



Abdullah Khan Uzbek: His rule in the unification of the Uzbek Empire (1551-1598)

Pakeeza Akhtar

Research Scholar, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Correspondence Author: Pakeeza Akhtar

Received 21 Feb 2025; Accepted 3 Apr 2025; Published 14 Apr 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.4.2.19-23>

Abstract

Abdullah Khan Uzbek occupies a prominent place in the history of the Uzbek Khanates, yet his role has not received the desired scholarly attention. When he assumed control of Miyankal in 1551, Transoxiana was divided into several appanages such as Samarqand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Balkh, and Miyankal, each ruled by hereditary princes under the authority of the Khaqan. Over several decades, Abdullah Khan dismantled this fragmented system, consolidating the provinces into a unified and powerful state with Bukhara as its capital. It is worth mentioning that in 1561, his father was proclaimed as the khaqan of the Uzbeks. Abdullah Khan acted as de facto ruler during his father's reign, following his death in 1583. He was declared the khaqan of Transoxiana. This paper examines Abdullah Khan's political strategies and military achievements between 1551 to 1584 with particular focus on his role in the unification and consolidation of the Uzbek Empire in Transoxiana.

Keywords: Uzbeks, Transoxiana, Bukhara, Struggles, Unification, Consolidation

Introduction

Defining Transoxiana and the early history of the Uzbeks

Abdullah Khan's struggle for the consolidation of the Uzbek empire can be understood well if the early history of the Uzbek Khanates and the location of Transoxiana are also taken into account. Transoxiana is a historical region of Central Asia, known to Arabs as Mawara'un-Nahr (the land beyond the river) and to Iranian sources as Turan. In Western accounts, it is called Transoxiana (the land beyond the Oxus). Geographically, the region is surrounded by the Aral Sea, the Syr Darya River, and Turkestan to the north; the Amu Darya River and Afghanistan to the south; the Tien Shan and Hindu Kush mountains extending to the Karakum Deserts in the east; and the Caspian Sea to the west. It encompasses the territories of modern-day Uzbekistan, western Tajikistan, western Kyrgyzstan, northwestern Turkmenistan, and southern Kazakhstan ^[1].

The Uzbeks, who inhabited this region, were a group of Turco-Mongol tribes that emerged there after the disintegration of the Timurid empire. They were descendants of Chenghis Khan's eldest son Jochi ^[2] and took their name from the Uzbek Khan, the ninth ruler of Jochi's house of the Golden Horde ^[3]. Uzbeks rose to prominence in the 15th century when Abul Khair Khan united many Turkic, Mongol, and Tibetan tribes under his command and established himself on the steppes of modern Kazakhstan. However, he was not interested in conquering or settling in any major town of Transoxiana; he preferred a nomadic lifestyle. His grandson, Muhammad Shaibani Khan, decided to settle in the main town of Transoxiana. He capitalised on the disintegration of the Timurid empire, which

was ruling Transoxiana at that time. Ultimately, he succeeded in conquering the region after defeating and expelling Timurid princes, including Babur ^[4]. Although Babur fought bravely to defend his ancestral domain, his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Shaibani Khan founded the Uzbek Empire in Transoxiana, commonly known as the Uzbek Khanate.

Abdullah Khan also belonged to this dynasty. Abdullah Khan's ascendancy in Transoxiana was not smooth, as the region at that time has been divided among several provinces like Samarqand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Balkh and Miyankal governed by different rulers called Uzbek sultans under the leadership of Khaqan, as The political system of the Uzbeks followed the Chengezid tradition, with a notable distinction, according to which the eldest member of the Abdulkharid lineage was consistently appointed as Khaqan or khan, regardless of his suitability for the role. The Khaqan exerted his authority from the principal town, which he inherited from his father. Consequently, the Uzbeks had no established capital during that period. The Khaqan exercised central authority over Other Uzbek sultans but had no absolute power. The other Uzbek sultans held him in high regard and respected his opinion; however, they were not compelled to obey his orders. Hence, the Uzbek Sultans often acted unpredictably, as they ruled their principality more or less independently, even sending their envoys abroad ^[5].

