

**DIPLOMATIC DEXTERITY: MONGOL QAGHANS OF THE YUAN  
DYNASTY AND THE QUEST FOR EAST ASIAN HEGEMONY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the foreign policy and diplomacy pursued by the Mongol Khans during the Yuan Dynasty (1268-1369), who held the titles of both Mongol qaghan and Chinese Emperor. Specifically, Qubilai Qaghan, who received the title of Khan at a qurultai held in the city of Shangdu, located in present-day Beijing, rather than the Orkhon region traditionally used for convening qurultais, and without the participation of all Mongol nobles, had to establish his legitimacy throughout his life both among the Mongols and the people he conquered in Asia. For this purpose, he utilized diplomacy and foreign policy as much as conquests. Within the scope of this study, the rhetoric and legitimacy foundations used in diplomacy are examined, taking into account not only the Goryeo kingdom in Korea, which became a vassal of the Mongol Empire but also regional states such as Japan, which did not acknowledge Mongol superiority and dominion, as well as diplomacy conducted with states in Southeast Asia and Europe. During this period, the Yuan Dynasty successfully blended elements of legitimacy belonging to China with those from the Turkic-Mongol tradition in its foreign policy, thereby leaving a lasting diplomatic legacy, especially in East Asia.

**Keywords:** Yuan Dynasty, Mongol Empire, diplomacy, China, Japan, Korea.

## INTRODUCTION

There is very little debate regarding when the Yuan dynasty ended. The establishment of the Ming Dynasty in China following the Mongols' defeat due to uprisings in China is traditionally assumed as the end of the Yuan dynasty. Although it is known that the Yuan Dynasty continued for a while longer in Mongolia under the name Dayan (Dayuan/大元), the year 1369 is generally accepted as an end date. On the other hand, the founder of the Yuan dynasty is a subject of debate, especially among Chinese historians. While many historians agree that Qubilai Qaghan was the founder of the Yuan dynasty, in Chinese historiography, the Yuan dynasty is sometimes started with Chinggis Qaghan, who, although not claiming to establish a dynasty, is honored in official histories with the title Taizu (太祖: great ancestor) (Zhou and Gu, 2003). Qubilai Qaghan, titled Yuan Shizu (元世祖) in the official history of the dynasty he founded, Yuanshi (元史), only finds a place in the fourth order.

However, the Yuan Dynasty is an exception both in the context of Chinese history and world history. Therefore, in this study, instead of the anachronistic viewpoint that sees the Mongols, Uighurs, Tibetans, Manchus, and now-extinct peoples like the Khitan and Tangut as extensions of Chinese history and thus China, an approach is adopted that aligns with the theory of North Asian peoples, which is accepted in Japan and the West (Sugiyama, 2011: 12–17). In this context, it is appropriate to start the foundation of the Yuan Dynasty with Qubilai Qaghan, because only Qubilai and his successors acted as a state with China at the center of their policies. Neither for Chinggis Qaghan nor for the qaghans preceding Qubilai, such as Ögödei and Möngke, was the center of gravity of the empire they ruled China. All three claimed to be the qaghan not of China, but of the Mongols and other nomads (Atik, 2018: 32). Indeed, it is Qubilai Qaghan who gave the dynasty the name 'Yuan,' and he also moved the capital from Karakorum to Shangdu (上都), where Beijing is located today. However, following Möngke's death, Qubilai Qaghan was elected as qaghan in a qurultai held not in the Orkhon region, considered sacred by all Turkic and Mongol tribes except the Kyrgyz (for whom the sacred region is Yenisei), but in Shangdu, where modern-day Beijing is located (Drompp, 1999: 47). This has had irreversible effects both for the Mongol Empire in general and for the Tului Ulus, which will henceforth be referred to as the Yuan Dynasty. After Möngke's death, Qubilai Qaghan convened a qurultai in Shangdu, which most of the Mongol nobles did not attend; his brother Ariq Boke, on the other hand, held a qurultai in Karakorum, the capital of the Mongols (Allsen, 1994: 147). Ultimately, the two brothers engaged in conflict, and although Qubilai Qaghan emerged victorious, from this point onward, the already tense relations among the Mongol ulus, named after the sons of Chinggis Qaghan, became further estranged (Xiao, 2010: 98). From this point onward, the Yuan Dynasty founded by Qubilai Qaghan entered into conflict with the Ilkhanate ruled by his brother Hülegü, as well as with Qaidu, the grandson of Ögödei, and the Chagatai and Golden Horde Khanates. This situation had both direct and indirect effects on Yuan-era foreign policy. From the time of Qubilai Qaghan, one of the main factors shaping the foreign policy of Yuan rulers was to have themselves recognized as the Qaghan of the Mongols.

