



WWJMRD 2018; 4(12): 69-72
www.wwjmr.com
International Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
Refereed Journal
Indexed Journal
Impact Factor MJIF: 4.25
E-ISSN: 2454-6615

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Mongolia's Complicated Relationship with China

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the causes of Mongolia's complicated relationship with China. The threat perception in Mongolia during communist rule was formed by the leaders and reinforced by the guidance of former USSR. The attitudes of the Mongolian political elites toward China have changed noticeably from mid-2000 due to increased interactions and the economic benefits but public attitudes have not changed because of lingering impacts of historical experiences and the unwillingness of the political elites to deconstruct the overly negative schemas that were consolidated during the Cold War.

Keywords: Communist rule, Outer Mongolia, Soviet Union, *Naadam*, The Chinese Cultural Revolution, Great Wall, Inner Mongolia

Introduction

Sino-Mongolian relations date back to the third century, when nomadic tribes were interacting agrarian people living in the territory of China. Eventually, the Great Wall was created to keep nomads out and peasants in. The Mongolian Empire (1206-1271) and the Mongol-ruled Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) were the main sources of anti-nomadic barbarian attitudes in China and Russia. Following the demise of the Yuan Dynasty, Mongols were fragmented and more vulnerable to the rising Chinese Ming (1368-1644) and Manchu-ruled Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. The Qing Dynasty took over Inner Mongolia in 1636, Outer Mongolia in 1691, and Western Mongolia in 1755. Manchu rulers maintained specific restrictions on the interactions between Chinese and Mongolian subjects to prevent Chinese settlements in Mongolia and divided Mongolia into multiple administrative units to prevent any unified uprisings against the colonial rulers. As ethnic-Chinese bureaucrats dominated in the waning Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty, at the beginning of 1900s, the Qing Dynasty lifted its earlier restrictions on Chinese settlements and economic activities (agriculture, mining, and trade) in Mongolia and adopted a "New Administration Reform" policy aimed at integrating Mongolia, East Turkestan, and Manchuria politically, economically, and culturally with China. For Chinese and Manchu rulers, the policy was to stop Russian expansion in Inner Asia, but the Mongols and Uyghurs perceived it as a clear colonial policy of assimilation. Nonetheless, the "New Administration Reform" policy partially succeeded in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, but failed in Outer Mongolia, because the Mongolian political elites contested the policy and elicited support from Russia to gain their independence. To suppress the nationalist movements in Inner and Outer Mongolia, the newly-established Chinese government dispatched military expeditionary forces and increased Chinese settlements in Outer Mongolia in 1919. The following year, Japan supported the fleeing Imperial Russian military commanders and their attempt to liberate Mongolia from Chinese while also helping it advance its plan to establish a Pan-Mongolian state and to expand its colony into Siberia. But Soviet Russia expanded its military operations into Mongolia to defeat the rebel Russian military units and established the first communist state in 1921. The Soviet -Mongolian agreement of 1921 and the Sino - Soviet agreement of 1924 which constituted the basis of the international status of Outer Mongolia were, in reality mutually contradictory. USSR being too weak during these years and strongly craving to arrive at some agreement with China, took a cautious line towards Outer Mongolia in spite of the Soviet Mongolian agreement.

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From 1921 to 1989, Mongolia allied with the Soviet Union and became a hostage of the Sino-Soviet tension, which lasted for about three decades since the 1960s. The dynamics of the Mongolian official attitudes toward China since 1911 have fluctuated between two extremes: hostile and friendly. Under the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty, Mongolians and Chinese together opposed Manchu rule since both had similar feelings as colonial subjects. As the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, Outer Mongolia was neither hostile nor friendly to the Chinese provincial government until Russia and China covertly jeopardized Mongolia's independence by recognizing Chinese suzerainty over Mongolia in 1915. Anti-Chinese attitudes were inflamed as China occupied Mongolia militarily and expanded Chinese settlements in Mongolia between 1915 and 1921.

When China was weakened by internal turmoil and external Interventions, Mongolian official attitudes toward China were neutral at key junctures, especially in 1911 and between 1921 and 1945. Mongolia's political elites even attempted to re-unite Inner Mongolia during this period. The Mongolian military joined with the Soviet army to liberate the northern part of China from the Japanese in 1945 and the three nations entered into a symbolic friendship under their respective communist parties in 1950. China and Mongolia further established a non-militarized border in the 1950s. In 1956, Mongolia de-commissioned its border troops and drastically reduced its military forces, which had been built up during the war with Japan. China provided grant aids and loans, which were used to construct factories, roads, and bridges, and 18,000 Chinese laborers with their families worked on the construction projects until 1964. Despite good relations with China a lingering ambivalence of Chinese leadership claimed towards Mongolia shaped Mongolia's threat perception towards China during this period. China's past claims of Mongolia as a part of China triggered the fear that Mongolia's newfound independence can be hindered if China may take over Mongolia. Although Mongolians were under the influence of both of its two neighbors during some periods of time, Russia's domination of Mongolia was less threatening to Mongolia. Soviet Russia saw Mongolia as a buffer state, while the more serious threats of colonization, and cultural absorption came from China. The pressing danger for Mongolia was not perceived as a colonial control of the empire state, but actual and physical settlement of Chinese people was associated to a fate of American Indians. By 1966, the friendly relationship had disappeared, as a visiting foreigner noticed the huge Soviet presence, the disappearance of Chinese participants in the annual *Naadam* parade, guarded encampments of Chinese laborers, which was in stark contrast to the earlier visible Chinese presence, small numbers of Soviet advisors, and the participation of Chinese workers in the *Naadam* parade in 1959. Numerous explanations can be given for the sudden shift of mood toward China in 1960s.

