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Reactive Foreign Policy under the Zand Dynasty: An Examination of Iran's Political Instruments in Its Dealings with the British East India Company

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ABSTRACT

During the eighteenth century, concurrent with the establishment of the Zand dynasty, the expansion of the British East India Company's activities in the Persian Gulf ushered Iran–Britain relations into a new phase. These relations developed at a time when the Zand government faced institutional constraints, limited naval capabilities, and the absence of systematic mechanisms for managing foreign relations. Consequently, its interactions with the East India Company unfolded within a context characterized by structural inequality and conflicting interests. Accordingly, this study aims to explain the pattern through which the Zand government employed political instruments in its dealings with the British East India Company, drawing on the theoretical framework of reactive foreign policy. The research employs a descriptive-analytical method and is based on data collected from library and documentary sources. The findings indicate that the structural limitations of the Zand government caused its political instruments to assume a predominantly reactive, crisis-driven, and short-term character. Within this framework, instruments such as ad hoc decrees, coercive diplomacy involving threats and pressure, and conditional diplomatic bargaining were employed in response to the East India Company's actions or its failure to fulfil its commitments. Thus, the political conduct of the Zand government was less the product of a coherent strategy than a reflection of institutional limitations and the asymmetry of power characterizing relations between Iran and the British East India Company.

Keywords: Iran, Zand dynasty, British East India Company, Persian Gulf, foreign policy, reactive foreign policy.

Introduction

During the eighteenth century, concurrent with the rule of the Zand dynasty, relations between Iran and Britain—which were pursued primarily through the British East India Company—entered a new phase. Unlike the Afsharid period, when relations between the two sides, despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties, were largely episodic and pragmatic, the establishment of an official East India Company agency in Bushehr in 1763, the conclusion of commercial and political agreements, the closure of the agency in 1769, and its subsequent re-establishment following the conquest of Basra in 1776 brought the relationship into a period of sustained interaction. The significance of this period lies in the fact that, for the first time, an extraregional commercial-political power became



involved in Iran's domestic and foreign affairs, while the Zand government lacked a coherent administrative organization for managing foreign relations, naval capabilities commensurate with conditions in the Persian Gulf, and a relatively stable model for regulating relations with foreign powers. At the same time, the Zand government faced the simultaneous necessity of rebuilding the national economy through the expansion of foreign trade and addressing security threats in the Persian Gulf. Maritime insecurity caused by the activities of local forces, particularly Mir Mahna, led Karim Khan Zand to seek cooperation with the East India Company—an institution whose objectives and interests were not necessarily aligned with those of the Iranian government and which, in many instances, pursued its own commercial and strategic interests independently of Iranian policy. Consequently, interaction between the two sides developed from the outset within a context of power asymmetry, disparities in institutional capacity, and conflicting interests. Accordingly, the central problem addressed by the present study is to explain how the structural limitations of the Zand government affected its selection and use of foreign-policy instruments and to analyze the logic underlying Iran's political behavior toward the British East India Company. The principal research question is therefore as follows: How did the structural limitations of the Zand government shape Iran's pattern of employing political instruments in its dealings with Britain, and how did this condition affect the nature of Iranian foreign policy toward the East India Company? Answering this question can move beyond the mere description of historical events and explain the logic governing the Zand government's foreign policy during one of the most significant periods in the history of Iran–Britain relations.

Research Background

Several studies have examined Iran's foreign relations during the Zand period. These studies may generally be classified into two categories: first, investigations of Iran's political and commercial relations with the East India Company and other European powers; and second, studies of Karim Khan Zand's role in managing foreign relations and developments in the Persian Gulf. For example, Ebrahimi examined the Zand dynasty's relations with European powers, emphasizing the strategic position of the Persian Gulf. Rajaei studied the commercial conditions of Iranian cities during Karim Khan's reign and the rivalry among European companies. Ebrahimi and Mousavi investigated the fluctuations in relations between Karim Khan Zand and Britain, focusing on commercial interactions. Yousef Jamali and colleagues applied systems theory to analyze relations between Iran and the East India Company on the basis of the agreements concluded between them. Karkhah also examined the general trajectory of Iran's foreign relations from the Afsharid period to the Qajar period.

Despite the value of these studies in illuminating various dimensions of Iran–Britain relations during the Zand era, most have concentrated on reconstructing events, examining agreements, identifying commercial consequences, and describing the actions of historical actors. Although they have provided valuable information concerning the formation and development of these relations, they have paid less attention to explaining which factors shaped the Zand government's pattern of political behavior toward the British East India Company and how structural, institutional, and security constraints influenced its selection of political instruments. In other words, the existing literature has not theoretically and explanatorily addressed the relationship between the structural conditions of the Zand government and its manner of employing foreign-policy instruments.