## THE GRAND STRATEGY OF QUBILAI QAGHAN: A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF THE SONG DYNASTY

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In this context, it was necessary for Qubilai Qaghan to establish a position of superiority primarily over his rival, the Song Dynasty, and its allies. The Song Dynasty was the state that had resisted the Mongols the longest, a place that neither Chinggis Qaghan nor his successors could conquer despite multiple campaigns (to this would later be added Egypt and some other East Asian countries). In this regard, conquering the Song Dynasty was a unique opportunity for Qubilai Qaghan to prove his ‘qut’ (Mongolian: *süü*) and establish himself as a genuine Qaghan in the eyes of other Mongol leaders. Among the Turks and Mongols, one of the indicators of having received “qut” was the conquest of new territories (Tao, 2014: 45). Despite its establishment in northern China and its later conquest of the nine southern kingdoms, thereby putting an end to the emerging state system in Asia based on equality, the Song Dynasty lost Northern China to the Jürchen Jin Dynasty. However, Southern China, which during the Tang Dynasty was a place of exile where, according to Confucian rules, state officials were not to be executed but were expected to die in exile, reached a level of development comparable to Northern China during the period of the Five Dynasties. This was due to both northerners who settled there to escape war and the developing economic and trade relations (Clark, 2009: 157). After withdrawing from Northern China, which was first weakened by wars and raids in conflicts with the Khitans and then conquered by the Jürchens, the Song Dynasty focused its economic, social, and political development on the provinces of Southern China. The influence of statesmen from Fujian in the imperial court also played a significant role in this shift (Lim, 2010: 37). With its maritime trade with Southeast and West Asia, dense population, and temperate climate allowing for multiple rice harvests per year, Southern China rapidly developed economically, providing the Song Dynasty with a large population, a strong economy, and the resources to sustain a large army. Indeed, the Song Dynasty alone was larger than the entire Mongol Empire in terms of population and economic capacity (Sugiyama, 2010: 42). However, the real danger that the Song Dynasty posed for Qubilai Qaghan was ideological, despite its army nearing one million and its massive navy, which was likely the largest ever assembled up to that point. The almost machine-like Mongol army was making slow but steady progress in Southern China. Yet the real danger for the Mongols, who were more accustomed to field battles and had never before in their history governed large cities and a sedentary population of this size, was the potential for the local population to rebel against their authority. Qubilai Qaghan wisely knew that he needed to leverage what was known among Turkic and Mongol peoples as “qut/süü” and by the Chinese as “Tianming” (天命) in his favor (Tao, 2014: 72). About seventy years after him, the Mongols were easily expelled from China by a rebel who managed to gain popular support, which vindicates his foresight. The Neo-Confucianism that emerged during the Song period, which became even more fervent after the loss of Northern China, considered the homeland of the Chinese, to the Jürchens, was influential not only in the Song State but also in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and had become

state ideology (Atik, 2012a: 108). This view, which also regarded the Khitans and Jürchens before the Mongols as barbarians, opposed the assumption of civilizing barbarians and advocated that civilized people should resist nomadic barbarians at all costs, without submitting to them (Atik, 2012b: 102). However, the adoption of such a view among the populace could have been extremely perilous for Mongol sovereignty. While they had successfully conquered China and Korea, the Mongols' dominance in these regions could not be sustained without the cooperation of the local populations. Therefore, after emerging victorious in his struggle against his brother Ariq Böke and gaining relative acceptance among other Mongols, Qubilai Qaghan faced his greatest military and diplomatic challenge in the form of the Song Dynasty and its allies. Diplomatic efforts to persuade Japan, Korea, and Vietnam to abandon their alliances with the Song were unsuccessful, except in the case of Korea. Indeed, until the Mongols captured the Song Dynasty, Qubilai Qaghan knew that he could not secure the southern border militarily from both the north and the south. Nevertheless, during the same period, Qubilai Qaghan initiated a containment operation, venturing westward through Tibet and then moving westward, conquering the small kingdoms in that region. This move effectively cut off the Song Dynasty from Vietnam, Burma, and other Southeast Asian states and placed the Song armies in a pincer between the Mongols from the north and the south.

However, when Möngke Qaghan died during this campaign, Qubilai Qaghan was forced to return, hold a qurultai to consolidate power, and assert his superiority over his brother, Ariq Böke. Ultimately, he entered Hangzhou in his last campaigns against the Song, capturing the majority of the imperial family. However, the last remnants of the Song forces, along with a prince who claimed to be the last Song emperor (as declared by those who had fled Hangzhou), initially took refuge in Fujian. Later, unable to hold their position there, they attempted to escape to Vietnam, but they did not receive the support they had hoped for from the Dai Viet Kingdom in Vietnam. Finally, they were defeated by the Mongol navy off the coast of Hainan Island. The prince who claimed to be the last Song emperor died in this battle. What is significant in terms of diplomacy here is that, up until almost the last moment, both Qubilai Qaghan, who claimed to be both a Mongol Qaghan and a Yuan Emperor, and the Song Dynasty, refrained from recognizing each other's superiority, just as the previous Liao and Jin Dynasties had existed alongside the Song Dynasty. The Song Dynasty resisted this proposal until the very end, only agreeing when the Mongols arrived at Hangzhou, but by then, it was too late.

