

**ARTICLES**

**MONGOLIA'S NATIONAL  
SECURITY CHALLENGES**

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*Why Mongolia?*

There are several reasons why Mongolia is or might be of concern to the outside world. Firstly, Mongolia borders with the three nations or areas that have often had antagonistic relations with one another and are most likely to shape the future world order: Russia, China and the Islamic world. Secondly, it is potentially an important region economically due primarily to its wealth in natural resources. Thirdly, with a vast and mostly un-populated territory totaling some 1.5 million sq. km, Mongolia might seem for some overpopulated countries as a plausible Lebensraum. And finally, Mongolia is becoming important because other think it is important. In other words, Mongolia might become an arena where several nations hope to extend their own influence as well as fear the consequences of their opponents doing so.

*Evolution of Mongolia's International Role*

Twice within the 20th century Mongolia has witnessed the crash of neighboring empires: Manchu Ching Dynasty in 1911 and the Soviet Union in 1991. These developments had a great influence on Mongolia's destiny, just as centuries ago the collapse of Mongolian empire shaped the destiny of China and Russia.

Centuries ago, the Mongols ruled an empire encompassing both China and Russia. With the decline of Mongol power, the core of Mongolia's empire was divided between its two neighbors. Thus, since the 17th century Mongolia was little more than a pawn in a great game in Asia.

Almost all of the former and present big powers were involved in this game. But given Mongolia's location that is sandwiched between China and Russia, the role of the latter and relations between them were decisive for its fate.

Mongolia's international role began to grow with Russia's intensified involvement in East Asian affairs a century ago. Russia believed that the control over Mongolia would not only foster its trade with China and the Pacific, but would also position Russia to outflank Great Britain and later Japan in northern China and Korea. However, Mongolia by that time was a dependent part of the Manchu empire and was not yet available for Russia.

When the Manchu empire collapsed in 1911, Outer Mongolia proclaimed its independence. The Mongols were the first to advance the political principle that China, Tibet and Mongolia had all been separately conquered by the Manchus. Therefore, neither Mongolia, nor Tibet belonged to China. All three belonged to the Manchu empire. And with the fall of the latter, China, Mongolia and Tibet were all free to go their own ways.

Unfortunately, Mongolia of those days was not powerful enough to protect its proclaimed independence. Therefore, Mongolia appealed to Russia and the United States seeking their help. But, as put by Owen Lattimore, "this (appeal) was simply ignored by Washington, because at that time and for a long time to come, the only official bureaucratic American understanding was that Mongolia should belong to China." As for Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union, it managed to gain the momentum and during the prevailing part of this century its influence in Mongolia grew enormously ultimately turning this country into a Soviet vassal. However, to be fair, Mongolia did in some way benefit from its alliance with the Soviet Union as far as economic and military matters are concerned.

The Mongols always resented domination by both their neighbors. But traditionally the Russians were considered the lesser of two evils. This preference is rather a matter of quantity, not quality. The Chinese were always perceived by the Mongols as more dangerous simply because there are so many of them. A small immigration of Chinese into Mongolia, if allowed, could easily reduce the Mongols to a minority in their own country, and that was exactly what happened in Inner Mongolia. This danger has not existed as far as Russia is concerned. The Russian regions to the north of Mongolia have always been sparsely populated, similar to Mongolia itself, and the population in these Russian regions does not exceed 8 million.

Mongolia's geopolitical location served prominently the strategic interests of both its neighbors. For China, the loss of control over Outer Mongolia in 1911 entailed a considerable strategic weakening, given the proximity of Beijing to Mongolia. For the USSR, control over Mongolia and deployment of Soviet troops on its territory during the 1960's gave it an ideal springboard for a plausible invasion into China. Moreover, this has guaranteed the security of its vital Baikal Corridor, through which runs the Trans-Siberian railway;

Since the mid-1980's the Soviet leadership pursued a policy toward normalizing its relations with China. In accordance with this course, unilateral concessions were made which were designed to address China's concerns about the famous "three obstacles", including the Soviet military presence in Mongolia

In 1987 Moscow began the withdrawal of its military forces (65,000 troops and 90 combat aircraft) from Mongolia and completed it by January 1992. The Soviet retreat from Mongolia can be viewed as a concession in favor of China rather than respect of Mongolia's independence. In other words, there was another great game in Asia, in which Mongolia was seen as a bargaining chip