The present study seeks to address this gap. Rather than concentrating solely on the narration of events or the identification of political instruments, the article employs the theoretical framework of reactive foreign policy to analyze the logic governing the Zand government's conduct toward the British East India Company. It demonstrates

how institutional limitations, weak naval capabilities, the absence of systematic mechanisms for administering foreign relations, and prevailing security and economic imperatives directed the use of political instruments toward predominantly reactive behavior. From this perspective, the study's contribution lies in explaining the relationship among structure, state limitations, and Iran's pattern of political behavior, as well as in presenting an analytical typology of the Zand government's political instruments on the basis of this explanatory logic.

Reactive and Passive Political Instruments

In international relations and foreign-policy studies, political instruments refer to the range of measures employed by states to influence other actors and realize their national objectives. Together with economic, cultural, and military instruments, they constitute the full spectrum of a state's capabilities in the international arena (1). Within this framework, the two key concepts of "proactivity" and "reactivity" are used to distinguish among states' foreign-policy strategies. A proactive approach involves shaping events before they occur, whereas a reactive approach entails responding to developments after they have occurred (2).

Reactive and passive political instruments differ in nature from covert and pre-emptive instruments. In foreign-policy theory, reactivity refers to a condition in which a state, rather than shaping events, assumes the role of a respondent to the actions of other actors and lacks diplomatic initiative (3). More specifically, reactive and passive political instruments may be defined as a set of diplomatic, administrative, and military measures employed by a state in response to prior actions by other states or non-state actors, without the state itself having entered the foreign-policy arena pre-emptively or on its own initiative. Such instruments are generally defensive, ad hoc, temporary, and crisis-driven and are not embedded in a comprehensive, predesigned strategy (4).

In international-relations theory, reactivity is generally associated with five principal characteristics (5, 6). First is the absence of initiative, meaning that a reactive state rarely initiates a new diplomatic measure and generally waits for provocation or action by the opposing party. Second is crisis orientation, whereby political measures are undertaken mainly in response to crises or immediate threats, after which the state returns to a passive position once the crisis subsides. Third is the ad hoc and temporary nature of decision-making, indicating that reactive instruments lack continuity and strategic coherence; each measure is designed in response to a particular event and has little connection to preceding or subsequent measures. Fourth is the absence of a systematic diplomatic structure, meaning that states characterized by reactive foreign policy often lack an efficient and orderly diplomatic bureaucracy, and foreign-policy decisions are made subjectively, hastily, and without professional procedures. Fifth is the overt and attributable nature of the instruments. Unlike covert measures, reactive instruments are generally visible and attributable to the state because they lack sophisticated mechanisms of concealment and plausible deniability (6). Historical studies indicate that states continuously confronted by domestic or external wars, or those experiencing the collapse of bureaucratic and diplomatic institutions, are more inclined than others to adopt reactive and passive foreign-policy approaches (5). In other words, reactivity is often not a strategic choice but an imposed condition resulting from structural weakness, internal crises, and an inability to formulate and implement an independent and pre-emptive foreign policy (4). In summary, reactive and passive political instruments may be described as overt, temporary, and defensive measures employed by a state lacking a systematic diplomatic structure in response to threats or prior actions by other actors, without diplomatic initiative or an overarching strategy. Such instruments frequently take the form of local decrees, post-crisis letters of threat, temporary conditional bargains, and reactive proposals intended to alter an existing situation.

On the basis of the theoretical literature, reactivity in foreign policy can be identified when a state's conduct is shaped in response to the actions or pressures of other actors. In the present study, five indicators—the absence of initiative, crisis orientation, the temporary and ad hoc nature of decisions, the absence of a systematic diplomatic structure, and the overt character of political instruments—are employed as criteria for analyzing the Zand government's behavior toward the East India Company. These concepts are not treated as self-conscious characteristics recognized by the historical actors themselves, but rather as an analytical framework for explaining the Zand government's pattern of political behavior.

Accordingly, the historical analysis presented in this article is not limited to narrating events in Iran–Britain relations; instead, each item of historical evidence is evaluated according to these five indicators. From this perspective, the issuance of local and ad hoc decrees, the use of coercive diplomacy based on threats and pressure, and conditional diplomatic bargaining represent forms of reactive political instruments that emerged in response to developments generated by the East India Company and to the crises of the period. Thus, the study seeks to explain these relations through the concept of “imposed reactivity” and to assess the extent to which the political instruments of the Zand government corresponded to the aforementioned theoretical indicators.