The reasons for the Song Dynasty's rejection of this offer were mostly related to domestic politics. Jiao Sidao and his supporters, who came to power internally, were staunch Neo-Confucianists. The rival groups held similar views, and no political group in power advocated reconciliation with the Mongols. Furthermore, Jiao Sidao (賈似道) had exaggerated the military situation to the court, even though he had been defeated in Sichuan. Effective politicians in the Song court were not fully aware of the true extent of Mongol military power. However, what is interesting here is that despite his military power, Qubilai Qaghan's

concerns were not primarily military. This is evident because Qubilai Qaghan later sent large armies to Japan, Vietnam, Burma, and Java. The Song Dynasty accepting his superiority willingly, rather than through military force, would have given Qubilai Qaghan a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese and other settled subjects. For the Mongols and their nomadic subjects, only conquest would prove his “qut”. This situation is more related to the legitimacy of dynastic changes in China. One of the strongest indicators that the new emperor possessed “tianming” was the voluntary abdication of the last emperor of the previous dynasty in favor of the new emperor, with an announcement that the heavens had blessed this emperor. From the fall of the Han Dynasty onwards, every new dynasty has sought to obtain such a proclamation from the last emperor of the previous dynasty. In this sense, Qubilai Qaghan acted more like a Chinese emperor than a Mongol qaghan. Neither his grandfather Chinggis Qaghan nor his uncle Ögödei or his brother Möngke had such a perception of legitimacy. As a result, the young emperor captured in Hangzhou was respected. The imperial family was kept under surveillance in the palace in Shangdu, with their incomes preserved. The last emperor became a monk in a Tibetan monastery. Thus, although he fulfilled the conditions necessary to be a traditional Chinese emperor (huangdi: 皇帝), at least in appearance, Qubilai Qaghan’s legitimacy concerns persisted. Surrounded by other Mongol khanates in the west and north, during the reign of Qubilai, the Yuan Dynasty saw that it had no opportunity to obtain Central Asia through war, as the wars against Qaidu had shown. In fact, after taking over the Song territories, the Yuan Dynasty did not need to conquer other countries in terms of population, economy, or land size. None of the other countries that were invaded were as large as the territories taken from the Song Dynasty. Nevertheless, during the reign of Qubilai, military campaigns continued to accompany diplomacy.

## **FROM CONQUEST TO KINSHIP: THE MONGOLS’ STRATEGY OF MARITAL ALLIANCES IN EAST ASIA**

The Mongols’ dominance in Korea, which they had conquered relatively early, relied largely on military power. The Mongols had to make several campaigns to suppress rebellions in Korea. The Goryeo Dynasty, which ruled over the Korean Peninsula, and after which the country is named today, claimed to be the continuation of the earlier Goguryeo (高句麗) Dynasty, which had previously ruled in Manchuria and the northern part of Korea. However, the Goryeo Dynasty, which ruled over a slightly larger territory than present-day Korea, was aware that it was not as powerful as Goguryeo had been. Unlike Goguryeo, which had defeated the powerful Tang Dynasty and the Türk Qaghanate and had not been subject to either of them until its demise, the Goryeo Dynasty acknowledged the superiority of the Liao and Jin Dynasties, founded by the Khitans and Jürchens. The strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula, serving as a buffer zone of sorts between Japan, China, and Manchuria, as well as providing the best bases for an attack from any of these three regions, if desired, to attack the others, has long been recognized. Attempting to take the

Goryeo Kingdom under control only militarily or only diplomatically was not feasible. Indeed, when the Japanese tried in the late 16th century with the Joseon Kingdom in Korea which replaced Goryeo, they failed. The Mongols, like the Khitans and Jürchens before them, resorted to a combination of brute force and diplomacy. After defeating the Korean king, the Mongols not only allowed him to remain on the throne but also protected the dynasty. Furthermore, Qubilai Qaghan married his daughter to the Korean crown prince and sent him back to Korea (where he had been held hostage in Beijing and had become close friends with Qubilai Qaghan) with Mongol troops to ensure a smooth transition. Subsequently, all Goryeo kings married Mongol princesses, and political loyalty was further cemented through both maternal and marital relationships. Relations with Korea and the Uighurs were crucial for the Mongols.

Unlike the Chinese, who were reluctant to marry the female members of the dynasty to foreigners and only did so when forced, the Mongols used marriage diplomacy very effectively. Throughout the Yuan Dynasty, many members of the dynasty married women from vassal states (Korean kings, Uighur Idiquts), thus binding these rulers to the dynasty through marriage ties. Additionally, in Southeast Asia, Western Asia, and India, some rulers were married to noble Mongol women. Indeed, the mysterious “Turkic-speaking” Queen of Khimer (Cambodia) mentioned in Ibn Battuta’s travelogue was probably one of them (Ibn Batuta, 2015: 237). However, the Yuan dynasty is an exception both in terms of Chinese history and world history. Therefore, in this study, the theory of North Asian peoples widely accepted in Japan and the West is adopted instead of the anachronistic perspective that considers the Mongols, Uighurs, Tibetans, Manchus, and extinct peoples like the Khitans and Tanguts as extensions of Chinese history, and therefore, as extensions of China.