First, Mongolia, unlike North Korea, was caught in the middle of the Sino-Soviet tension, because of its geography. Second, ties between the Mongolian leadership and the Soviets were stronger than those between the Chinese and most of the Mongolian leaders, who had been mostly educated in the Soviet Union. Third, the political elites were fearful of Chinese assimilation and were uncertain about Chinese intentions. Most importantly, the

political leader's calculations to maintain a repressive controlled regime likely had a crucial effect on the changes in attitude. Tsedenbal, who served as President and Prime Minister from 1952 to 1984, personally hated the Han Chinese. He had studied in Russia for nine years and married a Russian woman. At the outset, the young, 36-year old Prime minister needed to consolidate his political clout by eliminating his opponents and critics. At the time, his pro-Soviet stand was criticized by the senior party leaders and intellectuals, especially during the Mongolian version of the de-Stalinization process, which involved eliminating the cult following of Choibalsan's personality and the rise of nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. Second, Tsedenbal needed a strong Soviet backing and assistance for transforming Mongolia from an agrarian society to a Soviet-style society. At the same time, the Soviets desired to eliminate the spreading Chinese influence in Mongolia and use Mongolia as a geo-strategic buffer for its military operations against China. Not for the first time, Mongolian and Soviet communist leaders collaborated to form the pro-Soviet government in Mongolia. The Soviets backed the Mongolian communists to eliminate their religious and feudal opponents. Then, between 1963 and the mid-1980s Sino-Mongolian relations turned hostile due to the Sino-Soviet conflict. Following the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in 1986, Sino-Mongolian relations again entered into a neutral and friendly period. Although the pattern reveals the importance of external factors on the attitudes of a buffer state toward its neighbors, domestic factors, especially the actions of the political elites, were often the drivers of opinion in the late communist period and during the democratic transition. By the 1960s, the Soviet-style education and propaganda organizations, along with other controlling organizations had been fully established and equipped with new instruments and manned with specialists, who were educated and trained in the Soviet Union. For example, a section at the Ministry of Internal Affairs was tasked to censor media and literature, becoming a special Department of Control for Media and Literature. The personnel worked directly under the party leaders and the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party Central Committee in 1953. The department was responsible for censoring all publications, newspaper materials, and radio broadcasts (from 1934) and television transcripts (from 1967) prior to public dissemination; controlling the content of foreign publications, pre-screening films, documentaries, and plays; and confiscating anti-regime publications or other restricted materials. The secret police was also fully institutionalized for its control over the population. Several sources of new information were available for Mongolians at the time: education, works of organized propaganda, newspapers, radio and television (with one Mongolian channel, and later, a Soviet channel), and rumors. From the mid-1960s and 1970s, most of the history textbooks were re-written to highlight the sacrifices made by Mongolian communists and Soviets, in protecting Mongolia's independence and to transform the Mongolian backward agrarian society into a socialist one. Obviously, China, as the main target for the propaganda, was depicted as a nation with historic intentions to colonize Mongolia and to assimilate the Mongolian population, as had been the case for Inner Mongolians and Tibetans. Organized propaganda and the news media played major role in portraying the evil intentions of the Chinese and the

