
The balance of power in the middle east: The prelude to the confrontation between timur and bayazid

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Abstract: This article explores the transformation of the balance of power in the Middle East on the eve of the historic confrontation between Timur (Tamerlane) and Bayazid I at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries. The study analyzes the political, economic, and military factors that shaped the geopolitical landscape of the region, emphasizing the rivalry between the Timurid Empire and the Ottoman state for dominance in Western Asia. Particular attention is devoted to the collapse of smaller regional powers, the shifting alliances among Muslim rulers, and the impact of trade routes and strategic territories on diplomatic relations. The research highlights that the conflict between Timur and Bayazid was not merely the outcome of personal ambitions but a reflection of deeper structural transformations in inter-state relations and regional power dynamics. By examining historical sources and contemporary interpretations, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the shifting balance of power influenced the course of late medieval Eurasian geopolitics and laid the groundwork for future international configurations.

Keywords: Timur, Bayazid I, Middle East, balance of power, Timurid Empire, Ottoman Empire, geopolitics, diplomacy, 14th century, medieval Eurasia.

Introduction: During his military campaigns from 1399 to 1404, Amir Temur conquered the major cities of Sham—Aleppo, Homs, Baalbek, Damascus—as well as the region of Ubulistan in Arab Iraq (ancient Cappadocia), along with Baghdad, and a significant portion of Asia Minor. In the Battle of Ankara, Temur defeated one of the greatest military leaders of the time, Yildirim Bayezid.

By this time, Yildirim Bayezid had subjugated the beyliks of Aydin, Mentеше, Garmian, Karaman, and Jandar, and after the death of Kaza Burhaneddin, he seized his lands as well, advancing as far as Malatya. Bayezid, known in history as the founder of the Ottoman Empire, also actively waged successful military campaigns in the Balkans. After the death of the Mamluk Sultan Barquq (1399), he incorporated several regions within Asia Minor into the sultanate, expanding the borders of his state to Erzincan and the Euphrates. Thus, for the first time, Amir Temur met a politically equal opponent.

In the territories forcibly subjugated by the Ottomans, their power had not yet consolidated. The former rulers nominally recognized Bayezid's supremacy, but in reality they were unwilling to submit and hoped to restore their former position with the support of a strong eastern patron. Therefore, they were interested in secretly supporting Temur's campaigns.

From his accession to the throne in 1389, Bayezid closely monitored the situation in the West but underestimated the processes unfolding in the East. His brilliant victory over the Crusaders in 1396 earned him enormous authority in the Islamic world. However, he limited himself to merely observing

the growth of Timur's empire and took no effective measures. When the Ottoman Empire's borders reached Erzincan and the Euphrates, he faced a real threat emanating from the east.

Main part: Historical chronicles and diplomatic documents indicate that there were no serious open conflicts between the two sides until 1399. Nevertheless, relations remained tense, reminiscent of a "cold war."

It was in this context, in 1399, when Timur was in close proximity to Asia Minor, that Yildirim Bayezid took an extremely risky step: he invaded the domains of the Emir of Erzincan, Mutahhar Bey, a staunch supporter of Timur. This act became the formal pretext for implementing Timur's plans. He himself regarded the invasion as an act of aggression against his own authority, as detailed in contemporary correspondence.

Sending an embassy to Mutahhar Bey while Timur was in the Bingöl (Ming-Köl) mountain pastures was an unwise move. Timur, however, skillfully took advantage of the favorable situation.

In his dealings with Bayezid, Temur demonstrated outstanding abilities as a commander and diplomat. According to L. Karen, "Temur's strategy was based primarily on the high mobility of his troops and the strict secrecy of his decisions, which invariably put his opponents in a difficult position."

Before launching an open struggle against Bayezid, it was necessary to systematically neutralize all of his allies. Although Tokhtamysh had already suffered defeat, the Mamluks of Egypt still remained a significant force in the region. They supported Sahibkiran's longtime rivals—the Turkmen Kor Yusuf and the ruler Akhmad Jalayir—and constantly pushed them toward confrontation with him. Fearing the unification of these forces and a possible attack from the rear, Amir Temur initially maintained a cautious approach in his relations with Sultan Bayezid.

In his letters, he reminded the Ottoman ruler of the need to continue the fight against the infidels, urged him not to disturb the rulers under his control, and demanded the extradition of his implacable enemies who had found refuge at the Ottoman court.

Nevertheless, it is known that Sahibkiran sincerely sought to establish good-neighborly relations and cooperation with the Turkish Sultan. But blinded by his successes in the West, Yildirim Bayezid failed to objectively assess the strength and capabilities of the Timurid army. Judging by the content of his letters and his statements to his confidants, he was far from having a realistic understanding of the situation.