In this context, it is correct to start the establishment of the Yuan dynasty with Qubilai Qaghan, because only Qubilai and his successors acted as a state that placed China at the center of their policies. Neither Chinggis Qaghan nor Ögödei and Möngke before Qubilai Qaghan considered China as the center of the empire they ruled, and all three claimed to be the qaghans of the Mongols and other nomadic peoples, not of China (Cleaves, 1982: 21). Furthermore, the Mongols did not see any issue in marrying the daughters of smaller states or tribes. Like their predecessors, the Khitans and Jürchens, they selected their chief consorts from specific tribes, especially the Önggüt, but they also had Korean, Uighur, and Chinese wives (there are distinctions between concubines and official wives, and they should not be confused). Unlike the political marriages in the Golden Horde with the Byzantines and Mamluks, in the Yuan Dynasty, no political marriages were arranged with any country that did not submit to the Mongols. This sets the Yuan Dynasty apart, distinguishing it from both other Mongol Khanates and other states (Zhang, 2013: 12). Certainly, in this regard, the Yuan Dynasty’s geographical proximity to only the Mongol Khanates outside of Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, and the fact that none of its neighboring states posed a threat, played a significant role. Although Qubilai Qaghan’s campaigns against Japan, Vietnam, Burma, and Java ended in defeat, none of these states

had the capability to acquire territory from the Yuan Dynasty. In fact, apart from Japan and Java, the others, despite winning battles, recognized Qubilai Qaghan as their superior, realizing that further conflicts with the Mongols would not benefit them (Atik, 2021: 24). In this sense, it can be said that the Yuan rulers primarily used marriage strategies to exert control over their allies.

Korea, compared to Japan, held much greater strategic importance for the Yuan Dynasty. In addition to being a wealthy country, the Korean Peninsula, due to its geographical location, has historically served as a crucial passage and control point between Japan, Manchuria, and China. As mentioned earlier, it is impossible to think of the Mongols' Japanese policy during the Yuan period without considering Korea. For the Mongols, along with Anatolia, one of the most strategically important vassal states was the Goryeo Kingdom in Korea. In fact, despite the challenges they faced in Anatolia due to the resistance of the Turkmen principalities against the Mongols, they assigned some of their most important generals to the task of gaining control over Anatolia (Agirnasli, 2018: 247–249). Similarly, in Korea, the Mongols were not only interested in plunder but also in controlling the Korean Peninsula. The primary reason for this was not just because the Korean Peninsula's geographical location made it suitable for controlling Manchuria, Japan, and Northeast China. The Mongols saw the conquest of Manchuria, the ancestral homeland of the Jürchens who founded the Jin Dynasty, as a safer way to enter China. By doing so, they aimed to prevent the Jurchens and other potential threats, including the Khitans who were still living in Manchuria, from attacking the Mongol army from behind when it was on a campaign or looting Mongol territory.

The Mongols also considered the linguistic, cultural, and lifestyle similarities between the Koreans and certain groups in the region, such as the Tungusic tribes, to be advantageous. These groups had historical ties similar to the Mongols and Turks. The Mohe people, for instance, were a group that lived in Manchuria and founded Balhae, and later, they would take on the names Jürchens and Manchus (Yildirim, 2018: 11–26). These groups shared linguistic and lifestyle similarities with each other and with the Koreans. The Balhae and its successor, the Goryeo Kingdom, ruled over Tungusic tribes in the region, known as Malgal, who would later become the Jürchens and Manchus. When the Khitans conquered Balhae in 927, many Korean and Tungusic refugees sought refuge in the Goryeo Kingdom, which accepted them. In response, the Goryeo Kingdom resisted the Khitans, even imprisoning the Khitan envoys and starving the camels they had offered as gifts by tying them to a bridge known as the Manbu Bridge (Choi, 2014). This led to Khitan campaigns against Goryeo starting in 947. The Goryeo kings had earlier rejected a joint attack proposal by the Song Dynasty against the Khitans and later, in 996, ended the war by marrying a Khitan princess. The conflict ended without a clear victory for either side, but the Khitans ceded the region up to the Yalu River, where some Malgal tribes lived, to Goryeo.

The relationship between Goryeo and the Khitans was complex, involving both conflict and cooperation. It's important to note that while these events

were taking place, the Goryeo Kingdom considered itself a “sibling” state to the Khitans. Later, when the Jürchens founded the Qing Dynasty, they did not heavily pressure Goryeo either. When the Qing Dynasty was first established, it sought to establish a “sibling” relationship with Goryeo. However, the Joseon Dynasty, which existed at the time, remained loyal to the Ming Dynasty and, influenced by Neo-Confucianism, resisted the Qing Dynasty, leading to conflicts.

So, the Mongols’ interest in controlling Korea was not only due to its strategic location but also because of the historical, cultural, and political factors in the region, including its relationships with neighboring states like the Khitans and Jürchens (Atik, 2012b: 203). When viewed in this context, the control of Korea was also important for controlling Manchuria. Since the Song Dynasty had not yet been overthrown by the time of Qubilai Qaghan’s reign, if Korea and Japan allied themselves, they could potentially encircle the Mongols in the northeast. However, the Mongols realized that in both of their invasions of Korea, despite the Korean military being defeated in battles, the guerrilla warfare tactics employed by the Koreans with popular support allowed them to wear down the Mongols in the long run. In 1258, after Choi Ui, who ruled the country on behalf of the king, passed away in Japan, the Goryeo Kingdom negotiated peace with the Mongols and sent Crown Prince Wonjong to the Yuan Dynasty.

In 1260, when Qubilai Qaghan became Qaghan, he not only arranged the marriage between his daughter and Wonjong but also sent this prince, who had grown up in the Yuan court, along with his daughter and the Mongol army to Korea, to ensure his succession after his father’s death. From that point on, all Goryeo kings not only became “küregen,” meaning a son-in-law of the Mongols but also gave their daughters to Mongol Khans in marriage. Like other Inner Asian and Turkic tribes, such as the Önggüts and Uighurs, who had similar relationships, the Koreans were integrated into the hierarchical structure of Mongol nations, and they held an exceptional status above the Chinese in this system.