Consequently, the subsequent sections of the article are structured so that each political instrument under examination is analyzed not only through historical evidence but also in accordance with the five indicators of reactivity, thereby establishing a coherent and systematic connection between the theoretical framework and the historical data.

Political Relations between Iran and Britain during the Zand Period

Before examining political relations between Iran and Britain during the Zand period, it is necessary to recognize that these relations developed within the political and administrative structure of eighteenth-century Iran. During this period, the Zand government was administered through the ruler's personal authority and limited provincial and bureaucratic networks and did not yet possess specialized and durable foreign-policy institutions in the sense associated with modern states. Therefore, the present study does not assess the Zand government's political instruments against the model of the modern state; rather, it analyzes how the government managed foreign relations within the capacities, limitations, and structural requirements of its own historical context. Accordingly, concepts such as reactivity and initiative are employed as analytical instruments for explaining the Zand government's pattern of political behavior, rather than as criteria for judging its level of development or administrative effectiveness.

During the Zand period, political relations between Iran and Britain, pursued specifically through the British East India Company, not only reflected the commercial and strategic interests of the two sides in the Persian Gulf region but also constituted an arena in which Karim Khan Zand's pragmatic and calculated diplomacy was tested against an emerging colonial power. These relations reached a high point in 1763, when Karim Khan permitted the establishment of the Company's agency in Bushehr and concluded an agreement under which the British obtained valuable privileges, including exemption from customs duties—except for a three-percent export duty—and authorization to install artillery (7). Nevertheless, Karim Khan, unlike many of his contemporaries, was aware of developments in India and had received information from Dutch observers. By adding provisions known as “supplementary clauses,” including prohibitions on the export of gold and silver, the replacement of cash transactions with barter, and the prohibition of mistreatment of Muslims, he effectively neutralized the extraterritorial

rights and capitulatory privileges sought by the British (8, 9). These supplementary conditions, which provoked strong objections from Company officials, reflected Karim Khan's prudence and his awareness of Iran's national interests (10).

Behind this economic diplomacy lay two important political objectives. First, through foreign trade, Karim Khan sought to reconstruct Iran's weakened economic foundations following the disorder of the Afsharid period and to strengthen his legitimacy and standing against domestic rivals by expanding commerce (11, 12). Second, and more importantly, because the Zand government lacked an organized naval force, it looked to British maritime power in confronting threats posed by local forces such as Mir Mahna, who operated from Bandar Rig and Kharg Island, and hoped to secure British military support by granting economic privileges (13, 14). In practice, however, this expectation became the greatest obstacle in relations between the two sides. For several reasons—including the British misperception of Karim Khan as a temporary local ruler, their reluctance to confront Mir Mahna because of the concealed interests of certain British subjects connected to him, and the prioritization of absolute commercial interests over political commitments—the British refused to provide Iran with effective assistance (10, 15). The failure of the joint operation against Mir Mahna, marked by the premature withdrawal of the British fleet on the orders of Henry Moore, head of the Basra agency, and by mutual accusations and pretexts, aroused Karim Khan's profound anger and dissatisfaction (16).

In addition to the Mir Mahna affair, the issue of the Banu Ka'b tribe became another major challenge. During their campaign against the tribe, whose suppression they considered necessary for controlling the trade routes leading to Basra, the British pursued its members and repeatedly entered Iranian territory. Karim Khan issued a firm warning that he regarded the Banu Ka'b as "subjects of Iran under his protection" and would not tolerate any violation of Iranian territory (17, 18). These two political crises—the Mir Mahna and Banu Ka'b affairs—together with Karim Khan's enforcement of the prohibition on the export of gold and silver in 1767, severely deteriorated relations (19). Although George Skipp conducted two rounds of diplomatic negotiations in Shiraz in 1767 and 1768 in an effort to improve relations, the profound disagreement between the Company's board of directors in London, which favored a forceful approach toward Iran, and the Bombay government, which favored moderation, as well as the intrigues of Henry Moore, one of the Company's senior officials in Basra, who regarded any cooperation with Karim Khan as a betrayal of Company interests, brought all diplomatic efforts to an impasse (10, 12).