Ibn Arabshah cites a characteristic example: when Bayezid read Timur's letter and realized the force of his appeal, he leaped to his feet in a rage, became enraged, and began speaking, sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly, alternately pronouncing:

"Is he trying to intimidate me with these words? Or does he want to stir up trouble in the people with lies? Does he consider me similar to the shahs of Ajam? Or classify me among the incomprehensible Dasht Tatars? Or perhaps he sees in my army Indian detachments, haphazardly assembled? Or does he think my warriors are the disorderly mobs of Iraq? Or does he compare my ghazis to Syrian soldiers? Or does he mistake his pitiful horde for a force equal to mine? Or does he not understand that I know all the details about him?..."

Bayezid's speech, replete with arrogant and insulting expressions, shows that, despite his knowledge of Timur's past victories, the Sultan had never learned the lessons of his numerous battles. Moreover, it becomes clear that he lacked a reliable intelligence system. This is precisely why Ibn Arabshah characterizes him thus: "Ibn Osman was a swift and courageous man; "Despite the justice of his rule, he lacked patience and restraint."

The Arab historian also notes Amir Temur's contrasting traits—his restraint and prudence. When Sahibkiran heard Bayezid's irritated response, he remarked: "Ibn Osman is a madman and a fool." Subsequent events confirmed the accuracy of Temur's assessment of the Ottoman Sultan's character.

At that time, neither in the West nor in the East did any army rival Sahibkiran's. According to the contemporary Syrian researcher Akrom Hasan al-Alabi, who analyzed Timur's numerous victories, his superiority was based on a number of key factors:

- numerical superiority of the army;
- comprehensive and accurate information about the enemy (intelligence);
- offensive warfare;
- high motivation and morale of the army;
- serious attention to propaganda and ideological preparation;
- Outstanding leadership and management skills of the commander.

It was precisely these characteristics that made Timur's army virtually invincible. Rulers who failed to recognize this—most notably Yildirim Bayezid—ultimately suffered defeat.

Ultimately, it became clear that the Ottoman Sultan Yildirim Bayezid rejected Amir Timur's conciliatory proposals and responded with a harsh letter. In his message, he claimed he had long intended to wage war against Sahibkiran and had now made his final decision. Moreover, Bayezid warned that if Timur did not confront him in the field, he would himself march on Tabriz and Sultonia.

Amir Temur carefully studied the situation in the Middle East. Following the death of Sultan Barquq, instability ensued in the Mamluk state, and Syria began to show signs of secession. To restore order, a new ruler, Sultan Faraj, arrived in Syria, managing to stabilize the situation and pacify opposition groups. Following these events, he sent envoys to Bayezid, demanding the return of the captured lands and warning of the inevitability of war if he refused. However, the Ottoman sultan did not give the expected response, and the embassy returned to Cairo empty-handed.

By this time, Amir Temur already had a well-established intelligence network. Having received secret information about these events, he immediately changed his plan of action. At that time, Yildirim Bayezid was engaged in the siege of Constantinople and preparing troops in Sivas. Seizing the opportunity, Sahibkiran decided to send his forces south. Subordinating the Mamluk lands to Temur's sultanate promised him significant material benefits. However, this move was also based on profound strategic calculations. Timur understood that if he advanced deep into Ottoman lands, the rulers of Baghdad, Egypt, and Syria, as well as the Kara Koyunlu tribes, could attack from the rear. Therefore, he adhered to a well-trying tactic: eliminating the enemy's allies one by one, using both military force and diplomacy. Moreover, he was confident that, preoccupied with the siege of Constantinople, Bayezid would be unable to provide assistance to his supporters.

After successfully resolving the situation in Georgia, Timur headed for the winter in Karabakh. Thus, by the summer of 1402, he was ready to launch a campaign against Asia Minor. Only after defeating all other opponents did he concentrate his forces against the Ottoman ruler. It is known that there was an active correspondence between the two sovereigns, initiated by Amir Timur. The tone of these messages was belligerent. The minor Anatolian rulers, who had lost their thrones due to Bayezid's expansion and found refuge with Sahibkiran, continually urged him to invade Ottoman territory. War was becoming inevitable.

Following negotiations with the Ottomans, Timur also exchanged letters with the kings of France and Castile, as well as with the Byzantine emperor. Samples of their correspondence are published in the book "From the History of Uzbek Diplomacy" (pp. 247–266), as well as in L. Karen and A. Saidov's "Amir Timur and France" (Tashkent, 1996, pp. 72–82). These materials are essential for understanding Timur's foreign policy and diplomatic contacts. The study of the history of the confrontation between Amir Timur and Bayezid also draws on the letters, memoirs of Archbishop John of the Eastern Catholic Church, and the travelogues of Clavijo. Both Europeans were firsthand witnesses to the war between the two great rulers.