But more important is another fact. As a result of the Sino-Russian rapprochement the strategic role of Mongolia as a buffer state between the rival big powers has diminished significantly, though it would be premature to say that this role has vanished completely. Mongolia is a classic example of a small buffer state. The history of diplomacy reveals that the position of a buffer state may profoundly be affected by changes in the power balance of its greater neighbors. Small states may even be deliberately established and preserved by the relevant great powers to serve as a buffer between them. Over the period of time such a state may

be reduced to the position of a vassal, or even removed from the political map as an independent political entity. The next change in the power balance may enable it to rise to full independence in order, perhaps, to relapse again to dependence on one of its neighbors.

However, all these transformations were happening with small buffer states under the old world order. Now that we are entering the new one, countries like Mongolia are supposed to enjoy more conducive international environment than before. But do they indeed?

### *New Opportunities and New Challenges*

Disintegration of the Soviet Union has changed Mongolia's international position fundamentally. While on one hand, it has ultimately improved Mongolia's independent status, on the *other* hand, it has left the country in a great security dilemma.

There were several positive outcomes of the USSR collapse for Mongolia. First of all, for the first time ever in the last three centuries Mongolia has found itself on its own, with Russia unable even to maintain its vital interests on the territory of the former USSR, and China having to focus on its economic reform and political stability. This situation provides a really unique opportunity for Mongolia to shape its independent future.

Secondly, the emergence of new independent states in Central Asia enabled Mongolia to break its isolation as the only independent state with the longest frontier with Russia and China. Despite some differences between these new independent states and Mongolia they have - or might have - similar inter-

ests in regional security affairs and other common vital problems as well.

Thirdly, the collapse of the USSR has led to global geopolitical shifts, one of which is the breakdown of the Cold War's strategic triangle USSR-USA-PRC. At the regional level, there is also no more protracted Sino-Russian confrontation, that affected in an extremely negative way the development of these countries as well as Mongolia's growth. Within a decade of more friendly relations between USSR and PRC, i.e. 1952-1962, Mongolia has gained many benefits from mutual cooperation with its neighbors. Therefore, restoration of normal Sino-Russian relations provides new opportunities for Mongolia.

However, the disintegration of the USSR had at the same time a serious negative impact on Mongolia. The most immediate and tangible of them was the severe economic crisis, since Mongolia depended on the Soviet Union not only for major economic aid (it ensured 40 per cent of the country's national income), but also for the supply of vital commodities (100 per cent of gasoline, 90 per cent of imported machinery and equipment, 50 per cent of consumer goods sold in the Mongolian market, etc.). Properly speaking, the disintegration of the USSR was not the main cause of Mongolia's economic crisis, that started earlier as a result of the Soviet strategic retreat from Mongolia. But taken together these events led to the most serious peacetime collapse in Mongolia that any nation has faced during this century.

Furthermore, the disintegration of the USSR led to a diminishment of western attention to Mongolia, which since 1990 was perceived as the only former socialist country in Asia trying to implement both political and economic reforms. Now Mongolia has to compete for foreign aid and investments not only with East European countries, but with all fifteen former USSR republics as well.

• Apart from economic and financial issues, another set of challenges facing Mongolia after the collapse of the USSR are security challenges. Although there seem to be no immediate external threats (at least military) to Mongolia, Mongols are less confident about the security environment of their country than they have been at any time since the proclamation of independence in 1911. Suffice to name in this connection two of major threats, real or perceived, which have become a point of intense national debate:

(1) Without the Soviet security umbrella, the traditional Mongolian fear of absorption by China has grown enormously. Though this fear might be exaggerated to some extent, there are certain grounds for its existence.

One of them has a subjective feature. That is, so to say, China's ambiguous position on the issue of the Mongolian independence. Certainly, Beijing, having recognized Mongolia's sovereignty decades ago, does not question it

at an official level. Yet a number of vague statements were made by Chinese leaders, and even recently various doubtful history textbooks, geographical maps and other documents have been published, which treat Mongolia as part of China.

