

MONGOLIA AS A MODERN SOVEREIGN NATION-STATE

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Defining the state

Mongolia's history has encompassed a broad tapestry of state formation, from nomadic tribalism, through transcontinental empire and semi-colonial subordination, to its modern status as Modern Sovereign Nation-State (MSNS) - an actor in international politics and participant as theoretical equal in the community of nations. What are the characteristics of the modern Mongolian nation and state? What has been its role in the clash of empires that characterized world history, and how does it fit in the power blocs of the contemporary period? How can we describe Mongolia's current meta-constitution, or what Montesquieu called, the "spirit of the laws"? If the primary responsibility of government is to provide security for its citizens, what is the capability and agenda of post-Communist Mongolia vis-a-vis China and Russia, especially in the context of the Shanghai Cooperative Organization?

The beginnings of the Mongolian state began with the coalescing of nomadic tribes under Chinggis Khan. Within a few decades the state expanded to become an empire, divided into successor states, and was reduced to tribal banners. By the early twentieth century, the Russians represented political progress to Mongolian nationalists, and the Communist MPR was modelled after, and subordinate to, the Soviet Union.

The year 2006 marked the 800th anniversary of the Mongolian state. One scholar's research suggests that some roots of Mongolia's democracy can also be found in the reign of Chinggis Khan, as well as in the nomadic political culture that preceded him.¹ Subsequently, the Mongolian state consolidated neighbouring tribes, absorbed other peoples, and transformed into one of the greatest land empires ever seen. Its fragmentation and transformation into near colonial status under Manchus and Russians is background to a state now undergoing further transformation. Despite its medieval establishment as a powerful political entity that conquered much of the known world, Mongolia only in the past dozen years has emerged as a Modern Sovereign Nation-State (MSNS).

¹ Sabloff, P. L. W. (2002). "Why Mongolia? The political culture of an emerging democracy." *Central Asian Survey*, 060116 21:1: 19-36.

Exploring this concept is helpful in understanding contemporary Mongolia. By *modern*, we mean those attributes associated with industrial societies, including urbanization, bureaucratic rationality, and industrialization. Democracy has also come to be included in modern characteristics.

Sovereignty is the hallmark of an independent state – the absolute power to make laws over the population and exclusive control of delimited territory. In 1206, Chinggis Khan instructed Shigi Khutuku to write down Khan’s legal decisions and rewards to loyal followers. He also appointed Shigi first judge with responsibility to build a judiciary system throughout the empire.² After the Ming and Qing dynasties subdued Mongolia and exercised suzerainty for centuries, followed by the emergence of the Soviet empire replacing the Chinese until 1990. Mongolia is now a fully sovereign state, though understandably anxious over its long-term viability. This gain in sovereignty has been offset somewhat by the loss in economic and security benefits that resulted from the Soviet-dominated state.

A *nation* is a collection of people who have one or more characteristics in common, and have conscious affinity as a result. These characteristics include common language, history, religion, and territory. Chinggis Khan welded the various Mongol tribes into a loose nation, and facilitated integration by mandating a written language. Conversion to Buddhism was another factor, and separated the Mongols from their Islamic neighbours in Central Asia.

Finally, the *state* itself consists of three key components: First, there must be territory – land and water within a defined spatial area. Territory is the basis of life and sovereignty. Second, a state requires people living within a society, having lineage and transactional relations. And finally, a state must have a government that exercises authority and control, writes and enforces laws, and provides security for the population living within its defined territory. The government of a state is also responsible for dealing with other states

There may have been an implicit Mongolian state before 1206, though lacking a fixed territory, but for the sake of simplicity, we can accept that date, and ask how the Chinggis Khan political system conformed to our criteria of the state. A further question is: why did that state become an empire and later exist only in memory during the ascendancy of the Ming and Qing and Soviet periods? While state brutality was not uncommon during the recent MPR period, it was, to put it in the best light, a period of a Mongolian quasi-state, when segments of the Mongolian territory and nation were absorbed into either the

² Sabloff, 28.

Soviet Union or China, but a core of the Mongolian nation acquired characteristics of the Modern Sovereign Nation-State, albeit under strictly limited sovereignty.

Today, Mongolia has taken its place in the world as a fully independent nation-state. Yet, as all national governments in the world must navigate around obstacles formed by other states, Mongolia's choices may be more circumscribed than most others, with its geographical destiny circumscribed by China and Russia. Understandably, the government seeks a "third neighbour", but distance and the absence of a sea frontier raise spatial difficulties.