need for Soviet military protection. The Sino-Indian war in 1962, the Chinese nuclear test in 1964, Mao's statements and claims about Mongolia, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (particularly in Inner Mongolia), the *Ussuri* River Armed Conflict in 1969, and later, the Sino-Vietnam conflict in 1979 were cited as proof for China's threat. The Mongolian communist party leaders made statements to criticize the Chinese government and to express Mongolia's support of the Soviet Union's policy toward China. Whether the statements were made because of pressure from the Soviets or from Mongolians to appease their colleagues in Moscow is, hard to know. At the same time, the communist party classified any news that could be used in the enemy's propaganda, such as accidents, failures, or mistakes that involved Mongolians and Soviets. Negative rumors about a Chinese conspiracy for *coup d'état*, or possible sabotage were widespread. The other main sources of rumor were the students and people who studied at communist bloc countries, though most went to the Soviet Union. Besides these sources of new information, the national films, drama, and literature was used to introduce negative images of China and Chinese people. A Mongolian national film studio was established in 1954 and its production increased in the 1960s, as Mongolian producers were graduating from the Soviet Union. Only one movie, *Ardiin Elch (People's Envoy)*, depicted a positive image of the Chinese settlers in Mongolia. The movie was produced at the height of friendly Sino-Mongolian relations, in 1959. The movies, documentary films, dramas, literature, and patriotic songs all painted an evil image of Chinese people. Chinese citizens, mostly laborer and their families, were also controlled (guarded) until their departure in 1964. Moreover, Chinese settlers, their children, people who were believed to have Chinese ethnic links, and experts on China (linguists, historians, and others with experience in China) were marginalized from the society by having their access to privileges like party membership, higher education, and government works etc limited and they were kept under control of the secret police. Tsendenbal and his colleagues eliminated some of their opposition, who had alleged connections with Chinese ethnic ties or who even had false connections with the Chinese government. The acts of repression and control systematically created a fearful population, to the point that the people avoided talking about China and Chinese people; interacting with Chinese settlers, their children and the purged people; or talking negatively about the Soviets. People with Chinese ethnic connections hid their true ethnicity and most registered themselves as *Khalkh*, the dominant ethnic group in Mongolia. The objective of the institutionalized efforts was to prove that theories of "Chinese takeover" and "Chinese assimilation" were plausible, to justify the Soviet political and military presence in Mongolia from 1966-1992 and, for Tsendenbal and his cult, to strengthen their political base by marginalizing any dissenting views and covering up the negative side of his policies. Some Mongolians maintain that Tsendenbal managed to stop Chinese expansions in the 1960s and 1980s by expelling Chinese workers and settlers, and thus, his negative attitudes toward China were similar to many of the previous Mongolian political and religious leaders. In Mongolia still today, the negative attitudes toward China remain consistent as seen in major public opinion polls and the public discourses (e.g., media,

blogosphere) in both Ulaanbaatar and countryside. The main security documents issued since 1990s including the Concept of Mongolia's Foreign Policy and "Concept of National Security" presents distrust to China. In the Concept of National Security, the security threat was identified as "massive migrants from a neighboring state", "sharp increase in number of resident foreigners", "dissemination of false information by outsiders that may plant a doubt about Mongolian independence", and "assimilation into other cultures as a result of policies of foreign countries and external forces". A high level of threat perception was also related to identity issues and elevated by handling of the human right issues of Inner Mongolia, whom Mongolia felt closer to. Mongolians fear that they may face the same fate. As a result, the movements in the beginning of 1990's of spiritual unification of all Mongols began to take place. For example, the students who call themselves Prince Denchugdungrob Association "protested in front of Chinese embassy against the violence and abuse against Inner Mongolians in China." In addition, Mongolians have been fearful that they might become dominated by China. They suspect that an overflow of Chinese migrants to Mongolia would duplicate the situation in Inner Mongolia. However, despite the fear, China was important for Mongolia to develop its economy and replaced a gap left by the former Soviet Union. Although China was perceived as a threat in Mongolia, cooperation with China allowed Mongolia to avoid the greater loss. Mongolia made the choice to accept the risk associated with cooperating with China. Due to its critical need to survive and develop, Mongolian leaders welcomed the cooperation with China. As China has offered much needed economic cooperation and political reassurance for Mongolia, the reward for cooperating with China overweighed the cost. With the growing positive developments in the bilateral relations, partnership with China proved to be vital and fruitful to Mongolia; previous beliefs of China began to be changed. With the growing level of cooperation during this period of time, the threat perception consistently declined from 1993 to 1999. With a continuous reassurance from Chinese Government and promising bilateral relations, Mongolian leaders began to ease their perception towards China towards the end of this critical period. Logically, generations of people, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, will likely have the most neutral view of China and be rather cautious and mistrusting of Russia. They have not experienced the anti-Chinese (pro-Soviet) propaganda, and are able to have multiple views on most issues, links with the West, and access to vast amounts of information (from the Internet, cable TV, and newspapers). The most significant events they are likely to recall are the winning of two gold medals by Mongolians at the Beijing Olympic game, rather than second-hand knowledge about the Tiananmen incident and bad images of China from the 1960s. The increasing number of Mongolian students in China and China's policy of visa waiver, granting access to Chinese infrastructure and medical facilities, developmental aid, and assistance for Mongolia will certainly affect the attitudes of future generations in Mongolia. Over the last 20 years in particular, their relations have developed rapidly and made remarkable achievements. With its growing need of energy and resources, China has a deep aspiration to secure and acquire

possession, either partially or wholly, of natural resources such as coal, copper, and uranium in Mongolia. China permitted landlocked Mongolia the use of the port of Tianjin for its import and export. It also committed itself to a package of loans and aid and an increase in trade, air services, and cultural and scientific exchanges, while Mongolia committed itself to protecting Chinese investments in Mongolia. 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. At the end Mongolia will try to benefit from economic linkages with China's booming economy. There is a possibility for Mongolia to integrate more closely with world economy through China in general and the economy of Asia and Pacific in particular. The market for pure ecological and mineral products and raw materials will continue to increase. To meet the market needs of China and the world, Mongolia's geographical location connecting Asia and Europe will play an important role.

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