

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foreign Policy of The Ilkhanate State: Strategic Directions and Diplomatic Relations

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Abstract

This article analyzes the foreign policy strategy of the Ilkhanate (Hulaguid) state, which dominated the Near East in the 13th–14th centuries. It examines the military rivalry with the Mamluk Sultanate, border conflicts with the Golden Horde, diplomatic relations with Western European states, and ties with the Mongol uluses the Yuan Dynasty and the Chagatai Ulus. The central theme of the article is the interrelationship between domestic governance and foreign diplomacy.

KEY WORDS

Ilkhanate, Hulaguids, Mamluks, Golden Horde, Chagatai Ulus, Ain Jalut, foreign policy, Mongol diplomacy, Near East.

INTRODUCTION

In medieval history, few states conducted such complex diplomatic relations simultaneously with four major political powers—the Mamluks, the Golden Horde, the Chagatai Ulus, and Western Europe—as the Ilkhanate (Hulaguid State). Founded by Hulagu Khan in 1256, the state encompassed the territories of present-day Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, and Anatolia, becoming one of the largest empires of the medieval period [1, pp. 45–67].

It would be inaccurate to characterize the foreign policy of the Ilkhanate merely as expansion through military conquest. In essence, this policy was multifaceted, flexible, and pragmatic. On the one hand, the state engaged in nearly half a century of military confrontation with the Mamluk Sultanate; on the other, it sought alliances with Western powers. Simultaneously, it faced intense border disputes with fellow Mongol uluses. Together, these developments constituted

interconnected political processes that shaped the foreign policy of the Ilkhanate [15, pp. 112–130].

METHOD

Relations with the Mamluk Sultanate

The most challenging and decisive direction of Ilkhanid foreign policy concerned relations with the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517). This rivalry began with the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260 and continued until the conclusion of a peace treaty in 1322 [8, pp. 1–25].

Following the capture of Baghdad in 1258 and the execution of the last Abbasid Caliph, al-Musta'sim, Hulagu Khan's armies advanced westward toward Syria and Egypt. However, this expansion was halted on 3 September 1260 in the Valley of Ain Jalut in Palestine [2, pp. 203–215]. As noted by Mark

Cartwright, the sudden death of the Great Khan Möngke compelled Hulagu Khan to return eastward, leaving only a relatively small force of approximately ten thousand troops in Syria under the command of Kitbuqa Noyan [11]. The Mamluk Sultan Sayf al-Din Qutuz and his commander Baybars skillfully exploited this strategic opportunity.

In his seminal monograph, Reuven Amitai-Preiss characterizes the battle as the event that formally initiated the prolonged geopolitical rivalry between the Mongols and the Mamluks [8, pp. 40–58]. Ain Jalut was not merely a single military engagement; it became a historical turning point that fundamentally reshaped the political map of the Near East.

Following Ain Jalut, the Ilkhanids launched several campaigns into Syria. In 1281, Abaqa Khan's forces suffered another defeat at the Battle of Homs. In 1299, Ghazan Khan temporarily occupied Aleppo and Damascus, although these gains proved short-lived. Finally, in 1303, the Ilkhanid army was decisively defeated at the Battle of Marj al-Saffar [5, pp. 118–135]. Mirzo Ulugbek described this pattern as a "repetition of continuous military failures" [5, p. 140].

During the reign of Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan (1316–1335), a formal peace treaty was concluded with the Mamluks in 1322. This agreement was motivated not by military defeat but by political necessity. As tensions intensified along the northern frontier with Özbeg Khan of the Golden Horde, stabilizing the southern front became a crucial strategic priority [11].

Border Conflicts with the Golden Horde

The second major direction of Ilkhanid foreign policy involved relations with the Golden Horde. Initially, these relations were expected to be based on Mongol fraternal solidarity; however, they soon evolved into deep political conflicts [1, pp. 310–325].

The first signs of tension appeared as early as 1258. Hulagu Khan's destruction of Baghdad and the execution of the last Abbasid Caliph provoked the anger of Berke Khan (1257–1266), the Muslim ruler of the Golden Horde.

According to Rashid al-Din Hamadani, the conflict was not solely religious in nature. Material disputes, including disagreements over the division of spoils from northern Iran and attempts to restrict the sale of slaves to the Mamluk Sultanate, also played a significant role [2, p. 567]. In 1262, at the Battle of the Terek River, Hulagu Khan's forces suffered a major defeat at the hands of an army commanded by Nogai

of the Golden Horde. This battle marked the formal beginning of the period of internal wars within the Mongol Empire [10, pp. 145–160].

At the beginning of Abaqa Khan's reign (1265–1282), the Ilkhanate faced renewed attacks from Berke Khan. In 1270, Barak Khan, ruler of the Chagatai Ulus, invaded Khurasan, but Abaqa Khan defeated him near Herat [11].