After defeating the Song Dynasty, Qubilai Qaghan and his successors were determined not to allow the continuation of the Song Dynasty. Despite sparing the last Song Emperor’s life and allowing him to become a Buddhist monk, they eventually executed him. Qubilai Qaghan’s and his successors’ policies towards Korea were undoubtedly influenced not only by affection for the Koreans but also by their desire to control Manchuria and their importance as intermediaries with Japan. The success of the Quda-Küregen diplomacy between the Mongols and Goryeo played a significant role in the central role that Goryeo played in Yuan Dynasty’s foreign policy. This was not only due to the kinship relationships established between the two dynasties through Quda-Küregen diplomacy but also because Goryeo was the first regional state to recognize the Mongols as the possessors of the Tianming or Qut (divine mandate), which was highly significant.

## IMPERIAL SEMANTICS AND MARITIME STRATEGY: UNDERSTANDING THE YUAN DYNASTY'S DIPLOMATIC OVERTURES TOWARD JAPAN

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Japan holds a special place in Yuan dynasty diplomacy. Starting with Qubilai Qaghan, special attention was given to relations with Japan. Although Japan had been influenced culturally, socially, and economically by China from the beginning, it did not adopt the China-centric system. While Chinese emperors used the title “huangdi” (皇帝) for the emperor, the Japanese referred to their rulers as “tennô” (天皇), which means heavenly sovereign. Similar to the diplomatic rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, neither Chinese emperors agreed to address Japanese rulers as equals nor did Japanese rulers accept the title “wang” (王: king), which is of lower rank than the Chinese emperor.

There were only two instances in history where China and Japan clashed before the modern era. One occurred during the Tang Dynasty when Japan's allies, Baekje and Gaya kingdoms, fought against the Tang Dynasty's ally, Silla, in Korea. The other happened in the 16th century when Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea, leading to confrontations between Japanese and Chinese forces. In both cases, Japan ended up on the losing side, although during the Imjin Wars that began in 1592, Japanese forces defeated Chinese forces but were unable to advance due to the resistance led by Korean admiral Yi Sun-sin and Korean insurgents. Eventually, they withdrew after Toyotomi Hideyoshi's death. Throughout their history, the Japanese only once acknowledged the superiority of a Chinese emperor, and that was during the Yuan Dynasty (Nagai, 1984: 67). In this context, a state that had never recognized any Chinese dynasty as the Middle Kingdom, considering itself equal to China, to acknowledge the superiority of China would undoubtedly provide the Mongols with a significant political advantage within China (Gulez, 2023: 193). However, Japan was politically tumultuous during this period. The real authority had fallen into the hands of Yoritomo Minamoto, who established his capital in Kamakura, before passing to the Hôjô clan, which served as regents for the Minamoto clan after Yoritomo's death. Additionally, local feudal lords (daimyo) were gaining strength, and both the imperial government in Kyoto and the shogunate government in Kamakura were losing their influence over these feudal lords. Unaware of this complexity, the Mongols unintentionally posed a threat to the shogunate's authority by bypassing the bakufu and establishing direct communication with the emperor, which would later be seen when Emperor Go Daigo rebelled, leading to the downfall of the Kamakura shogunate.

While the emperors may have appeared to lack significant power outside Kyoto and its surroundings for approximately two centuries, they still had the potential to be a threat to the shogunate. Therefore, the Mongols' letter sent to the “King of Japan” had the potential to create a political crisis. Although the emperor had the letter forwarded to the shogunate to avoid antagonizing them, and the Hôjô clan, as the regents, were tasked with handling the matter, they were uncertain about how to approach the situation while also dealing with internal

unrest (Kasamatsu et al., 1981: 97). In Qubilai Qaghan's letter to the Japanese emperor, apart from addressing the Japanese emperor as the "Japanese king," there was nothing objectionable. Unlike their demands from other countries, the Mongols did not request tribute, submission, or the enlistment of Japanese in the Mongol armies, nor did they ask for a population census to be conducted as if Japan were a province of the Mongol Empire. The letter simply expressed the desire to reestablish relations, promote trade, facilitate the exchange of diplomatic envoys, and establish friendship between the two nations. It did not contain any overt threats of war or invasion. This letter was probably the most conciliatory in tone that a Mongol qaghan had ever written to a foreign ruler, excluding those written to the Khwarezmshah Muhammad before the war. Qubilai Qaghan's letters to the Pope or the French King, in contrast, were more assertive, demanding submission and carrying a tone of threat.

However, it should not be inferred from this that the Mongols considered the Japanese as equals or were afraid of them. After their victory over the Khwarezmshahs, the Mongol khans did not consider any ruler their equal. They believed that having received the "qut" (divine grace), they were tasked by God to be the masters of the entire world. Therefore, while the Mongols' initial actions towards the Japanese may have seemed audacious, and the Japanese did not respond to the first letter and later killed Mongol envoys, it is important to explain the diplomatic etiquette that was not extended to rulers of small states like Japan during that period. The original text of the letter is as follows:

“上天眷命大蒙古國皇帝奉書日本國王朕惟自古小國之君境土相接，務講信修睦。況我祖宗受天明命，奄有區夏，遐方異域，畏威懷德者不可悉數。朕即位之初，以高麗無辜之民，久瘁鋒鏑，即令罷兵，還其疆域，反其旄倪。高麗君臣感戴來朝，義雖君臣，歡若父子。計王之君臣亦已知之高麗朕之東藩也。日本密邇高麗，開國以來，亦時通中國。至於朕躬，而無一乘之使，以通和好。恐王國知之未審，故特遣使持書布告朕志，冀自今以往，通問結好，以相親睦。且聖人以四海，家不相通，好豈一家之理哉！以至用兵，夫孰所好？” (Song, 2013).

