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The "Great Game": Mongolia Between Russia and China

Eric Hyer
Provo

Throughout history it has been the fate of small nations surrounded by larger neighbors either to be divided and absorbed by the larger nations, or survive as buffer states by mastering balance-of-power politics and skillful diplomacy. Ever since Russia pushed into the Far East and China extended its domination north of the Great Wall, Mongolia has been one arena of the "great game" in the struggle for empire between Russia and China. The Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu characterized Mongolia's geopolitical position as a "critical condition, like piled up eggs, in the midst of neighboring nations."¹

Russians have historically regarded Mongolia as a classic buffer state. On the other hand, Chinese have viewed Mongolia as historically part of China. After the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, Mongolia asserted and has preserved its independence as a nation in the midst of two hegemonic powers while other nations in similar circumstances have not enjoyed the same fate. Russian policy initially sought to preserve Mongolian autonomy from China but did not support Mongolian independence, in order to maintain Russia-China relations and not alarm Japan. After 1917, the Soviet Union did eventually support Mongolian independence but was not firm in this support. China, on the other hand, persistently attempted to absorb Mongolia into the new Chinese nation-state. This paper briefly examines the triangular diplomacy between Russia, Mongolia and China from 1911.

The 1911 Chinese Revolution And Mongolian Independence

Following the October 1911 Chinese revolution, the Mongols declared independence in December 1911 and proclaimed the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu leader of an independent Mongolian nation. Mongolia had enjoyed a special relationship with the Manchu court and Mongols believed that Mongolia was not an integral part of China. Initially Russian and Chinese newspapers reported the Mongolian declaration of independence but subsequently dropped the term "independence" and adopted the term "autonomy." Chinese maintained that

Mongolia was an integral part of China, but at the time Beijing did not have the military strength to force the integration of Mongolia into the new Chinese republic.

Yuan Shikai, the President of the Republic of China, made a personal appeal for unity. After several unanswered telegrams from Yuan, the Jebtsundamba responded: "We should establish ourselves in amity and peace as neighboring states each adhering to its own territory and preserving its integrity." Hinting at involving Russia or even Japan as protectors of Mongolia's fragile independence, he further stated that, "it will be to our mutual advantage to invite a neighboring state to act as intermediary." The Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu believed that under unrelenting pressure from China, Urga had no other option than to seek the support of czarist Russia.² President Yuan failed to persuade the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu to rescind Mongolia's declaration of independence and eventually turned to Russia for help.

Within the czarist government at the time, Russian policy toward Mongolia was also being debated. The czarist government had not recognized Mongolia's independence but was providing Urga significant political, financial, and military support. In Russo-Japanese negotiations as early as 1907, they considered dividing Mongolia into outer and inner zones in Russian and Japanese spheres of influence respectively, but Japan and Russia reconsidered this same idea in 1912. In 1911, following Mongolia's declaration of independence, Russian foreign minister S.D. Sazonov advocated that Moscow assume a role limited to mediation, while finance minister V.N. Kokovtzev pushed for a much more forceful policy. Sazonov prevailed and Moscow told Mongolian authorities that Russia would not assist Mongolia in obtaining independence but would resist the growing Chinese influence. Russia's objective was to preserve Mongolia's autonomy from China and ensure its own commercial and other rights in Mongolia granted earlier by the Manchu court. Moscow adopted a policy supporting an "autonomous" outer Mongolia that remained part of China and sought to assume the role of mediator between Beijing and Urga. To this end, St. Petersburg initiated an intricate diplomatic initiative involving both Urga and Beijing.³ However, Beijing rejected Russian mediation and in June 1912 told the Russian envoy to Beijing, V.N. Krupenskoy, Sino-Mongolian relations had to be settled through direct negotiations between Beijing and Urga without Russian interference.⁴

Initially rebuffed by Beijing, St. Petersburg decided to initiate secret negotiations with the Urga authorities. These began in October 1912 and on November 3, the

¹ *Records of the Department of State Relating to Political Relations Between Russia (and the Soviet Union) and Other States, 1910-29* (hereafter *Records*), microcopy no. 340, 761.93/88.