Ubaidullah Khan Uzbek was the popular Khaqan of Transoxiana. He reigned from 1533 to 1540. Before his formal accession to the throne in 1533, he acted as a de facto ruler during his two weak predecessors, Kochikonji (1510-1530) and Abu Said (1530-1532), who were the immediate successors of

Shaibani Khan. During his regime, all principalities of Transoxiana remained united; however, after he died in 1539, his successors were not capable rulers, and therefore, the disintegration among Uzbek Sultans began. Ubaidullah's successor was Abdullah Sultan I he died short reign of six months on 9th July 1540. He was succeeded by his brother Abdul Latief as Khaqan, but he lacked the qualities of being a great leader, so during his rule Central authority became weak. The youthful Uzbeg sultans, inheriting their father's throne in different provinces, were striving for chivalry and nurtured ambitions that could only be achieved by encroaching upon their neighbours' territory or challenging the central authority [6]. These conditions in Transoxiana persisted for a decade.

Abdullah Khan's Emergence and his struggle (1551-60)

Under these circumstances, Abdullah Khan emerged on the scene of Transoxiana. He set out to combine all the principalities into a single powerful state and made Bukhara its Capital. This took him many Years, since he had to fight many wars and battles to subdue his rival Uzbek sultans, who were ruling in these principalities.

Abdullah Khan's family appanage included the provinces of Balkh, Kermine, and Miyankal. His father was Iskandar Khan. His uncle Pir Muhammad was the sultan of their appanage [7] at that time. Abdullah Khan possessed all the qualities of a great ruler, but he was very young then. Meanwhile, Khaqan's weakness was exposed, and other Uzbek sultans exploited the situation to their advantage, which caused turmoil in the state. Consequently, Transoxiana experienced a period of political instability. Khaqan was unable to punish the rebellious princes. Abdullah Khan Uzbek emerged on the political scene of Transoxiana when his uncle Pir Muhammad saw political instability in Bukhara and tried his luck there. He visited Bukhara under the pretext of paying his last respects to Abdulaziz, the ruler of Bukhara, who had died in 1549. Eventually, he captured the fort of Bukhara in August 1550. Consequently, its ruler Burhan Sultan fled to Samarqand to seek Khaqan Abdul Latief's assistance against Pir Muhammad. Then they laid siege to Miyankal in June 1551, the family appanage of Pir Muhammad, so that this could compel the latter to raise the siege and run back to Miyankal to save his family appanage. Pir Muhammad, including his brother Iskandar Khan, fled from Miyankal. Meanwhile, Bukhara was recaptured by the Burhan Sultan. However, Abdullah Khan, then only 12 years old, stood firm to defend his family appanage, despite his family taking flight. After a prolonged siege of Miyankal by Abdul Latief, the besiegers were defeated by Abdullah Khan. This achievement made him popular among the people of Transoxiana. The famous Juibari Shaikhs, who held considerable influence in the politics of the region, extended blessings upon Abdullah Khan and predicted that he would soon be master of Turkestan and Samarqand [8]. This encouraged him. Afterwards, Abdullah Khan set out to strengthen his position there and Unify Transoxiana.

Abdullah Khan led his first campaign against Qasbi and occupied it; the town was a dependency of Qarshi. It served as

a base for future conquest for him. After Qasbi Abdullah Khan launched an operation against Qarshi, which was ruled by Khudai Pirdi. After a prolonged siege, the forces of the latter fled, and Abdullah occupied the town of Qarshi. Soon after, the town of Shahr-i-Sabz also came under his control.

While Abdullah Khan was carrying out his expansionist policies, the reigning Khaqan, Abdul Latif, did nothing to prevent him. He died in 1551 [9]. Eventually, Neuroz Ahmed was appointed as the new Khaqan, since he was the eldest among the Uzbek Sultans. He lacked leadership qualities. Thus, the disunity among Uzbek sultans spread on a full-fledged scale during his regime. Pir Muhammad of Balkh and Burhan Sultan in Bukhara declared themselves as independent rulers. Neuroz Ahmed realised the gravity of the political situation in Transoxiana and decided to undertake measures to strengthen his hold over it. So, Neuroz Ahmed gathered forces and marched towards Samarqand in 1554, the town which he wanted to make his capital. He succeeded in occupying it, but its ruler, Sultan Abu Said, took shelter at Abdullah Khan and sought his assistance against Neuroz Ahmed. Abdullah Khan attempted to retain the town for Sultan Said but was unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Neuroz Ahmed decided to punish Abdullah Khan for his imperialistic behaviour. At that time, the latter was out of Miyankal and his father, Iskandar Khan, was governing the province. Neuroz Ahmed took Advantage of his absence and launched an attack on Miyankal. This time, destiny did not favour Abdullah Khan. Neuroz Ahmed's son, Baba Sultan, conquered Miyankal, Abdullah's paternal kingdom, along with the town of Shahr-i-Sabz. Qarshi was also lost to the invaders after a battle, although his forces fought bravely to defend the town, but their efforts proved futile. Eventually, Abdullah Khan sought refuge with Pir Muhammad Khan in Balkh [10].