The translation of the text is as follows:

“By the command of Heaven, the great Mongol Emperor (huangdi) writes this letter to the King of Japan. The rulers of neighboring small countries have long been interested in corresponding with each other and forming friendships. Since the time my ancestor received divine grace, numerous distant lands, too many to enumerate, have feared our power and inquired about our virtues. At the beginning of my reign, the innocent people of Goryeo lived in constant fear of spears and arrows. We made peace and returned their land, and the elderly and young, the ruler and ministers, came to us in gratitude, and we are as happy as father and son. We believe that the King (Japanese Emperor) is already aware of this. Goryeo is our vassal in the east. Japan has also been a secret ally of Goryeo recently. Since the founding of your country, it has had relations with China. However, since our ascension to the throne, it has not sent any envoys. We fear that the King (Japanese Emperor) may not be aware of this. Therefore, we are sending this letter expressing our wishes and an envoy. We hope that

our correspondence in the future will bear good fruit as before, and we can become friends like relatives. As wise people, we believe that the four seas are one family. How can we be a family if we do not understand this? What need is there to use force?”

The letter indeed contains two interesting points. Firstly, Qubilai Qaghan begins the letter by addressing himself as the Mongol Emperor. Undoubtedly, the Mongols were not the first foreign conquerors to establish dynasties in China. The Wei Dynasty was founded by Tabgach and Turkic-origin generals, and during the Five Dynasties period, both Turks and, in the period following the fall of the Han Dynasty, the Huns established dynasties. Subsequently, the Liao Dynasty established by the Khitans and the Jin Dynasty established by the Jürchens, which was later overthrown by the Mongols, also ruled over parts or all of northern China despite being founded outside of China. However, once they claimed the mandate of heaven (tianming 天命) in the Chinese style, they used the dynastic names they adopted in the Chinese fashion (Liao and Jin) in their correspondence. Qubilai Qaghan’s letter, on the other hand, starts as a Mongol Khan. On the other hand, Qubilai Qaghan uses the term “middle kingdom” (zhongguo 中國), which is typically associated with China, to express his dissatisfaction with Japan not sending envoys after his ascension to the throne. Moreover, he does not request tribute or submission from the Japanese “king,” unlike the Mongols who demanded tribute from all countries except the Khwarazm Shah. The final veiled threat in the last sentence aside, the letter appears to be quite reasonable. Except for the use of the term “Great Mongol State,” all other expressions are in line with Chinese diplomatic traditions. It is highly likely that Qubilai Qaghan’s Chinese ministers drafted the letter. However, the tone at the beginning and end of the letter is distinctly Mongol in style. The use of “Great Mongol State” emphasizes Qubilai’s status as a Mongol qaghan, and the hope that there will be no need for the use of force at the end of the letter also departs from the Chinese diplomatic style.

In a Confucian style, it assumes that “barbarians” will be influenced by Chinese civilization and the wisdom of the Chinese emperor and will willingly come to the Chinese emperor without the use of weapons, entering into a father-son relationship like a family. This can be seen in the expression “the four seas are one family.” It implies that a foreign ruler will be brought into submission through military force, departing from traditional Chinese diplomacy. In Chinese tradition, an ideal emperor would earn the respect of neighboring countries’ rulers through wisdom and justice, and these rulers would submit to the emperor without the use of force or threat (Gokenc Gulez, 2022: 25–27). The submission of neighboring countries, and more importantly, distant countries, with tribute and envoys demonstrated that the emperor possessed the mandate of heaven (tianming/qut). However, it would be incorrect to say that Qubilai Qaghan was the first Chinese emperor to imply the use of force or the ability to use force. Before the Song Dynasty, which the Mongols conquered, the Tang Dynasty had directly invaded Goguryeo, Baekje, the Türk Qaghaganate, the city-states in Central Asia, and Vietnam with their armies. In fact, Emperor Tang Taizong,