The culmination of this deterioration was the closure of the Company's agency in Bushehr and the departure of all British personnel from Iran in January 1769. Although this action harmed the Iranian economy, particularly the merchants of Bushehr, it demonstrated that Karim Khan was unwilling to yield to foreign pressure and prioritized national sovereignty over short-term commercial advantages (16, 20). The withdrawal was not permanent, however. Iran's military victory over the Ottoman Empire and the capture of Basra by Sadeq Khan Zand in 1776 once again transformed Bushehr into Britain's most important commercial base in the region and compelled the British to return and restore relations with a government that now controlled vital sections of the Persian Gulf coastline (17). After Karim Khan's death, his weaker successors, particularly Jafar Khan Zand, issued a decree in 1788 granting the British complete freedom of trade, tax exemptions, and even unrestricted permission to export cash, thereby reversing Karim Khan's cautious and anti-colonial policy (21, 22). During the final years of the Zand dynasty, however, the British observed Lotf Ali Khan's extreme weakness and the Qajars' advance toward power and consequently adopted a policy of active neutrality. Although they proposed purchasing royal jewels to finance the war, they declined to provide direct military support to the Zand government because the dynasty's collapse and

the resulting power vacuum in southern Iran would facilitate unimpeded British influence in the Persian Gulf and coastal regions (23, 24). Thus, political relations between Iran and Britain during the Zand period followed a cycle of rapprochement and estrangement, trust and suspicion, and cooperation and confrontation. Throughout this process, Karim Khan Zand represented a form of balanced and informed diplomacy and continued to insist on safeguarding Iran's independence and economic interests in the face of Western power, although his successors, because of domestic crises, were unable to sustain the same firm policy.

Iran's Foreign-Policy Instruments in Its Dealings with Britain during the Zand Period

Iranian foreign policy toward Britain during the Zand period constituted a concrete manifestation of "reactivity" as understood in international-relations theory. Owing to structural weakness, the absence of a systematic diplomatic bureaucracy, and persistent domestic crises, the Zand government generally occupied a reactive position and lacked strategic initiative or a predesigned framework for managing its relations with the East India Company. In contrast, the British relied on the Company's organized institutional structure, its extensive network of correspondence and intelligence reporting, and the continuous presence of its representatives in major Persian Gulf ports to monitor regional political and military developments and respond accordingly. Their policy during this period may therefore be interpreted as comparatively active and anticipatory (16, 25). Iran, by contrast, remained confined to a passive position. Most Iranian political measures—from issuing firm warnings against territorial violations and imposing commercial restrictions as leverage, to conducting direct, ad hoc negotiations with British envoys and making reactive threats in response to their refusal to cooperate—were undertaken in response to crises and events initially generated by the opposing party. No evidence exists of pre-emptive political activism, such as espionage, covert diplomacy, clandestine penetration of the Company's institutional structure, or the formation of regional alliances designed to weaken Britain's position. This condition was imposed on Iran by continuous domestic conflict, the absence of a professional diplomatic apparatus, and, most importantly, severe military weakness, particularly the lack of an organized naval force. Under these circumstances, although Karim Khan Zand prudently sought to protect national interests by adding supplementary conditions to agreements, he was unable to move beyond a reactive position or formulate and implement an active, pre-emptive foreign policy toward Britain. In other words, rather than acting as a "shaper of events" in its relations with the East India Company, the Zand government consistently appeared as a "respondent to developments."

Issuance of Local and Ad Hoc Decrees

In the foreign-policy literature, one of the most important indicators of reactivity is a government's reliance on ad hoc decisions lacking institutional continuity. Under such conditions, political decisions are adopted in response to ongoing developments and crises and rapidly change when circumstances or decision-makers change. Consequently, the political decrees of reactive states generally lack strategic coherence, durable implementation mechanisms, and institutional follow-up. Rather than expressing a continuous policy, they reflect temporary exigencies. On this basis, the decrees issued by the Zand government concerning the East India Company can be analyzed in terms of their conformity with these characteristics, thereby clarifying the extent to which they reflected a reactive approach to the management of relations with Britain.

One of the most prominent yet vulnerable reactive political instruments employed by the Zand government toward Britain was the "issuance of local and ad hoc decrees." These decrees, addressed primarily to local officials and

governors in Persian Gulf ports, particularly Bushehr, lacked structural support, temporal continuity, and strategic coherence. They fully reflected the characteristics of reactive foreign policy: absence of initiative, crisis orientation, ad hoc and temporary decision-making, absence of a systematic diplomatic structure, and overt state attribution. The first example of such decrees was issued immediately after the conclusion of the 1763 agreement. Karim Khan Zand instructed all Iranian officials and governors stationed in Persian Gulf ports to provide every possible form of cooperation and assistance to facilitate British commercial activities and transactions (26). Issued in response to the establishment of the Company's agency in Bushehr and intended to secure its anticipated economic benefits rapidly, the decree was entirely temporary and situation-specific. It was neither formulated within a systematic diplomatic structure and stable administrative bureaucracy nor supported by any guarantee of continuity under changing political circumstances. Pursuant to this decree, Sheikh Saadun, the governor of Bushehr, personally assumed the expenses associated with constructing the British Company's commercial establishment in the port and undertook to protect the lives and property of British subjects while granting them extensive freedom in their commercial transactions (26).