² *Records*, microcopy no. 340, 761.93/88-89.

³ Belov and Ran 1994, 175-181.

⁴ Luzyanin and Ran.

two parties signed a treaty that pledged St. Petersburg to assist outer Mongolia in preserving its "autonomy," maintaining a national army, and keeping Mongolia free of Chinese troops and colonizers. This agreement was written by Russian authorities even before negotiations started. Mongolian negotiators objected to the division of Mongolia into outer and inner spheres and did not want to sign the agreement. Russian authorities told the Mongols that Chinese troops were already marching toward Urga and that unless Mongolia signed the agreement, Russia would not defend Mongolia.

Chinese authorities were indignant about the Russian-Mongolian agreement and reluctantly agreed to Russian-Chinese negotiations in a last attempt to assert Chinese domination over outer Mongolia. Sino-Russian negotiations began in November 1912. China wanted recognition of its sovereignty over outer Mongolia, but Russia insisted on three conditions: no Chinese troops, no Chinese administration, and no Chinese colonization in outer Mongolia. During these bilateral negotiations alternatively with Mongolia and then China, St. Petersburg took no initiative to open tripartite discussions. But Urga, alarmed by the Sino-Russian negotiations, was concerned that any agreement would be at the expense of Mongolia and began to push for a seat at the table in the Russian-Chinese talks. In May 1913, Mongolia demanded to join the Russian-Chinese negotiations. The Russians rejected this proposal, arguing that involving Mongolia in any negotiations at the present stage might only confuse the discussions and compromise agreements already reached with Beijing. The Russian consul general in Urga, A.Y. Miller, tried to reassure the Mongols, telling them that St. Petersburg would secure the "full autonomy" of outer Mongolia.

Urga, unappeased by this argument, continued to press the issue. Also, in the spring of 1913 Mongolia's interior minister, Tserenchimid, attempted to go to Japan to seek Tokyo's assistance but was prevented from doing so by Russia and China. In the meantime China dispatched troops to inner Mongolia, and Urga responded by sending troops to resist the Chinese invasion. In July the Mongolian foreign minister informed Beijing would not recognize any Sino-Russian agreement. On August 31, 1913 Beijing his government secretly approached the Mongolian government and proposed opening Sino-Mongolian negotiations. For the first time since declaring independence, the Mongols agreed to allow Chinese diplomats to travel to Urga for talks. Russia strongly opposed Mongolia-China talks and, in exchange for Urga dropping its demand to participate in the Russian-Chinese negotiations and canceling scheduled talks with Beijing, agreed to open tripartite negotiations, in which Urga would enjoy equal status with St. Petersburg and Beijing after the conclusion of a Sino-Russian agreement.

After a year of difficult negotiations and a Russian threat to break off negotiations if China did not accept Russia's demands, St. Petersburg and Beijing signed an agreement. Russia recognized Chinese "suzerainty" over outer Mongolia in exchange for Chinese recognition of Mongolian "autonomy." St. Petersburg also agreed to facilitate the establishment of relations between Urga and Beijing.⁵ Russia achieved its diplomatic objectives of establishing Mongolia as a buffer by maintaining its autonomy. China was unhappy with the agreement but Mongolia felt betrayed and sent a protest to Beijing saying that the Mongolian government considered "relations with China severed forever."⁶ On December 16, 1913, Urga notified St. Petersburg that it had terminated relations with China and did not recognize the validity of the Sino-Russian declaration recognizing Chinese "suzerainty" over outer Mongolia.