However, fortune smiled upon Abdullah Khan when, in August 1555, Neuroz Ahmed turned his attention toward Bukhara. Its ruler, Burhan Sultan, sought Abdullah Khan's assistance against Neuroz Ahmed on the condition that, once Bukhara was saved from the invaders, it would be assigned to Abdullah Khan. Consequently, Abdullah Khan gathered his forces and defeated Neuroz Ahmed. Burhan Sultan kept his word, handed over Bukhara to Abdullah Khan, and withdrew to Qarakul. Yet this good fortune was short-lived; only a few days later, Burhan Sultan changed his mind and returned to Bukhara with a large army to expel Abdullah Khan. The latter's army deserted him, and he, with no choice, left the fort of Bukhara. Thus, Abdullah Khan found himself once again deprived of the military success that he had achieved. After some time, Neuroz Ahmed besieged Qarakul as their Amirs had revolted and asked Abdullah Khan for assistance against Neuroz Ahmed. However, the prolonged siege compelled the latter to negotiate a peace settlement with Abdullah Khan. Although he achieved some success this time but the terms of the treaty favoured his opponents. Neuroz Ahmed, overwhelmed by his success, celebrated it with great zeal and indulged in excessive drinking, which led to his death in 1556. His demise brought relief to Abdullah Khan. Subsequently, Pir Muhammad of Balkh, being the eldest among the Uzbek sultans, was declared as the new Khanqan.

After Pir Muhammad assumed Khaqanship, Abdullah Khan embarked to gather the scattered possessions of the Uzbek state ^[11]. He set out to recover his family appanage of Miyankal from Dost Muhammad (son of Neuroz Ahmed). The latter fled, and Abdullah Khan recovered his lost principality. Then he marched to occupy Shahr-i-Sabz and launched a night attack and occupied Shahr-i-Sabz. He also succeeded in giving Samarqand to its legitimate ruler in April 1557.

After that, Abdullah Khan besieged Bukhara; the siege persisted for a long time despite the hot weather. Burhan Sultan its ruler, offered tough resistance and sought the intervention of Khwajah Juibari for peaceful negotiation. Abdullah Khan agreed to Khawajah's wishes out of respect for them. Meanwhile, Burhan Sultan was murdered by nobles, since he was a tyrannical ruler and the nobles were fed up with him. Consequently, Abdullah Khan entered and occupied it. Then he set out towards Qarshi in 1558 and besieged it. But the siege persisted for two months. Consequently, the nobles of Abdullah Khan and Khudai Pirdi negotiated, and it was agreed that the town of Qarshi would be given to Abdullah Khan. Next, Abdullah Khan occupied Charjuy.

After subjugating Samarqand, Bukhara, and Qarshi, there was no ease for Abdullah Khan ^[12]. He was informed that Mirza Suliaman of Badakhshan had attacked Balkh ^[13], so Abdullah Khan advanced towards Balkh and reached Qarahulqam, where he met his uncle Pir Muhammad. Then the combined army of Uzbek attacked the vanguard of the enemy in the battle. Eventually, Mirza Suliaman was defeated, and his son Mirza Suliaman was captured and later, on the orders of Pir Muhammad, he was executed ^[14]. Afterwards, Pir Muhammad wanted to exchange the territory of Balkh with Abdullah's territory of Bukhara, as Balkh was vulnerable to foreign invasion since it shared borders with Badakhshan, Heart, and Khurasan. Abdullah Khan agreed with the proposal, but the exchange of provinces could not be done due to an outbreak of rebellion by Din Muhammad, son of Pir Muhammad, against his father. Pir Muhammad's inability to suppress the rebellion cleared the way for Abdullah, who took it as a suitable opportunity to occupy the town of Balkh, so he ended his uncle's regime and declared his independence in Bukhara. In 1560, he declared his father, Iskandar Khan, as Khaqan. However, as Iskandar Khan was a devout man who dedicated himself to religious observances and showed little inclination towards military or political affairs, Abdullah Khan effectively wielded full authority in his name. In this way, Abdullah Khan Uzbek became the de facto ruler of Uzbek Khanate in 1560 under the Khaqanship of his father ^[15], making Bukhara the capital.