Another ground for fear has an objective feature. Geographically China is located between the ocean on the east and high mountains on the west. Therefore, having restrictions to expand horizontally, it would most likely consider expansion to the north and south moving like a match box. (The “match box” concept named so by some western scholars was articulated in 1960’s but then obviously forgotten). If expansion to the south is considered, China has to take into account that South Asia has even denser population than China itself, while it is poor in natural resources. Besides, there is a real threat of direct collision of interests with other big powers. Thus, compared to the South, expansion to the north, particularly to Mongolia, might seem more feasible and beneficial, given the fact that Mongolia now is in some kind of “power vacuum”, let alone other important factors, i.e. huge sparsely populated territory, natural resources, etc.

(2) In view of the virtual absence of the sufficient national and/or regional security system, another threat that faces Mongolia is local tensions which develop in many areas of the Russian, Chinese and Central Asian regions adjacent to Mongolia. These tensions may provoke conflicts of major scale. There is no way Mongolia can “immunize” itself from the involvement in these plausible conflicts, whether it would, be ethnic unrests or religious controversies along the Mongolian border, or flood of refugees into Mongolia. Obviously, Mongolia lacks political, economic and military means in order either to protect its vital interests or to influence parties in these controversies. On the other hand, one may imagine that in cases of ethnic conflicts the Mongolian government, while trying to retain its normal relations with Moscow and Beijing, will have considerable trouble devising an attitude that could win overwhelming support of its own population, which most likely will be eager to side with Mongol-originated communities in neighboring countries.

#### *Changes in the Region and Mongolia’s Search for a Third Partner*

So far no shape of the new order in the area could be observed, but the fact is that the traditional order has gone. The tradition has survived mainly in bilateral knots of contradictions, and this part of the world is connected with the past mostly by the links of old hostility and suspicions. However, it is logical to suggest that this huge geopolitical space has to be organized in one way or

another. The new system of international relations must emerge, but what its core will be is still uncertain.

Certainly, nearly everything has changed inside and around this huge area since the beginning of this century. This region no longer constitutes a mere distant theater of European-based international order. For instance, China is no longer a helpless object to Japanese, Russian and European depredations. Korea - even divided - is no longer anyone's colony; and Japan no longer an insular imperial power. And the dynamics among nations are no longer a competitive scramble for extraterritorial privileges, ports, railways and colonies.

Yet the basic realities remain as they have always been. Whatever is to become a region ultimately depends on the fate of three major powers in the region - Russia, China and Japan and on the future US policy in this region as well.

As far as Mongolia is concerned, it is important to note here that, unlike in the past, when Mongolia's fate was molded exceptionally by the course of Sino-Russian relations, the weight of the American and Japanese factors as well as that of other western countries, in Mongolian affairs is growing now considerably. One can say in this connection that the geopolitical dream of Mongols to have the third big partner is coming true.

Why do Mongols want to have a third partner? First, because they do believe that, apart from important advantages, i.e. economic aid, investments, human contact, etc, the availability of a strong third partner would be a crucial factor as a counter-weight in relations of Mongolia with its immediate neighbors. That is what Mongolia has lacked for a long time. Second, since Mongolia knows that the existence of only two partners makes almost fatal for it, as for any small buffer country. Since that would imply an alliance with one of them, thus making also inevitable all sad consequences of the policy of alliance. Mongolia more than any other country has experienced on itself such consequences and certainly would not want their repetition. Third, the presence of three relatively equal partners will enable Mongolia to build up the balance of independent relations with all three avoiding at the same time the dominance of any of them.

Yet Mongolia has acquired in fact its strong third partner. It is not a single country, as it was expected earlier, but rather a sum of several countries, including the United States, Japan, South Korea, Germany and other western countries, as well as international financial and economic institutions, like World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, etc. The availability of this "collective" partner allows Mongolia to keep its doors open to the world and to continue successfully radical economic and political reforms. Close cooperation with western countries provides Mongolia breath-taking opportunities, new ideas

and commodities that Mongolia has never been able to enjoy before.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that while Mongolia's prospects for the future look promising enough in terms of economic recovery and growth, they do not look so from the point of view of its national security concerns. This is so partly the third partner is a collective and mostly relevant to economic issues. Two main reasons why Mongolia does not feel confident about its security can be named. First of all, the Mongols who have a long experience of being involved in the Soviet alliance policy are probably still accustomed to link security, if not necessarily with the presence of foreign troops on its soil, at least with certain agreements, commitments and guarantees. The absence of these guarantees creates naturally a sense of unprotectedness. Secondly, the past and current history reveals that practically all collective efforts to ensure a small state's security have so far failed. This is so probably because of the very fact of "collectiveness", which inevitably assumes a collection and a collision of various interests, thus creating big obstacles for cohesive decisions and actions. The only happy exception was Kuwait. And there are in fact a very limited number of small countries in the modern world which represent such high economic, political and military-strategic significance for other nations as Kuwait do. Apparently, Mongolia does not belong to them.