Tripartite negotiations were opened in Kiakhta on September 8, 1914. Urga expressed the hope that during these negotiations St. Petersburg would support its desire for an independent Mongolia that included all of greater Mongolia. St. Petersburg urged Mongolia not to push for total independence and informed Mongolian negotiators that the Russian government had never intended to support Urga's desire for an independent greater Mongolia. The Russian and Chinese objective in these negotiations was to prevail upon Mongolia to accept the Russian-Chinese agreement and press Mongolia to remove its troops from inner Mongolia. Without Russian support Mongolia had no hope to realize its dream of an independent greater Mongolia. A June 1915 tripartite agreement afforded the broadest possible "autonomy" for outer Mongolia at the time and paved the way for its eventual total independence from China. The agreements included provisions on trade, taxes, and other matters but no boundary agreement. However, neutral zone between outer and inner Mongolia was established.

Beijing made its future intentions clear when it dismissed the tripartite agreement as "nothing but a diplomatic trick of a temporary character."⁷ The conditions under which the Kiakhta treaty was concluded changed dramatically two years later with the overthrow of the czar and the October Revolution in Russia. The new Bolshevik government was unable to assist Mongolia in resisting China's attempts to reassert full control over outer Mongolia. Under tremendous pressure from Beijing, the Khutukhtu "petitioned" for the abolition of Mongolia's autonomy in

⁵ For treaties see, *Supplement to The American Journal of International Law* 10, no. 4 (October 1916):230-57. For legal implications of agreements see, Williams 1916, 798-808; Nemzer 1939, 452-64.

⁶ Friters 1974, 174.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

November 1919, and China gladly "complied." But, the reassertion of Chinese control did not last long. Mongolia became a battlefield in the Russian civil war and the White Russians drove the Chinese from Urga in 1921. But the Whites' victory soon turned to defeat at the hands of the Bolsheviks.

Establishment Of The Mongolian People's Republic

With the blessings of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu and the support of the Soviet Union, Mongolian revolutionaries established a Marxist regime in Urga in 1921. But the Soviet Union, like czarist Russia, still viewed Mongolia as a bargaining chip in its relations with China. In May 1924 the Soviet Union recognized China's "full sovereignty" over outer Mongolia. However, a month later, following the death of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, Mongolia declared its independence as the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR). China's internal problems prevented it from reasserting control and the most it could do was protest Soviet-Mongolian agreements.

Mongolian independence was bolstered two decades later at the Yalta Conference when the Allies agreed that the status quo in Mongolia would be preserved following the war. The Nationalist Chinese government grudgingly agreed to recognize Mongolia's independence as a precondition to concluding the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in August 1945.

Communist China's Quest For Influence

Chinese communists were also reluctant to acknowledge Mongolian independence and harbored irredentist sentiments. In an interview with Edgar Snow in 1936, Mao Zedong expressed the dream that the "Outer Mongolian republic will . . . become part of the Chinese federation."⁸ While in Moscow in February 1950, Mao Zedong raised the issue with Stalin. Although Mao expressed his desire for the eventual "reunion" of Mongolia with China, he did not allow his irredentist dreams to prevent the conclusion of a Sino-Soviet treaty.⁹ The MPR and the USSR were apprehensive about China's ambitions in Mongolia and insisted on a Chinese declaration acknowledging Mongolian independence.¹⁰

⁸ Snow 1961, 96.

⁹ *Talk at the Chengdu Conference, March 10, 1958*, in Mao 1969, 163-64; Kapitsa 1979, 31-32; Kruchinin and Olgin 1971, 25.

¹⁰ See Rupen 1963, 288.

