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Mongolia between Russia and China

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Abstract

When Russia pushed into the Far East and China pushed its domination north of the Great Wall in the early twentieth century, Mongolia became an arena of the Great Game — the struggle for empire between China and Russia. Mongolia's leader at the time, the Jebtsundamba (holy lord) Khutukhtu (1874– 1924), called Mongolia's geopolitical position a “critical condition, like piled up eggs, in the midst of neighboring nations.” Russia historically has regarded Mongolia as a buffer state, whereas China historically has regarded Mongolia as part of China. But after the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644– 1912) fell, Mongolia asserted— and has since preserved—its independence as a nation in the midst of two great powers. Russia's policy initially strove to preserve Mongolian autonomy, but it did not support Mongolian independence in order to maintain China- Russia relations and not alarm Japan. After 1917 the Soviet Union eventually did support Mongolian independence but was not firm in that support. China, however, persistently tried to absorb Mongolia into the new Chinese nation.

Keywords: Buffer State, Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, Manchu Qing Dynasty, Geopolitics, Tripartite agreement, Great Game, Mongolian People's Republic

Introduction

1911 Revolution and Mongolian Independence

After the Chinese revolution in October 1911, Mongolia declared independence in December 1911 and proclaimed the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu leader of the independent Mongolian nation. Mongolia had enjoyed a special relationship with the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644– 1912) court, and Mongolians believed that Mongolia was not an integral part of China. China maintained that Mongolia was indeed an integral part of the country but did not have the military strength to force the integration of Mongolia into the new Chinese republic. Russia's czarist government also was debating policy toward Mongolia. Russia had not recognized the independence of Mongolia but was providing Urga, the Mongolian capital, then was called— military, political, and financial support. In Japanese-Russian negotiations as early as 1907 Russia considered partitioning Mongolia into inner and outer zones, with Japanese and Russian spheres of influence, respectively. During the period from 1911 to 1915 Mongolia, Russia, and China held convoluted negotiations, including 1509 secret bilateral talks, and did much military posturing, which in June 1915 resulted in a tripartite agreement that gave the broadest possible autonomy for outer Mongolia and would make possible its eventual total independence from China. The agreement included provisions on taxes, trade, and other matters but no boundary agreement, but a neutral zone was established between outer and inner Mongolia. China rejected the agreement after the 1917 Russian revolution, and under pressure from China the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu in November 1919 petitioned for the abolition of Mongolia's autonomy, a petition with which China gladly complied. But the reassertion of Chinese control of Mongolia did not last long: Mongolia became a battlefield during the Russian civil war, and the White Russians drove the Chinese from Urga in 1921, only to be defeated themselves by the Bolsheviks.

Mongolian People's Republic

With the blessings of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu and the Soviet Union, Mongolian revolutionaries established a Marxist regime in Urga in 1921. But the Soviet Union, like

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czarist Russia, continued to view Mongolia as a bargaining chip in its dealings with China. The Soviet Union in May 1924 recognized China's "full sovereignty" over Outer Mongolia. A month later, however, after the death of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, Mongolia declared its independence as the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR). China's own internal problems kept it from reasserting control over Mongolia; the most that China could do was protest the Soviet- Mongolian agreements. At the Yalta Conference two decades later Mongolian independence was bolstered when the Allied powers agreed that the status quo in Mongolia should be preserved after the war. After a plebiscite (a vote by which the people of a country express an opinion for or against a proposal especially on a choice of government or ruler) in Mongolia overwhelmingly favored independence, the Chinese Nationalist government grudgingly recognized Mongolia's independence in 1946. China's Communists also were reluctant to recognize Mongolia's independence and harbored irredentist sentiments. (Irredentism is political or state policy directed toward reincorporating a territory that was historically or ethnically related to that state but which has fallen under the control of another.) Even before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in a January- February 1949 meeting with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's personal liaison to the Chinese Communists, Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong (1893- 1976) raised the question of the Soviet Union's attitude concerning the unification of outer and inner Mongolia. Mao again raised the question with Stalin directly while in Moscow in February 1950. Mao expressed his desire for the eventual "reunion" of Mongolia with China, but he did not let his irredentist dreams prevent the conclusion of a Sino- Soviet treaty. The Soviet Union and MPR were uneasy about China's ambitions in Mongolia and demanded that China acknowledge Mongolia's independence. In spite of that declaration, in October 1954 China raised the question again during the first visit Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (1894- 1971) made to China after the death of Stalin. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (1868- 1976), under great pressure from Mao, reluctantly raised the issue with Khrushchev. According to Khrushchev's memoirs, he declined to speak for Mongolia but did not voice strong opposition. Although the Soviet Union may have refused to reconsider the status of the MPR, it did acquiesce to China's assuming a more dominant role in Mongolia. Soviet complacency over China's ambitions in Mongolia soon turned to alarm as Sino- Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s. The Soviet Union responded to the Chinese challenge, and Mongolia was caught in the middle of the Soviet- Chinese dispute. Mongolia's initial wish was to remain neutral, and one official said the Soviet- Chinese dispute would not affect Mongolia's relations with China or the Soviet Union. But Mongolia's precarious geopolitical situation made it impossible to remain neutral for long. Mongolia took a pro- Soviet position after the open split between China and the Soviet Union occurred at the Twenty- second Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Congress in October 1961. In June 1962 Mongolia became the first Asian state to become a full member of the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). This move was a clear indication that Mongolia would closely cooperate with the Soviet Union to the exclusion of China. China, in its attempt to gain influence in