after defeating the first Türk Qaghaganate, proclaimed himself the Qaghan of the Turks at a council he convened (Skaff, 2012: 49). In this context, Qubilai Qaghan's foreign policy resembles the Tang Dynasty more than its predecessor, the Song Dynasty. Qubilai Qaghan, much like Tang Taizong, was not hesitant to use military intervention against states that could challenge his authority during his reign. However, he showed more leniency towards weaker, smaller states. While he conducted campaigns against Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Burma, and Java, his navy sent to Java did not plunder wealthy but vulnerable kingdoms like Singapura (Chen, 2011: 37). Instead, he allowed them to engage in trade with China and even accepted their embassies. This approach reflects a mix of military assertiveness and diplomatic pragmatism, which aligns with the Tang Dynasty's approach to foreign affairs. Tang China, under the leadership of Emperor Taizong, used military force when necessary but also maintained diplomatic relations and trade with neighboring states. This combination of strategies allowed Tang China to expand its influence and maintain stability in the region. Qubilai Qaghan's policies demonstrate a recognition of the benefits of both military power and diplomatic engagement in achieving his foreign policy objectives, similar to the Tang Dynasty's approach to handling foreign relations (Atik, 2020: 25). Indeed when viewed from this perspective, it becomes evident that Qubilai Qaghan considered Japan to be a smaller and more distant country compared to neighboring states like Korea, Vietnam, and Burma. However, the lack of a response to Qubilai Qaghan's initial letter and the killing of his second envoy led to Qubilai Qaghan's decision to launch a military campaign against Japan. This decision eventually culminated in the Yuan Dynasty's significant naval expedition, particularly the campaign against Java, making it one of the two major maritime expeditions during the Yuan Dynasty, as extensively studied by Delgado and others (Delgado, 2008; Yamaguchi, 1988). These military campaigns not only had strategic importance but also contributed to the historical understanding of Yuan Dynasty's foreign relations and naval power. The campaigns against Japan and Java showcased Qubilai Qaghan's determination to maintain control over distant territories and assert Yuan authority in maritime regions. The events surrounding these campaigns provide valuable insights into the political and military dynamics of the time. It's worth noting that maritime expeditions were complex undertakings during this period, involving a combination of military strategy, logistics, diplomacy, and cultural interactions. The study of these expeditions helps shed light on the broader historical context of the Yuan Dynasty's foreign policy and its interactions with neighboring and distant regions (Delgado, 2008: 37–41). However, as Delgado pointed out, these military expeditions were highly risky both economically and politically. Qubilai Qaghan would have needed to genuinely feel politically compelled to undertake these campaigns (Delgado, 2008: 32). The main reason for undertaking two expensive military expeditions to a country like Japan, which posed very little threat to the Mongols, was clearly not economic. During this period, Japan was characterized by a fragmented structure ruled by local feudal lords and had a relatively small economy compared to China. The Mongols were likely informed about Japan's situation through their vassal, the Goryeo king in Korea, who would later be discussed as Qubilai Qaghan's friend and son-in-law.

The real problem for Qubilai Qaghan was not external but internal damage. He had diverged from Mongol tradition by convening a qurultai (assembly) and proclaiming himself as the qaghan in his own capital, Shangdu. However, his brother, Ariq Boke, also declared himself as qaghan in Karakorum, leading to a civil war. Although Qubilai Qaghan won this war, the Yuan rulers could no longer fully control other Mongol nations. Therefore, to assert his authority over other Mongol nations, and even his own Mongol subjects, he could not leave an insult from a perceived weak country like Japan unanswered. Additionally, he had to consider the opinions of his Chinese subjects. The Song Dynasty had just been conquered, and Chinese intellectuals, although weakly, were resisting the Yuan Dynasty's rule. While the memory of the Song Dynasty was still fresh, he needed to establish himself as the Chinese emperor. For this purpose, conquering or subduing a country that did not recognize China as the Middle Kingdom would be highly beneficial. However, after both Japan expeditions ended in failure, Qubilai Qaghan shifted his focus to other countries. These expeditions not only affected relations between the Yuan Dynasty and Japan but also influenced the relationship between Korea and Japan. After the Goryeo Dynasty had overthrown the previous Silla Dynasty and started to mend its relationship with neighboring Japan, the Mongols' invasions of Korea during the Ögödei and Möngke periods eventually led to Qubilai Qaghan fully subjugating the Goryeo Kingdom under Mongol sovereignty, even sending his daughter to crown the prince and marry him to strengthen the Mongol influence over Korea (Batu and Jiemusi, 2007: 72). After the death of Qubilai Qaghan, the Kamakura shogunate in Japan rapidly lost its power. Ultimately, they submitted to the Yuan Dynasty, not as a result of military threats but due to their need for trade with China. This submission to the Yuan Dynasty was temporary, but it was driven by economic considerations and the desire for trade relations with China.

## **MONGOL GRAND STRATEGY IN FLUX: THE CASE OF DAI VIET AND THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN FRONTIER**

After the conquest of China and the incorporation of Korea into the Mongol system, Qubilai Qaghan turned his attention to the south and sought to bring Vietnam under Mongol control. However, unlike Japan, the Dai Viet kingdom in Vietnam, which had not yet submitted to Mongol rule, was requested to recognize Mongol suzerainty, assist in conducting censuses and tax collections, and send tribute and troops. The Dai Viet Kingdom, which was originally led by the Chen family from Fujian in southern China, had come to power in 1127 and overthrown the ruling Ly Dynasty in 1226. Therefore, when the Mongols sent this ultimatum to Dai Viet, the Tran Dynasty in Dai Viet was relatively weak and newly established. Although they did not want to take sides in the wars between the Mongols and the Song Dynasty, refugees from the Song Dynasty, both during and after the wars, had taken refuge in Dai Viet and the neighboring Champa Kingdom. Moreover, the last declared Song Emperor, a child, and the Song supporters who had managed to escape with him, including some high-ranking officials, had fled to Dai Viet with a plan to gather strength, sail back to China with a navy after persuading the Muslim governor of Fujian to change sides to the Mongols and take control of the Song Empire again. However, they were intercepted by the Mongol navy off the coast of Hainan Island. Although

these officials initially did not want to take sides in this war, they started to play increasingly important roles in the newly established and Chinese-controlled Dai Viet and Champa, which were ruled by Chinese families (Ceylan, 2016, 2023). While both states were pleased with the well-trained manpower that had come to them, they did not become direct allies of the Song Dynasty. Nevertheless, Dai Viet and Champa continued to provide refuge for those fleeing from the Song Dynasty and resisted direct Mongol control.