The absence of a systematic diplomatic structure in the issuance of these decrees is clearly evident. No institution was responsible for drafting, implementing, monitoring, or evaluating them, and foreign-relations decisions were made personally and subjectively by Karim Khan himself or, in some instances, by his brother Sadeq Khan, who served as his deputy. When the agreement was concluded, Karim Khan was occupied with the administration of the northern regions of the country, and the negotiations were therefore conducted on his behalf by Sadeq Khan. The agreement was later approved and sealed by the Zand ruler (12, 14). This personalized decision-making process, which depended on temporary officeholders, was itself a principal characteristic of reactivity because no permanent professional administrative body existed to formulate and pursue Iran's long-term interests in relation to the British.

The "crisis-driven" and "ad hoc and temporary" character of these decrees is also evident in the pronounced fluctuations in their content. The decree issued at the beginning of the British presence in Bushehr, which prescribed full cooperation with them, was replaced by restrictive and coercive decrees following the emergence of disagreements and the British failure to assist Iran against Mir Mahna. As disputes arose between Iran and the British East India Company, Karim Khan imposed commercial restrictions on the British as an instrument of pressure to advance his demands during negotiations (18). This change in position occurred in response to British behavior and to the crises that had emerged. After relations deteriorated, Karim Khan dispatched an individual named Aghasi Khan to Basra to request that the British send a special envoy to Shiraz to resolve the disagreements (16). This measure itself provides further evidence of reactivity and the absence of initiative.

The situation became even more unstable under Karim Khan's successors. Jafar Khan Zand, who ruled from 1785 to 1789 and is regarded as the only Zand ruler after Karim Khan to have seriously considered improving trade and the economic condition of his territories (27), issued a decree in January 1788 that strongly supported commerce and granted the British complete freedom to trade in Iran (16). The decree did not continue Karim Khan's cautious policy; rather, it explicitly abolished the earlier restrictions. British merchants were permitted to sell their goods freely wherever they wished and to export cash without restriction (28). Karim Khan's previous decree was declared invalid, and provisions that had been economically beneficial to Iran were abandoned (22). This direct contradiction between Karim Khan's decree and that of Jafar Khan clearly demonstrates that the decrees of the Zand period lacked strategic continuity and coherence. Each new ruler could, on the basis of temporary judgment

and without regard for the diplomatic legacy of his predecessor, repeal overnight all restrictions imposed on the British. A similar situation prevailed under Lotf Ali Khan Zand. Like his father Jafar Khan, and in continuation of the same policy, Lotf Ali Khan appears to have sought closer relations with the British. In June 1790, he requested that they continue their commercial activities in Shiraz (23). These dramatic fluctuations—from full cooperation to restriction and pressure and then a return to unconditional cooperation—demonstrate that local and ad hoc decrees during the Zand period functioned not as instruments for implementing a stable, predesigned foreign policy but as immediate responses to changing political, economic, and military conditions.

Another noteworthy point is that these decrees were frequently issued without consideration of implementation capacity or oversight mechanisms. For example, following Karim Khan's decree requiring cooperation with the East India Company, Sheikh Saadun, governor of Bushehr, personally paid the expenses of constructing the Company's commercial establishment. This indicates that implementation of central decrees depended entirely on the goodwill and capabilities of local governors and that no independent monitoring mechanism existed to ensure proper execution. Disputes between the British and Sheikh Saadun consequently prevented them from benefiting fully and effectively from the privileges they had been granted (29). This demonstrates that decrees issued in Shiraz, although authoritative in their wording, could not be guaranteed in practice because of the absence of a systematic bureaucracy and an efficient executive structure. Overall, the "issuance of local and ad hoc decrees" during the Zand period may be regarded as a direct reflection of the government's structural weaknesses in foreign policy: decrees issued at one moment were violated at another; restrictions prudently imposed by Karim Khan were abolished by his less capable or weaker successors; and throughout this period, no durable professional institution existed to formulate, pursue, and safeguard Iran's long-term interests in relation to the East India Company (22, 30).