Even if one assumes that some day Mongolia will have sea cradity guarantees from its third partner, it still will have to deal with the reality of geography, i.e. insulated location between China and Russia. Even at the end of the 20th century, this factor still has a key importance and is likely to have it in the forthcoming century. Therefore, Mongolia should firmly remember that it cannot rely just on one side of the imagined triangle of its partners. So to say, it has to abide by the reality of the rules of geometry stating that the sum of two triangles is always more than the remaining one.

In other words, the Mongols still have to face the fact that despite the rapidly developing relations with Japan, the United States and other western countries, which are doing a tremendous job by strongly supporting Mongolia's efforts toward democracy and market-oriented economy, both Russia and China as well as the state of their relations continue to remain the major factors to influence Mongolia's fate.

#### *Old Neighbors under New Conditions*

It is not an easy task to try to make predictions of the possible trend of developments inside and between Russia and China -the most unstable of the major countries of the world. Nevertheless, certain similarities and differences in

positions and policies of Beijing and Moscow can be noted, that influence or may influence Mongolia, as well as its security environment.

To begin with similarities:

(1) Both Russia and China will oppose the intentions of any third nation to become a meaningful power in the areas of traditional influences of both countries.

For Mongolia it means that its attempts to create strong and long-term interests of other major powers in Mongolia, so that they would have their own stakes in its security, will definitely meet huge obstacles from the part of her big neighbors. On the other hand, other major powers like the United States or Japan are unlikely to stake their relations with China or Russia in favor of Mongolia, to say nothing about conventional military involvement of any third nations in Mongolia's security affairs.

(2) Both Russia and China are changing in the same definite direction: they are turning into authoritarian regimes combined with market economy. Both countries desperately need foreign investments, advanced technology, joint ventures, i.e. western aid and assistance.

For Mongolia this means that both China and Russia will be impelled, at least in the nearer future, to subordinate their actions, including those in terms of their relations with neighboring countries, to the opinion of western countries. This is a rather tangible guarantee of security for Mongolia. At the same time, a keen need of China and Russia for western aid makes them competitors of Mongolia, which also needs western support. But as compared to Mongolia, both China and Russia represent enormous markets. Moreover, China has already started effective economic reforms years ago, built up an appropriate infrastructure for foreign investment, and has earned trust of western businessmen. Russia, on its part, is incomparably richer in natural resources than Mongolia, let alone its huge scientific and technical capabilities.

(3) Both China and Russia have discovered on their borders, after the disintegration of the USSR, the turbulent Central Asian area with its endangering Pan-Islamic trends and completely UN solved ethnic and border problems. If the current fragile stability in Central Asia collapses, this will pose the most direct threat to national interests of both Russia and China. Hence, obviously the letters will have to achieve mutual understanding in Central Asian affairs. Mongolia is strongly interested to see that Sino-Russian cooperation in this area is a success and is eager to join any efforts aimed at maintaining stability in Central Asia. Unlike most of the former socialist countries, Mongolia has so far



luckily avoided problems derived from ethnic controversies. None the-less, one can assume that the plausible Islamic resurgence in Central Asia may have consequences for Mongolia by giving birth to Islamic fundamentalism in Mongolia's own Kazakh community, which constitutes about 5 per cent of the country's total population of 2.2 million.

As to differences in policies and interests of China and Russia, there are too many of them - at least more than similarities. But there are two aspects that are worth mentioning in terms of their relevance to and importance for Mongolia.

(1) Border and territorial issues. Russia does not have border or territorial claims addressed to China or Mongolia. Mongolia does not have such claims to its neighbors either. As to China, it can potentially claim disputed territories from both Russia and Mongolia, although the border issues between the three countries are considered officially settled. Nonetheless, according to numerous reports, the disputed territories are still regarded by the Chinese, elite as Chinese lands.