Despite Beijing's declaration affirming Mongolia's independence, Beijing raised the issue again in October 1954 during Khrushchev's first trip to China after Stalin's death. Under intense pressure from Mao, Zhou Enlai reluctantly broached the issue with Khrushchev. Khrushchev, according to his memoirs, declined to speak for Mongolia but did not voice strong opposition.¹¹ Although the Soviets may have refused to reconsider the status of the MPR, subsequent developments in Russian-Mongolian-Chinese tripartite relations give credence to suggestions that the Soviets acquiesced to China's demand to assume a dominant role in Mongolia.¹²

An Asian diplomat in Ulaanbaatar characterized the growing Chinese influence in Mongolia during the 1950s by saying: "The momentum of Chinese initiative is so great, the attractive force of Chinese dynamism so overpowering, that it is hard to see how, in the long run, Russia can maintain her position here."¹³ China also encouraged pan-Mongolian nationalism by constructing a Chinggis Khan mausoleum in Inner Mongolia, although his birthplace was in outer Mongolia.

As Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s, Soviet complacency over Chinese ambitions in Mongolia turned to alarm. The Soviets responded to the Chinese challenge, and Mongolia was caught in the middle of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Ulaanbaatar's initial wish was to remain neutral, and a high-level official commented that the dispute would not influence Mongolia's relations with the PRC or the Soviet Union. But Mongolia's precarious geopolitical circumstances made it impossible to remain neutral for long. Following the open split between the USSR and PRC after the Twenty-second Congress of the CPSU in October 1961, Mongolia adopted a pro-Soviet position.¹⁴ In June 1962, Mongolia was the first Asian state to become a full member of the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).¹⁵ This was a clear indication that the MPR had decided to cooperate closely with the USSR to the exclusion of China.

Beijing appealed to Mongolian nationalism in its bid to gain influence in Ulaanbaatar. During the commemoration of the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan's birth in 1962, the Mongols dedicated a statue at a location believed to be his birthplace. The PRC also celebrated the event and supported the MPR festivities. Beijing, with both nationalistic and racist overtones, portrayed Chinggis Khan as

¹¹ Shi Bo 1993, ch. 8; Talbott 1976, 325; Mao 1969, 540; *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 16, no. 34 (September 16, 1964), 5-7; Kruchinin and Olgin, 25.

¹² Sulzberger 1955, 18; Rupen 1962, no. 5:4; 1964, no. 540:2; Kaznacheev 1962, 142; Ginsburgs and Pinkle 1972, 174.

¹³ Jones 1961, 307; Rupen 1959, 328-29; *Mongols of the Twentieth Century* 1964, 272.

¹⁴ *NYT* December 17, 1961, 33; Bawden, *CNA*, November 16, 1962, no. 445 :6.

¹⁵ Topping *NYT*, June 9, 1962, 1; Uren 1965, 204.

a positive "cultural force." An article published in *Lishi yanjiu* argued that Chinggis Khan had played a "progressive" role by building Mongolia into a "great power" and developing relations with Europe, breaking down all barriers between East and West.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the Soviets criticized the celebrations. They characterized Chinggis Khan as a reactionary "who had overrun, looted, and burned most of what was then Russia" and said his "bloody invasions" were a "great historical tragedy."¹⁷

China Plays Its Last Card

On December 16, 1962 China announced that Tsedenbal would travel to Beijing to sign an agreement to settle the boundary. After demarcating the boundary, a treaty was signed in Ulaanbaatar on July 2, 1964.¹⁸ To forestall further degeneration in Sino-Mongolian relations, Beijing wanted to assure Ulaanbaatar that China had relinquished its irredentist claims in Mongolia, and a boundary treaty was the most unambiguous way to achieve this.¹⁹

This boundary agreement closed a long chapter in Sino-Mongolian relations. At the time of the 1915 Kiakhta treaty, Beijing had agreed to delimit the boundary, but this was never done, and China eventually reasserted control over outer Mongolia for a brief period.²⁰ After the Chinese Nationalists' recognition of the MPR "in her existing boundaries" in 1946, no boundary settlement was negotiated. Mao's statements in the 1930s concerning the future reintegration of outer Mongolia into China and his later comments to Stalin and Khrushchev in the 1950s on the same question underscored Chinese irredentism. Despite recognizing the MPR in 1950 and affirming the PRC's respect for Mongolian independence and territorial integrity, Beijing was reluctant to negotiate a boundary settlement.