Ulaanbaatar, appealed to Mongolian nationalism In 1962, during the commemoration of the eight hundredth anniversary of Mongolian conqueror Chinggis (also spelled Genghis) Khan's birth, Mongolia dedicated a statue at a location believed to have been his birthplace. China also celebrated the birthday and supported Mongolia's festivities. China, with both racist and nationalistic overtones, characterized Chinggis Khan as a positive "cultural force." The Soviets Union, not surprisingly, criticized the celebrations, characterizing Chinggis Khan as a reactionary "who had overrun, looted, and burned most of what was then Russia" and saying that his "bloody invasions" were a "great historical tragedy" On 16 December 1962 China announced that Mongolian leader Tsedenbal (1916- 1991) would come to Beijing to sign a treaty to settle the boundary. After demarcating the boundary, a treaty was signed in Ulaanbaatar on 2 July 1964, which was the indication to the Chinese Communist government to cooperate with Mongolia in order to attract Mongolians. However, alarmed and intimidated by the absorption, Mongolia leaned toward the Soviet Union. This caused the Mongolian-Chinese relationship to be hostile and antagonizing for three decades or until the demise of the Soviet-led socialist bloc. Since 1990, the two countries' relationship has been developing and improving successfully in all areas. In 1994, both sides signed the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between China and Mongolia, laying the political and legal foundation for the healthy and steady development of their relations. Visits of the high-ranking officials resumed. In December 1998, at the invitation of President Jiang Zemin, President of Mongolia N. Bagabandi paid a state visit to China. Both sides issued a Sino-Mongolian joint statement, deciding to establish neighborly, friendly relations and cooperation into the twenty-first century based on long-term stability and sound trust to point out the course for the development of the bilateral relations in the future. In June 2003, President Hu Jintao paid a state visit to Mongolia. Both sides declared to establish a neighborly and mutual-trusting partnership between China and Mongolia, and issued a joint statement. Mongolian President Elbegdorj paid a state visit to China from April 28 to May 4, 2010, held official talks with President Hu Jintao, and met with premier Wen Jiabao and other officials. At the official talks, the two Heads of State exchanged views and opinions on the current level of Mongol-Chinese bilateral relations, cooperation, and possibilities for further expansion of the two countries' relations. One essential subject of the talks and meetings during the visit was Mongol-Chinese trade and relations. Increasing trade between the two countries and expanding cooperation on mining and infrastructure was remarked by the leaders to be one of the important goals of the bilateral cooperation.¹²⁹ there are over sixty bilateral treaties and contracts to facilitate the two countries' relationship. After two decades, Ulaanbaatar and Beijing jointly inspected the 4,676 km land border and modified the border protocol from 2001 to 2004. However, China has concerns over the democratic Mongolia's relationships beyond its two neighbors, such as relations with the United States and Japan. Since it lost the massive patronage assistance from the Soviet Union in 1990, Mongolia remains under the implementation of the difficult transition of its economy, and China has replaced the Soviet Union as a main trading partner. Forty eight percent

of total Mongolian exports go to China, while 27.7 percent of the total imports come from China. Top export items are copper and molybdenum, animal hide, skin, cashmere, wool, and wood. Garments, food, flour, rice, machinery, and equipment represent the bulk of the imports from China. Additionally, China is one of the main investors in Mongolia, both by the amount of investment and the number of companies, with investment mainly in textiles, garments, trade, services, and mining. Though certain factors, such as historic, economic, and military factors, have a large influence on the Mongolian's suspicious sentiment toward China, the two countries have been succeeding greatly in developing a friendly and neighborly relationship. While Mongolia's aspiration of having stable and friendly relations with China is stemmed from its own survival and the reality of being landlocked between two larger states, China's relations with Mongolia are based on China's interest to keep Russia, the United States, and other states away from its proximity and natural resources. Additionally, Chinese suspicion of the democratic development in Mongolia with other countries fuels this notion as well. Although it has promised to keep a friendly relationship with Mongolia, it is uncertain whether China would maintain this if its peaceful policy toward Mongolia contradicts with other powers' interests. Because of its location between Russia and China, today, as in the past, Mongolia is likely to be of strategic importance to Russia and to China. Mostly owing to its own weakened position, Moscow is likely to favor Mongolia's adopting a neutral posture vis-à-vis its two neighbors. In this way, Russia would continue to underline the strategic importance of Mongolia and use every opportunity to strengthen its position there. Therefore, Russia, after a period of recession is trying to restore the old prestige in neighboring countries, and it underlines Mongolia, who has been successfully reforming its economic and political institutions according to the democratic principles. In addition, Mongolia's attempt to build compact, efficient, and professional military forces with the assistance of western powers, particularly with the United States, and its active contribution to the international peace support operation undoubtedly raise concerns between Russian elites. Therefore, even though the relationship between Russia and Mongolia seems to be improving, economic constraints and old Soviet legacy prevents it from developing further

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