In case of Russia, China has claims regarding only certain territories in the Amour basin and Central Asia. Whereas in terms of Mongolia, China may claim not only part of the Mongolian territory, but all of Mongolia. Thus the issue is no more a trivial border dispute, but is brought over to the fundamental issue of relations between two independent states, i.e. recognition of sovereignty.

Most probably, China being intensively engaged in implementing its economic reforms and maintaining its political stability will be unlikely to deal in the nearest future with territorial and border disputes with its neighbors. Still the fact that, as noted earlier, domestic propaganda persistently raises the issue of legitimacy of Chinese territorial demands leads to the conclusion that the seeds of conflict are stored for the potential clash in the future.

There also exists another potential problem. Although Russia does not have, as mentioned earlier, any territorial claims to its neighbors, the latter do have serious claims to Russia. For instance, the issue of Kuril islands. As is known, the issue of these islands, along with the issue of status quo of independent Mongolia, was regulated by the single final resolution of the Yalta Conference in 1945. For Mongolia there are some grounds to fear that Russia's future position on Mongolia's sovereignty and security will depend on the way Moscow will settle the Kuril islands dispute with Tokyo. The issue of Kuril Islands is a really dangerous key to Pandora's Box, which might lead to the revision of other documents related to the results of the World War II as well. Thus, the chain reaction, having started from four small islands near Japan, may burst into the Euro-Asian continent.

(2) Military preparations. China is still reluctant to join the Russian-American disarmament process. While Russia is impelled to reduce its troops and arms because of its disastrous situation in the economy, the economic achievements of China have enabled it to undertake modernization of its armed forces. In the light of this situation, one can explain to a certain extent 'the resumption of Sino-Russian military contacts and subsequent military transactions since the beginning of the 1990's...', which are probably the most significant and radical developments in the two countries' bilateral relations.

Oddly enough, for Mongolia Sino-Russian military contacts and modernization of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) do not imply such great significance, as for instance for other countries in the North East Asia. In any case, Mongolia cannot match either the formidable PLA (whether modernized or not), or giant Russian military forces (whether reduced or not) in the event of direct military confrontation.

What Mongolia would like to see is a firm balance of forces as a result of all these processes, i.e. modernization of PLA, re-reduction of the Russian army, and cooperation between them. Such balance of forces should exclude domination of either of parties. It is vital for Mongolia to find an equal distance between two military monsters, so that to ensure: (a) non-use of the Mongolian territory for military purposes by any of the parties; and (b) non-involvement of Mongolia in any conflict of the parties, including military.

### *Conclusion*

The situation around North East Asia as well as around the entire world resembles at present a chess-board with all chessmen tossed up after the end of the game. The functions of the chessmen are known more or less, but their role in the future game remains uncertain.

Another problem is that the chess-men are changing too. They have been changing throughout the Cold War years as well, but then their evolution was limited by the rigid Cold War framework. Now practically all major and small nations of the region are pushed toward rapid evolution. There is a variety of nations in the region, but one may highlight the three following features that are becoming common for all of them, including Mongolia:

(1) The rise of nationalism as opposed to certain internationalism during the Cold War years

(2) The determination to achieve as much as possible on the international arena while the so called new world order is not yet there. This may result in a

growing aggressiveness of behaviour of powers (whether small or great) and unpredictable changes of their foreign policy orientation, priorities and instruments.

(3) The World War II has left continental Euro-Asia suspended between the two super powers, and its nations did not have a chance to achieve maturity. Now their time has apparently come.

#### **NOTES**

1. Owen Lattimore, "Mongolia as leading state". *Mongolian Studies*, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1988, p.7

2. "Izvestiya", Moscow, April 9, 1992, p.2

3. In 1993 the Beijing Publishing House released a book named "The secret of Outer Mongolia's independence" which contains open claims to Mongolia's sovereignty. Another example: in April 1992, Reuters reported that "China has a secret circular stating that the independent country of Mongolia and a Mongol-inhabited part of Russia should be considered as Chinese territory". There were no comments from Beijing concerning Reuters news.

4. Since 1990 Mongolian armed forces were cut by 19.000 troops of the estimated 33.000 strong armed forces, thus reducing substantially their heavy financial burden on an almost bank-rupt economy. Mongolia's tiny military forces are hardly sufficient to cope even with potential border disturbances, let alone military confrontation with its neighbors.