Coercive Diplomacy Based on Threats and Pressure

Within the theoretical framework of reactivity, threats and pressure are classified as reactive instruments when they are employed in response to an action, threat, or refusal to cooperate by the opposing party. Such instruments are generally used during crises to compel the other party to alter its behavior and are often unsupported by durable institutional and military capabilities. Their continuity and effectiveness are therefore strongly influenced by temporary circumstances. On the basis of this criterion, examination of the Zand government's coercive diplomacy demonstrates that this instrument emerged in reaction to East India Company behavior and within the context of political and military crises.

Another overt and reactive political instrument employed by the Zand government toward Britain was "coercive diplomacy based on threats and pressure." This instrument was used primarily during crises and in response to repeated British failures to fulfil their commitments, particularly their refusal to provide military assistance against Mir Mahna. It was entirely reactive, overt, and attributable to the government and lacked any covert or pre-emptive design. The first example of this threatening diplomacy can be observed in Karim Khan Zand's reaction to British and Ottoman incursions into Iranian territory. When British and Ottoman forces extended their operations into Iran while pursuing Banu Ka'b fighters, Karim Khan issued a firm warning. Because he considered the Banu Ka'b to be Iranian subjects under his protection, he ordered the forces to leave Iranian territory (17, 18). The warning produced a response, and Ottoman officials accepted Karim Khan's demand to avoid confrontation with Iran (10). This episode indicates that political threats and pressure could be effective under certain conditions. Nevertheless, the warning was less effective against the British, who continued their naval blockade of the Banu Ka'b (10).

The most prominent and extensive use of coercive diplomacy during the Zand period concerned the Mir Mahna affair and Karim Khan's unsuccessful attempts to secure British cooperation in suppressing him (12, 13). Iran's naval inability to confront local powers was a principal factor driving the Zand government toward cooperation with the British (12). Like Nader Shah, Karim Khan considered the British the only potential ally against pirates and maritime raiders in the Persian Gulf (10, 12). The British failure to satisfy this vital need gradually aroused Karim Khan's anger and induced him to employ political and economic pressure (10). From his perspective, the British had failed to meet his demands and had not provided the assistance expected of them (10). This profound dissatisfaction generated a shift in Karim Khan's approach from cooperation and the granting of privileges toward coercive diplomacy based on threats and pressure. He had gradually concluded that the British did not strongly oppose Mir Mahna's continued political survival because Mir Mahna could deliver the final blow to their long-standing Dutch rivals, particularly since he did not at that time constitute a threat to British commercial interests (10, 15). British indifference toward Iran's central security concern compelled Karim Khan to intensify pressure.

Another manifestation of coercive diplomacy during the Zand period was the imposition of commercial restrictions, particularly the prohibition on the export of gold and silver (19, 22). When disagreements arose between Iran and the British East India Company, Karim Khan used commercial restrictions as leverage to advance his demands during negotiations (18). When these restrictions were enforced in 1767 (19), they provoked strong British dissatisfaction and criticism (13). The Company's board of directors regarded Karim Khan's interference in trade as an unforgivable offense and complained that he had obstructed British commercial activity in Bushehr, prohibited merchants from making cash payments, and required goods to be exchanged through barter, particularly for Iranian manufactures that the Company was unwilling to accept (10).

Coercive diplomacy during the Zand period was not limited to economic instruments and occasionally developed into direct military threats. In early 1774, when Karim Khan was planning a campaign against Oman and considered British naval cooperation necessary (12), he employed threats as leverage. He announced his intention to campaign against Oman and requested British assistance. He also threatened the British and the Ottoman authorities that, should they refuse to assist him in the war against Oman, he would dispatch forces to Basra (12). This direct military threat against British interests in Basra indicates that, at the height of the crisis and after years of unsuccessful efforts to secure British cooperation, Karim Khan adopted a more confrontational tone and resorted to explicit threats. Nevertheless, Company officials rejected his requests (12).

The reactive nature of this coercive diplomacy is clearly evident. In none of the cases discussed did Karim Khan employ threats pre-emptively or on his own initiative. Rather, he consistently resorted to pressure in response to British action or inaction. The failure to cooperate militarily against Mir Mahna resulted in commercial restrictions (18); British incursions into Iranian territory while pursuing the Banu Ka'b were met with a firm warning (17); and the refusal to assist in the campaign against Oman was answered with a threat to attack Basra (12). In each case, the initiative belonged to the British, while Iran occupied a responsive position. These threats and pressures were also "overt and attributable." Unlike covert actions, which may be deniable and difficult to attribute to the state, Karim Khan's threats were communicated explicitly through official correspondence or special envoys. For example, in September 1764, Karim Khan personally wrote to Jervis stating that he intended to attack Bandar Rig and expected several British vessels to assist him (12). Similarly, when the British vessel *Tiger* was detained and two Company employees were sent to Shiraz, Moore returned to Basra and sent a letter demanding the return of the ship and the

release of the detainees. Karim Khan responded by announcing his intended campaign against Oman and requesting British assistance (25).