For the first two years, Abdullah Khan refrained from striking coins and reading Khutba in his father Iskandar Khan's name; instead, he jointly mentioned his father's and His uncle Pir Muhammad's name in coins as Khaqan, to legitimise his authority. However, in 1562, he denounced his uncle's name and established complete control in the Uzbek Khanate under his father's name.

Unification and Consolidation of the Uzbek Empire (1651-83)

After proclaiming his father as *Khaqan*, Abdullah began his campaign to unify and consolidate the Uzbek Empire in Transoxiana. Following the death of Pir Muhammad, he appointed his son, Din Muhammad, as governor of Balkh. His primary goal was to strengthen both his own position and legitimize his father's authority over the Khanate. To achieve this, he sought to extend his influence over the other Uzbek sultans, which aroused their jealousy. At that time, Samarqand was ruled by the Kuchkunchid princes Sultan Said, Jawanmard, and Abul Khair while Tashkent and Turkestan were under the Suyunchid princes ^[16], Baba Sultan, Darvesh Sultan, and Tahir Sultan, sons of Nauroz Ahmad. After becoming the de facto ruler of Bukhara, Abdullah had to contend with these powerful sultans, who posed a constant threat to his hereditary domain of Miyankal.

His initial approach was pragmatic, so he avoided simultaneous confrontations and instead neutralizing one threat at a time. In 1567, the Samarqandi prince Abul Khair seized Shahr-i-Sabz from Khusrau, Abdullah's cousin and appointee. When Abdullah moved to reclaim the town, Bukhara and Miyankal came under threat from the combined forces of Samarqand, Tashkent, and Turkestan. Exercising patience and strategy, rather than engaging in a potentially ruinous multi-front conflict, he waited until conditions were favorable and regained Shahr-i-Sabz and Qarshi in 1569 after two years delay, and appointed his cousin Uzbek Sultan as their governor ^[17].

Abdullah then turned his attention to Balkh, where Din Muhammad had grown reluctant to support him against his rivals. After a nine-month siege, Abdullah occupied Balkh in July 1573, removed Din Muhammad from power, and annexed the province. In 1574, he also conquered Hisar, defeating and killing its ruler, Hashim Sultan ^[18].

His next target was Samarqand, as already noted, it was held by the Kuchkunchid princes, who repeatedly attacked Abdullah's territories in alliance with Baba Sultan. These princes were politically unstable, frequently switching allegiances between Baba Sultan and Abdullah. Despite their disloyalty, Abdullah initially treated them with generosity, hoping to secure their military cooperation when required. So, after defeating them, he refrained from annexing Samarqand and instead appointed Prince Abul Khair, a Kuchkunchid loyal to him, as governor under his suzerainty. However, Abul Khair soon turned against him. In November 1578, Abdullah decisively ended Kuchkunchid rule in Samarqand by defeating and killing Abul Khair and appointing his own brother Idadullah as governor ^[19], thereby completing its annexation.

The most difficult challenge for Abdullah was subjugating Tashkent and Turkestan, held by Suyunchid princes, led by his formidable rival Baba Sultan, who repeatedly threatened his authority in Miyankal and Bukhara. Abdullah initially sought to deal with him through peaceful means. In 1569, he granted Shahr Sabz to Baba Sultan in exchange for peace and allegiance. However, this peace proved short-lived. In 1570, Baba Sultan once again attacked Bukhara but was defeated by

Abdullah. Although he subsequently sought Abdullah's pardon and professed loyalty, Abdullah forgave him, so he was given several chances to retain his control over Tashkent and Turkestan, within Abdullah's suzerainty, but his apologies were never genuine. He repeatedly attacked Abdullah's territory and sought repeated forgiveness. Abdullah sought to ensure that Tashkent and Turkestan remained under Suyunchid administration while acknowledging his suzerainty; accordingly, he appointed Baba Sultan's brother, Darwesh Sultan, loyal to Abdullah but hostile to Baba as governor. But he was killed by Baba Sultan. The act was intolerable to Abdullah, prompting him to launch a military campaign to suppress Baba Sultan's rebellion. In 1582, Abdullah Khan successfully captured Tashkent and Turkestan, killing Baba Sultan^[20] and formally annexing both territories.