The relationship between Dai Viet and the Mongols was complex. The Mongols initially called upon the Champa Kingdom to submit to them peacefully, and the Champa King V. Indravarman agreed to recognize Mongol suzerainty and sent tribute to the Mongols. However, under the influence of Song Dynasty supporters who had taken refuge in the Champa Kingdom, his son Harijit imprisoned Mongol envoys. These envoys were actually sent after Qubilai Qaghan abandoned the idea of launching expeditions in Southeast Asia following the failure of his 1281 Japanese campaigns and instead decided to send envoys to Southeast Asia for diplomatic purposes. These envoys were sent to various kingdoms, including Malabar, in the region. The Mongols' policy in Southeast Asia is particularly notable for its combination of military power and political acumen.

However, the Mongols' military tactics that had made them unbeatable in Asia and Europe did not work in the rainforests, tropical climates, and rivers of Southeast Asia. The Chinese soldiers recruited from the southern regions, especially Fujian, were not successful in this environment. Nevertheless, the Mongols were able to analyze the emerging state system in Southeast Asia very effectively. For example, they supported small kingdoms like Singapura against the rising Majapahit Empire. They also cooperated with the Thai tribes, who had been their allies from the beginning and were allied with the Thai kingdoms, against states like Pagan (Myanmar) and Dai Viet, which did not fully submit to them. Thus, they were able to establish an alternative route through Southeast Asia and India when the routes to Inner and Central Asia were closed, maintaining open communication channels with their allies in Iran, the Ilkhanate.

Overall, the Mongols' interactions with Korea and Southeast Asia were shaped by a complex web of political, strategic, and diplomatic considerations. These interactions illustrate the multifaceted nature of Mongol foreign policy and their ability to adapt their strategies to different regions and circumstances. After the death of Qubilai Qaghan, the last ruler of the Mongol Empire who was elected as qaghan in a qurultai and recognized as Qaghan by other Khans, the empire began to fragment to a large extent. However, in the east, where the empire's main center was located, the Yuan Dynasty largely continued the Mongol tradition. Although the population, economy, and power center of the empire later shifted to China, the Yuan Dynasty continued to base its diplomatic and political legitimacy on its Mongol origins until its downfall in 1369. Until its collapse, the Mongol mentality was maintained, and unlike the previous Chinese dynasties, except for the Tang Dynasty, the Mongol Empire during the Yuan period used both diplomacy and warfare and they often resorted to hostile actions when necessary. However, as seen in examples such as Japan or Southeast Asia, the military option was generally used as a last resort. In this regard, it can be said that the Mongols' Asian policy was different from

their policy in the West. The fundamental reason for this difference lies in the flexibility of the Mongols to adapt to different environments when necessary. In this new geographical context where their military tactics did not work, the Mongol Empire, using diplomacy as a tool, successfully pursued a realistic policy until its dissolution, remaining a key player in a vast region stretching from the Vatican to Japan, from the Kuril Islands to Sumatra.

## CONCLUSION

The Mongol Empire began as a nomadic powerhouse in the steppe. However, it did not remain so. Unlike the Turkic predecessors on the steppe such as the Türk and Uighur Qaghanates, the Mongol Empire was more like the Khitan and Jurchen dynasties in its pursuit of political hegemony with a hybrid approach that blended nomadic, Chinese and Korean and other ideas from Islam, Christianity (Nestorian) and Central Asian civilizations. This in return affected the Yuan Dynasty's political strategy and therefore, contrary to the general ideas on the Mongols, their grand strategy for political hegemony included different tools, rather than being merely limited to military might. This can be seen in the flexibility of Mongol policies in different cases. While the Mongol hegemony over Korea had to be established with military campaigns, the Mongols continued their hegemony on the Mongol court via a web of marriage alliances that not only included marrying of Mongol princesses to the Korean crown princes but also getting Korean spouses whose families back in Korea became tools of control within the Goryeo court. In Japan, the Mongols were in a way forced into military action by the Kamakura Bakufu who killed the Mongol envoys and insulted them to which Qubilai Qaghan had to answer with military campaigns due to his own concerns of legitimacy. But the initial Mongol diplomacy suggests that Qubilai could be quite flexible and his first choice was political maneuvering rather than military action. Similarities can also be drawn with the South East Asian States. Although his approach was more domineering towards the South East Asian States due to his perceived weakness of these states vis-à-vis Japan, Qubilai Qaghan could still be flexible, and although the majority of studies on Mongol policies in South East Asia often concentrate on the military campaigns, the Yuan Dynasty actually also strived to build a web of alliances and a states system in the region with the aim of establishing relations with the region as a political hegemon and to reach their Ilkhanate allies in West Asia via the Indian Ocean due to the complications in Central Asia that prevented the Yuan and the Ilkhanates from direct contact via land routes. Therefore, when taken as a whole, the Yuan strategy during the reign of Qubilai Qaghan went far beyond military conquest, and was more complex than pure employment of military might.

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