Coercive diplomacy during the Zand period faced two fundamental limitations. First, the structural weakness of the Zand government and the absence of effective military support, particularly naval power, substantially reduced the effectiveness of its threats (29, 31). The British understood that Iran lacked the capacity to implement maritime threats and therefore confidently ignored Karim Khan's demands or responded negatively (10). Second, the use of threats and pressure lacked strategic continuity and coherence. Threats were applied temporarily during particular crises and, as soon as conditions changed—for example, following Iran's capture of Kharg Island (12) or the conquest of Basra (17)—they were rapidly replaced by softer diplomacy and even retreat. In other words, coercive diplomacy during the Zand period did not operate as a stable and predesigned strategy, but as an immediate, temporary, and frequently hasty response to momentary crises.

Conditional Diplomatic Bargaining

Another manifestation of reactive foreign policy is reliance on conditional bargains and temporary agreements to compensate for structural weaknesses. Under such conditions, rather than securing its interests through internal capabilities or long-term planning, a government attempts to obtain the cooperation of another actor in response to an immediate crisis by granting privileges or proposing reciprocal exchanges. Such agreements usually arise from temporary necessities and constitute responses to immediate security or political needs rather than elements of a stable strategy. On this basis, the Zand government's conditional transactions with the East India Company may be analyzed as a manifestation of imposed reactivity. These bargains emerged in the context of naval weakness and the government's urgent need for military assistance and therefore reflected structural limitations more than diplomatic initiative.

One of the most costly reactive political instruments employed by the Zand government toward Britain was "conditional diplomatic bargaining," which took the form of reciprocal and barter-based proposals in foreign policy. These bargains, generally structured according to the logic of "military cooperation in exchange for territorial concessions," were entirely temporary, conditional, and based on Iran's immediate needs and lacked a long-term strategic framework. The clearest example can be observed in George Skipp's negotiations with Karim Khan Zand. During the first round of negotiations, conducted between April and September 1767, Karim Khan undertook to compel the Banu Ka'b to compensate the Company for its losses. He also proposed paying the British 5,000 rupees in exchange for their cooperation against Mir Mahna. Furthermore, he offered to transfer Kharg Island to the British after its capture (10, 19). This proposal, in which "cash payment and the transfer of Kharg Island" were offered in exchange for "military cooperation against Mir Mahna," represents a clear example of conditional diplomatic bargaining in which Iran was prepared to negotiate part of its sovereignty through the transfer of an island.

This bargaining model was repeated more extensively during the second round of Skipp's negotiations in April 1768. The provisions of the new agreement explicitly demonstrate the privileges Karim Khan was prepared to grant in exchange for British military assistance. Under the first clause, the British were authorized to construct military fortifications in Bushehr or, at minimum, to equip the Company's agency as required. The third clause stipulated that, should joint Iranian-British forces capture Kharg Island from Mir Mahna, half of the resulting spoils would be allocated to the British. The fourth clause constituted the most important and sensitive element of the bargain: Kharg—or any other island deemed suitable by the British—would be transferred to them. With regard to Kharg, it

was further stipulated that, if the British no longer required the island, Iran would not be permitted to transfer it to any other European country in the region (32). In addition to effectively transferring Kharg Island to the British, this clause incorporated a prohibition against transfer to third parties, thereby guaranteeing Britain an enduring exclusive claim to its possession. The fifth clause completed the arrangement: in exchange for the continuous presence of the East India Company's naval force in the region to maintain security, Iran was to pay the Company annually between 20,000 and 25,000 rupees from Bushehr customs revenues or general state income (25).

These conditional diplomatic bargains demonstrate the extent to which Karim Khan Zand was prepared to compromise national sovereignty and territorial integrity in order to secure maritime protection, which had become a vital strategic need because of Iran's naval weakness (10, 12). In exchange for British ships and military cooperation, Iran was prepared to transfer its islands, divide wartime spoils, finance the British fleet from the state treasury, and authorize the construction of a British military base on Iranian territory. This unequal exchange—in which Iran offered territorial and financial resources in return for temporary and unreliable military support—was rooted in the profound structural weakness of the Zand government and the absence of a coherent maritime-defense strategy (29, 31).

