situated on the immediate approaches to Herat.

Consequently, on September 17, 1918, the Commissariat for National Affairs of the Turkestan Republic issued a rallying cry to the working populace of Soviet Turkestan, declaring : "The predatory appetite of these sworn enemies is not

confined to India alone; they are actively striving to extend their dominion over Persia, Afghanistan, Khiva, and ourselves... It is therefore our sacred duty to stand firm in the defense of our Fatherland" [4].

In November 1917, the armed bands of Ataman Dutov seized Orenburg, effectively severing Soviet Turkestan from the RSFSR as rail communication between Moscow and Tashkent ground to a halt. As a direct consequence, the central government of the RSFSR was temporarily deprived of any viable means to establish direct diplomatic channels with Afghanistan.

However, the existence of the Turkestan Soviet Republic—whose borders spanned hundreds of miles contiguous with Iran and Afghanistan—served as a vital geopolitical bridge. It enabled the local Soviet authorities in Turkestan to initiate direct contacts with the governments and peoples of adjacent Middle Eastern countries.

From the very inception of its existence, the government of the Turkestan Soviet Republic formally proclaimed its recognition of the independence and sovereignty of its neighbors, notably Iran and Afghanistan, expressing a profound desire to cultivate amicable bilateral relations.

The establishment of formal diplomatic ties with these nations carried immense political weight, given that the Soviet populace and the peoples of Iran and Afghanistan shared a common adversary: British imperialism. British intelligence networks in these regions were conducting a hostile and defamatory propaganda campaign targeting both the Soviet government and the RSFSR. Specifically within Afghanistan, imperial agents operated through reactionary factions of the local clergy to propagate rumors among the population, claiming that "Bukharia, the very beacon of Islam, is being plundered and oppressed by the Russian Bolsheviki". Certain clerics went so far as to openly incite the Afghan public and government to mount a military defense of Bukhara. Reporting on these imperialist schemes to foment enmity between the peoples of the RSFSR and Afghanistan, the military commissar of the Kushka fortress dispatched an urgent message to Tashkent, emphasizing : "The complete absence of diplomatic relations with Afghanistan remains the primary catalyst for the prevailing mistrust and suspicion toward our Republic. It is imperative to immediately dispatch a diplomatic mission that can clarify to Afghanistan the Republic's sincere desire for peaceful coexistence, thereby fundamentally eradicating all misunderstandings..." [5.87-88].

Driven by the necessity to regularize diplomatic channels with neighboring states, the Third Regional Congress of Soviets established the Commissariat for

Foreign Affairs of the Turkestan Republic. The official "Regulations" governing the Commissariat, drafted in May 1918, delineated its core mandate as follows:

"1) Managing political relations with foreign governments; 2) Safeguarding our commerce and the broader interests of the Republic in foreign territories; 3) Petitioning for the legal protection of the Republic's subjects regarding their affairs abroad; and 4) Facilitating the resolution of lawful claims brought forward by foreign nationals concerning their affairs within Turkestan" [6.14].

On October 28, 1918, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Turkestan Republic delivered a pivotal report to the Council of People's Commissars, stressing the urgency of convening a specialized conference to resolve the question of establishing formal diplomatic relations with adjacent states—namely Afghanistan, Iran, China, Bukhara, and Khiva. To ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the matter, the Commissar proposed the formation of a joint inter-departmental commission. This body was designed to include representatives from the Commissariats of Foreign Affairs, Industry, Food Supplies, and Finance, alongside officials from the Customs Administration and the Cotton Department [7.277].

To initiate these diplomatic overtures with Kabul, the government of the Turkestan Republic resolved to leverage the return of Prince Ishak Khan, an Afghan political émigré who was then preparing to depart for his homeland. For transmission to the Afghan ruler, Ishak Khan was entrusted with an official diplomatic note from the Turkestan government dated October 22, 1918, which formally proposed to Amir Habibullah Khan the establishment of permanent diplomatic ties. The note stated: "Being entirely detached from any aggressive or hostile intentions toward neighboring foreign states, and profoundly invested in fostering the existing friendship between our peoples as well as facilitating the broadest possible commercial exchange... we deem it highly desirable to station a seasoned and dependable official at Your Highness's court as the plenipotentiary representative of the Turkestan Republic. We harbor no doubt that You will perceive in this initiative our genuine desire to sustain good-neighborly relations in both the economic and political spheres, and that You will favorably receive the prospect of establishing direct communication by welcoming our envoy and appointing your own representative to Turkestan" [8.68].

Regrettably, this initial attempt by the Turkestan Soviet Republic to forge an official understanding with the Afghan leadership proved abortive. Amir Habibullah Khan strictly prohibited Prince Ishak Khan from entering the country, and consequently, the official note from the Soviet Turkestan government never reached Kabul.

The geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically in the spring of 1919. Following the death of Amir Habibullah Khan, Amanullah Khan—a leading figure of the progressive "Young Afghan" movement—ascended the throne, and under his leadership, Afghanistan boldly proclaimed its absolute national independence.

The Soviet government, under the leadership of V.I. Lenin, became the first global power to formally recognize the independence of the newly sovereign Afghan state. As previously noted, the Soviet administration had already championed Afghanistan's right to an independent and sovereign existence during the negotiation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, a principle explicitly codified in Article VII of that accord.

On March 27, 1919, the Soviet government issued a second, definitive official declaration reaffirming its recognition of Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty. Concurrently, it declared the unilateral and absolute revocation of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which had historically reduced Afghanistan to a de facto joint protectorate of the British Empire and Tsarist Russia.

Shortly thereafter, on April 7, 1919, the newly enthroned Amir Amanullah Khan dispatched a formal missive to the Soviet head of state, V.I. Lenin. In it, the Amir announced his coronation and formally proposed the establishment of regular diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and Afghanistan. The Amir wrote that he deemed it both a personal duty and an urgent necessity to declare his profound desire to forge a bond of "unity and friendship" between the Afghan and Soviet peoples, noting that up until that historic juncture, Afghanistan had been systematically denied the opportunity to maintain equitable and reciprocal relations with the international community.

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