It should be noted that Timur's correspondence with Western European monarchs and John's memoirs remained unknown to the general public for a long time. They were first introduced into scholarly circulation by the renowned orientalist Professor I.I.Umnyakov. Archbishop John's memoirs were later published in Uzbek.

On the eve of the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the exchange of embassies between Amir Temur and the rulers of Western Europe intensified significantly. Sahibkiran's subsequent correspondence with the French King Charles VI and the English King Henry IV particularly emphasized the idea of establishing trade and diplomatic ties between East and West.

In a letter in Persian addressed to Charles VI and dated 1 Muharram 805 AH (August 1, 1402), Temur wrote: "It would be desirable to send your merchants to our dominions—we will show them due respect and protection." In return, our merchants must receive the same guarantees from you—free from harassment and unjustified extortion, for "the world prospers thanks to merchants." It is noteworthy that this letter makes no mention of the victory over Bayezid, the common enemy of Timur and Charles VI.

I.I.Umnyakov explained this by saying that the letter was likely composed before the Battle of Ankara, and was dated and sent after the events.

In another letter, written in Latin and also addressed to Charles VI, Timur reports his victory. Both messages bear the same date—August 1, 1402. In this Latin letter, Timur emphasizes that Bayezid, by faith and law, should have been his ally, but he broke his word to him and his friends; therefore, having secured the support of the aforementioned monks and the promises of those under your control, we entered Turkish territory and, with God's help, quickly settled accounts with both Bayezid and his domains. In the same letter, Timur again insists on the mutual exchange of merchants and confirms the benefits of trade contacts for both sides. Thus, Sahibkiran's brilliant victory over the Ottoman Sultan opened a direct path to diplomatic and trade relations between the Middle East and Western Europe. Amir Temur's extensive campaigns across the Near and Middle East had a significant military and political impact on the region. First and foremost, a well-thought-out strategic plan was consistently implemented: disparate small feudal estates were subordinated to a single, strong authority, which reduced internal strife and senseless bloodshed. Security and relative peace were ensured for the population. Protracted bloody clashes and robberies were put to an end, particularly in Khorasan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Sham (Syria), and Asia Minor.

Here, it is important to emphasize one more thing. In many studies—including Soviet historiography—Sahibkiran's campaigns have often been interpreted as purely conquest and plunder. However, an unbiased look at the events reveals that Temur, as a rule (with the exception of Khorasan and Iran), did not seek to incorporate the conquered lands into his own state. In his campaigns to the countries of the Near and Middle East, he aimed to strengthen Sharia law, ensure the safety of pilgrims, protect trade routes and caravans, and curb highway robbery. Over time, these goals were achieved: the activities of robber rulers like the Turkmen leader Kara Yusuf were curbed.

Both in his address to Charles VI and earlier, in letters to Sultans Barquq and Faraj, Timur repeatedly insisted on the need to develop friendly relations and trade between the states. These intentions were put into practice after his victorious campaigns: the ancient caravan routes between East and West, primarily the Great Silk Road, were revived. Naturally, Sahibkiran strove to ensure that the main trade routes passed through Transoxiana and the capital, Samarkand. This deliberate move, which strengthened the country's economic power and the well-being of its residents, led to Samarkand gaining worldwide fame as the "adornment of the land."

Amir Timur's political activities in the Near and Middle East had significant international significance. By dealing a blow to the expansionist aspirations of the Golden Horde and the Ottoman Empire, Sahibkiran effectively protected the peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa from large-scale wars and enslavement. Thanks to his actions, the fragmented Russian principalities and Caucasian peoples liberated themselves from Mongol rule, while the countries of Europe and Egypt escaped Ottoman

aggression—all of this constitutes his significant contribution to world history.

Conclusion: These facts demonstrate that Soviet historians and other opponents of Sahibkiran were biased and one-sided in their assessment of his work, distorting historical reality to suit their own political goals. The emergence of new research and the opportunity for an objective understanding of the past, brought about by independence, require a new and comprehensive examination of Timur's political, social, and economic views.

Without a truthful account of events and a fair assessment of historical figures, it is impossible to fully understand the true goals and prospects of the future. In this context, studying the life and work of Amir Temur—the ruler who liberated our land from centuries-long Mongol rule, created an independent state, and transformed it into one of the most powerful powers of its time—plays a crucial role in educating the younger generation of Uzbekistan. It fosters national pride, spiritual richness, and a deep sense of patriotism.

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