Relations with the Golden Horde remained contentious into the fourteenth century. In 1357, Jani Beg Khan temporarily occupied Tabriz, the former Ilkhanid capital, symbolizing the definitive end of the Ilkhanid political legacy [14, p. 198].

Diplomatic Relations with Western Europe

The third major direction of Ilkhanid foreign policy involved diplomatic relations with the Christian powers of Western Europe. These contacts are commonly referred to as the "Franco-Mongol Alliance Project" [13, pp. 1–30].

The ideological basis of these diplomatic efforts was straightforward: both sides shared a common enemy in the Mamluk Sultanate. While the Crusaders aspired to reclaim Jerusalem, the Ilkhanids sought to conquer Syria. Consequently, cooperation appeared mutually beneficial [13, pp. 45–70].

Abaqa Khan (1265–1282) was among the most active Ilkhanid rulers in fostering diplomatic contacts with the West. He dispatched envoys to the Papacy and various European monarchs in pursuit of coordinated military action. In 1271, a commercial treaty was concluded with Venice [11].

Arghun Khan (1284–1291) continued this policy. In 1288, a trade agreement was signed with Genoa [13, pp. 165–180]. Arghun's most famous envoy, Rabban Bar Sauma, a Nestorian Christian monk from China, traveled to Europe between 1287 and 1288, meeting King Philip IV of France, Pope Nicholas IV, and King Edward I of England. Nevertheless, the proposed military alliance never materialized.

Several factors contributed to its failure. First, geographical distance and communication difficulties posed substantial obstacles; an envoy traveling from Tabriz to Paris required several months to complete the journey [12, p. 212]. Second, mutual distrust intensified after Ghazan Khan officially embraced Islam in 1295 [7, p. 89]. Third, strategic incompatibility prevented European powers from coordinating their actions with Mongol military plans [8, pp. 210–225].

Although the military alliance failed, commercial relations

flourished. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Tabriz emerged as one of the principal commercial hubs linking East and West. Venetian, Genoese, and other Italian merchants established permanent trading colonies in the city [6, p. 45]. David Morgan argues that these commercial connections proved more significant than political relations, as military cooperation failed whereas trade networks demonstrated remarkable durability [15, p. 190].

Relations with the Chagatai Ulus and the Yuan Dynasty

The Chagatai Ulus (1227–1363) represented one of the most difficult neighbors of the Ilkhanate. Controlling Central Asia and eastern Khurasan, it posed a constant threat to the eastern frontiers of the Ilkhanid state [9, p. 340].

The most serious confrontation occurred in 1270, when Barak Khan invaded Khurasan with an army of approximately thirty thousand troops. Historians generally regard this campaign as a strategic attempt to secure control over the commercial and agricultural resources of eastern Khurasan [4, p. 78]. Pressure from the Chagatai Ulus forced the Ilkhanids to wage a two-front struggle—against the Mamluks in the west and the Chagataids in the east.

Formally, after 1260, the Ilkhanids recognized Kublai Khan (1260–1294) as the Great Khan. The Yuan court officially confirmed Ilkhanid accessions to the throne, while early Ilkhanid coinage was minted in the name of the Great Khan, reflecting this relationship of nominal subordination [5, p. 98].

In his *History of the Four Uluses*, Mirzo Ulugbek emphasized that the most stable inter-Mongol relations existed between the Ilkhanate and the Yuan Dynasty. Since both ruling houses descended from Tolui, kinship ties contributed significantly to strengthening diplomatic relations [5, p. 102].

Rashid al-Din Hamadani also relied extensively on Chinese sources when composing the Chinese history section of his monumental *Jami' al-Tawarikh*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Ilkhanate achieved several important objectives in the sphere of foreign policy.

First, the half-century-long military rivalry with the Mamluk Sultanate constituted one of the most significant strategic challenges faced by the Ilkhanids. The Battle of Ain Jalut (1260) halted Mongol westward expansion, while the peace treaty of 1322 emerged from economic and strategic necessity

rather than military defeat.

Second, persistent border conflicts with both the Golden Horde and the Chagatai Ulus compelled the Ilkhanids to maintain simultaneous military commitments on two fronts. This situation substantially constrained their capabilities in the struggle against the Mamluks.

Third, the projected military alliance with Western Europe never materialized. Nevertheless, commercial and economic relations developed successfully. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Tabriz became the principal western transit center of the Silk Road.

Fourth, a direct relationship existed between foreign policy and domestic governance. The success of Ghazan Khan's reforms enhanced the international prestige of the state, whereas the internal political instability during the reign of Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan weakened the effectiveness of Ilkhanid diplomacy.

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