Mongols also had reason to be apprehensive about the Russians' commitment to Mongolian independence. The 1954 Mao-Khrushchev meeting demonstrated that the Soviets still viewed Mongolia's status as "negotiable," just as czarist Russia had four decades earlier.²¹

Negotiating a boundary settlement was clearly a diplomatic move by Beijing to counterbalance the growing Soviet-Mongolian alliance and attempt to salvage

deteriorating Sino-Mongolian relations to maintain a favorable balance of power in this triangular relationship.²² Recognizing a boundary dividing China and Mongolia was Beijing's last card. No doubt China hoped that a flexible approach to the boundary dispute would persuade Ulaanbaatar at least to take a more balanced position in Mongolian-Russian-Chinese triangular relations.²³

The Chinese repeatedly expressed the hope that the boundary treaty would improve Sino-Mongolian relations. A *People's Daily* editorial published the day Tsedenbal arrived in Beijing to sign the treaty stressed the intimacy of their friendship and said, "We are convinced that . . . the signing of the Sino-Mongolian Boundary Treaty will be a positive contribution to the strengthening of fraternal friendship and solidarity between the Chinese and Mongolian peoples."²⁴

Conclusion

At a Conference on the Question of Ideological Work held in Ulaanbaatar in January 1963, just two weeks after the signing of the boundary treaty, Tsedenbal reminded the Chinese of their past domination that ended through the assistance of the Russians, who helped Mongols realize their "dreams of freedom, independence and happiness."²⁵ Mao personally responded on July 10, 1964, just a week after the exchange of the final instruments of ratification of the boundary treaty, by saying that under the guise of helping Mongolia gain independence, the Soviets had in fact begun to dominate the MPR.²⁶

Now, three decades after the boundary treaty, China and Mongolia remain extremely sensitive about their historical relationship. The triangular Mongolian-Russian-Chinese relationship is entering a new period of flux and possible instability. Democratic Mongolia could emerge as the focal point for a reinvigorated pan-Mongolian nationalism that will surely alarm Russia and China. One Russian scholar has argued that now Russia and China share a common interest in thwarting possible threats to national unity posed by pan-Mongolism.²⁷ Russia also needs Mongolia as a buffer state to shield it from an awakening Chinese dragon that is becoming an economic and military power. And apparently the

¹⁶ Han 1962, 1-10.

¹⁷ Hersch 1963, 1; Rupen, 1963, 271, 77-78.

¹⁸ *Renmin Bao*, December 24, 1962, 1; *Survey of China Mainland Press*, January 2, 1963, no. 2889: 32-37; *CNA*, January 18, 1963, 6-7; *Renmin Bao*, July 3, 1964, 3.

¹⁹ See Rupen 1973, no. 5: 467-69; Salisbury 1973, 239; Adel 1984, 147.

²⁰ See Lamb 1968, 202.

²¹ See Rupen, *CNA*, November 13, 1964, no. 540: 2.

²² See Rupen 1966, 54.

²³ *CNA*, September 25, 1964, no. 534:2.

²⁴ *Renmin Bao*, December 25 and 31, 1962, no. 288: 39.

²⁵ *Joint Publication Research Service*, September 24, 1964, 26544: 14.

²⁶ *NYT*, September 6, 1964, IV:3; *Current Digest of Soviet Press*, September 16, 1964, no. 34: 3-7.

²⁷ Miasnikov 1994, 62: 23; Voskressensky 1994, 35.

legacy of the Chinese empire lingers in the minds of Chinese. In 1992, China's State Security Ministry revived the specter of Chinese irredentism when it issued a statement saying that "As of now, the Mongolian region comprises three parts that belong to three countries [the Russian regions of Tuva and Buryatia, Mongolia, and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region]... [but] the Mongolian region has from ancient times been Chinese territory."²⁸

²⁸ *International Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1992.

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