Nevertheless, the reactive and temporary character of these conditional bargains must not be overlooked. In none of these cases were the proposals based on diplomatic initiative or a predesigned strategy. They consistently emerged in response to particular crises, such as Iran's inability to suppress Mir Mahna. In other words, Karim Khan, acting in a purely reactive position, resorted to conditional and reciprocal bargaining after other instruments—cooperation, negotiation, and pressure—had proven ineffective. These bargains were also overt and attributable, being embodied in written agreements formally sealed and signed by the parties. They contained no indication of covert action or secret diplomacy.

Another noteworthy point is that, contrary to Karim Khan's expectations, these conditional bargains almost invariably failed. During the first round of negotiations, Moore argued that Karim Khan's demands would effectively restrict British operations against the Banu Ka'b and would not fulfil Britain's objective of maintaining security in the Persian Gulf. He therefore ordered Skipp to return (12). During the second round, despite the conclusion of an agreement, the joint military operation against Mir Mahna failed because of poor coordination and the absence of mutual trust (10). In another case, Green, a detained British employee in Iran, carried a message stipulating the release of Beaumont and the re-establishment of the commercial agency in Bushehr (10). This conditional diplomacy again produced no success, as Company officials made any agreement with the Iranian central government contingent on Beaumont's release (10). The British therefore employed the same conditional and transactional logic and were never willing to meet their commitments without obtaining definite and enforceable privileges.

Under Karim Khan's successors, this pattern of conditional bargaining continued with greater intensity. During Lotf Ali Khan Zand's reign, Harford Jones travelled to Shiraz as a representative of the East India Company at the invitation of Mirza Mohammad Hossein, the vizier, to purchase the two famous diamonds known as the *Darya-ye Nur* and *Taj-e Mah*. He established close and cordial relations with the Zand ruler (23). In this conditional transaction, Lotf Ali Khan was prepared to exchange the royal jewels for funds to confront the Qajars and a promise of military assistance. Jones advised him to fortify Bushehr, seek British assistance if necessary, and send the royal jewels to India to raise money (23). Like the bargains concluded during Karim Khan's reign, however, these proposals were never implemented. The British apparently had no interest in strengthening or supporting the Zand government

because the collapse of the dynasty would eliminate any centralized authority capable of controlling the Persian Gulf region and would facilitate greater British influence in southern Iran and the coastal areas (24). This demonstrates that Iran's conditional diplomatic bargains during the Zand period were structurally predisposed to failure because the British regarded continued weakness, disorder, and the absence of a dominant maritime power as advantageous to their interests. Consequently, conditional and transactional diplomacy, rooted in Iran's structural weakness, not only failed to provide the desired security but also contributed to the gradual erosion of Iranian sovereignty over parts of its territory and the expansion of foreign influence in the Persian Gulf region.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Iran's policy toward the East India Company during the Zand period was shaped less by a coherent, long-term strategy than by a collection of reactive measures adopted in accordance with the circumstances prevailing at each particular moment. The historical evidence indicates that Iran employed three principal instruments during this period: local and ad hoc decrees, coercive diplomacy based on threats and pressure, and conditional diplomatic bargaining. Although these instruments differed in function and implementation, they shared several characteristics, including their response-oriented nature, dependence on ongoing crises, absence of institutional continuity, and overt character. These common features permit their analysis within the framework of "imposed reactivity."

Analysis of these instruments indicates that the Zand government's political conduct toward the British East India Company was strongly influenced by structural limitations. The absence of a systematic diplomatic organization, weak naval capabilities, dependence on the Company's military cooperation, and domestic conflicts reduced the government's ability to formulate and implement a pre-emptive policy. Consequently, measures such as the imposition of commercial restrictions, the issuance of supportive or restrictive decrees, and the presentation of conditional proposals were adopted primarily in response to ongoing developments and for the management of immediate problems.

The findings further indicate that the effectiveness of these instruments was limited. Although Karim Khan Zand was able in certain cases, particularly through the addition of supplementary clauses to commercial agreements, to protect Iranian interests to some extent, these measures did not survive his death because they lacked institutional support and political continuity. His successors abandoned many of the earlier restrictions. This demonstrates that the effectiveness of political instruments during this period depended less on durable institutions than on the personal decisions and capabilities of individual rulers.

The principal contribution of this study is its typology of Iran's political instruments toward the British East India Company on the basis of the concept of "imposed reactivity." This analytical framework demonstrates that the structural limitations of the Zand government directly affected its manner of employing political instruments and caused relations with the East India Company to be organized through temporary and reactive measures. The findings may therefore provide a basis for reinterpreting Iran's foreign relations during comparable historical periods and for examining how state institutional capacities affect the selection and effectiveness of foreign-policy instruments.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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