Abdullah's influence extended beyond his immediate rivals. He secured the cooperation of the Qazaqs by granting their chief, Shighai Khan, a fief in the Uzbek Khanate in exchange for military support. Shighai Khan's son, Tawakal, played a major role in defeating Baba Sultan. By securing the cooperation of the Qazaqs, he not only secured auxiliary military forces but also neutralised a potential northern threat for the time being. Similarly, Abdullah also campaigned against Khwarzm, compelling its princes to recognise Iskandar Khan as their overlord, thus establishing peace^[21]. In June 1583, upon the death of his father, Iskandar Khan, Abdullah was legitimised as Khaqan. He continued the consolidation of the Uzbek Empire and ruled Transoxiana until he died in 1598. Abdullah Khan also annexed Badakhshan, the last principality in Transoxiana that had been under the control of the Timurids until then. As he never forgot the hostility of its ruler, Mirza Shahrukh, who had previously attacked the Uzbek province of Balkh in 1579 with the help of a Kuchkunchid prince and a prince of Hisar. Although Shah Rukh had been defeated, Abdullah was angry and determined to chastise the Mirza for his hostile actions; moreover, Abdullah regarded him as a serious threat. However, at that time, he was engaged in campaigns against the Suyunchids, waited patiently for the right moment. That opportunity came in 1584, when internal conflict erupted in Badakhshan between its ruler, Mirza Sulaiman, and his grandson, Mirza Shahrukh. Abdullah Khan seized the opportunity, conquered the province, and expelled both rulers^[22], integrating the principality into his realm. This demonstrates his ability to exploit political instability beyond his borders for territorial expansion. With this, Abdullah Khan completed the unification of Transoxiana by bringing Bukhara, Balkh, Samarqand, Tashkent, Turkestan, and Badakhshan under his authority.

Conclusion

Through a combination of calculated diplomacy, decisive military campaigns, and strategic appointments, Abdullah Khan unified and consolidated the Uzbek Empire, bringing nearly all of Transoxiana under his direct or indirect control, establishing him as one of the most effective political leaders. His success lay not only in relentless conquest but also in his

ability to read the political landscape, intervene at opportune moments, and secure the cooperation of influential religious groups and key tribal factions.

Acknowledgement

The author is profoundly thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), New Delhi, India, for providing the funding that made this research possible.

References

1. Di Cosmo N, Frank AJ, Golden PB. *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p277.
2. Allworth EA. *The Modern Uzbeks: From the 14th Century to the Present*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press; 1990, p32–33.
3. Vambery A. *History of Bokhara from the Earliest Period Down to the Present*. London: Henry S. King and Co.; 1873, p244–245.
4. Burton A. The accession of Iskandar Khan. *J Br Inst Persian Stud*. 1994;32(1):111–114.
5. Burton A. *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History 1550–1702*. London: Curzon Press, 1997, p3–4.
6. Vambery A. *History of Bokhara from the Earliest Period Down to the Present*. London: Henry S. King and Co.; 1873. p. 280.
7. Haider M. Relations of Ubaidullah Khan with Persia (1510–1539). *Proc Indian Hist Cong*. 1967;29(2):190–195.
8. Burton A. *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History 1550–1702*. London: Curzon Press, 1997, p8–9.
9. Haider M. *Central Asia*. [Exact title of the work needed—assumed from context], p185.
10. Hafiz Tanish bin Mir Muhammad al-Bukhari. *Sharafnama-yi Shahi or Abdullahnama*. Tashkent: Institute of Oriental Studies, 41a.
11. Haider M. *Central Asia*, p186–192.
12. Adle C, Habib I, Baipakov KM, editors. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia: Development in Contrast: From the Sixteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 5. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2003, p40.
13. Haider M. *Central Asia*, p195–199.
14. Jenkinson A. *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*. Morgan ED, Coote CH, editors. Vol. 1. New York: Burt Franklin Publisher, 1886, p470.
15. Vambery A. *History of Bokhara from the Earliest Period Down to the Present*. London: Henry S. King and Co., 1873, p284.
16. Abul Fazl. *Ain-i-Akbari*. Vol. 1. Blochmann H, translator. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873, p312.
17. Burton A. *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History 1550–1702*. London: Curzon Press, 1997, p21–22.

18. Hafiz Tanish Bukhari. *Abdullahnama*. ff, 104a–108a.
19. Hafiz Tanish Bukhari. *Abdullahnama*. ff, 122b.
20. Hafiz Tanish Bukhari. *Abdullahnama*. ff, 178b–192b.
21. Burton A. *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History 1550–1702*. London: Curzon Press, 1997, p36, 43–44.
22. Abul Fazl. *The Akbar Nama*. Vol. 3. Beveridge H, translator. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1939, p665–666.