Foundations of the Mongolian state – the Constitution

Aside from these basic components of the state, every political system has what Aristotle recognized as a constitution – a set of rules and principles that establish the authority and parameters of government mandated to wield power, as well as the rights and duties of subjects/citizens. The constitution of a MSNS is the foundation of its laws, and expresses the spirit of the state. Aristotle's categories addressed the number of power-holders, and he noted the dynamic quality of constitutions – how constitutions could be corrupted and transformed.

The notion of constitution can be applied to the pre-modern Mongol state as well as the post-modern. A modern constitution consists of several elements – First, it addresses the design of government. Second, there is an enunciation of political principles. Third, it prescribes the duties and rights and definitions of citizen/subjects, and fourth, it usually specifies the manner in which it can be amended. The practical benefits of a constitution include that it provides a foundation for laws and a division of labour and powers among various institutions. Modern constitutions have largely been the product of late-eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism claiming equality of citizenship for the inhabitants of states. But with the emergence of dictatorships in the twentieth century, formal and formulaic constitutions emerged with little enforcement of enumerated rights.

While most modern constitutions have been written and explicit (with the notable exception of Great Britain's), the Aristotelian perspective reminds us that there is more than a written document. This broader notion of constitution permits us to inquire on the design of the first Mongol state, and the changes it experienced in the centuries prior to 1922, when the first modern Mongolian

constitution was promulgated. To address this question, it is necessary to reconstruct a constitution out of the three elements of the Chinggis Khan Mongolian state and its subsequent permutations – territory, society, and government.

Regarding *territory*, the nomadic concept of ownership is far less embedded in particular space than in agricultural or industrial society, where land and water are fixed and immovable assets. Nomadic *society* is also a challenge to the state insofar as tribalism claims primary loyalty, and interpersonal contacts have less density than those in settled societies.

Stages of the Mongolian state

In the eight centuries since the founding of the Mongolian state, we can roughly identify four major stages:

- The centralized empire of Chinggis Khan,
- The divided empire and absorption by China and successor states,
- Client of the Soviet Union, and
- Contemporary democratic republic.

The state-empire founded by Chinggis Khan enjoyed unity during his life. There was a single unified government – more similar to the military administrative organization from which it was derived, with unitary command structure. Nominal unity was maintained after his death, but the various hordes and their commanders each took on characteristics of separate states, with the Mongol empire undergoing irreversible fragmentation under successors. China was been part of the Mongol empire during the Yuan dynasty, but Chinese historians claim the dynasty as part of their own history of dynasties. Subsequently from the Ming, most modern Mongolian territory was ruled as part of the Chinese empire. In the 17th century, the territory of the Mongols was conquered by the Manchus, and then integrated under the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty. Thus, the Mongol state of Chinggis Khan and his sons was virtually obliterated from the 14th century through 1921, as territory and society were under Chinese suzerainty, and recognized as such under the treaty of Nerchinsk.

Without a sovereign government, there could be no state. There was a semi-autonomous authority, in the various princes who claimed succession from Chinggis Khan and in the Buddhist theocracy, but no unified Mongolian state. With the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, through 1921, Mongolian nationalists sought to oust the Chinese and later the White Russians from their homeland, and only succeeded with Soviet military help. Sukhe Bator and his

comrades established the first Mongolian MSNS, followed by the 1922 constitution. While it was celebrated as a colonial separation from centuries of government by China, it was more an exchange of masters. For the next 70 years, Moscow dominated all areas of Mongolian political, social and economic life, while the MPR enjoyed a limited sovereignty as buffer and client in Stalin's empire.

As part of the Soviet empire for seven decades – albeit practicing a nominal sovereignty - Mongolians endured a harsh apprenticeship in becoming a modern nation-state. A single-party dictatorship managed a socialist economy, media, education, and administrative system. Literacy was improved, a rudimentary modern infrastructure was constructed, and a common national identity was forged, albeit under Soviet dominance.

As a Soviet satellite, the MPR shared a semi-colonial status and experience with the states of Eastern Europe. There was a common national system of Communist dictatorship in which Soviet interests dominated over local interests. There were economic links through Comecon as well as Soviet subsidization of industry. There was official hostility to the West, and after 1960, to China as well. Religion and other cores of national identity were brutally suppressed in the name of materialist dialectics. There was repudiation of national identity and local history in the name of progress. Expression of nationalism was officially repressed.

When Gorbachev announced reforms that led to collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolians were among the first to seize the opportunity to declare independence from Moscow. Decolonization was swift and although readjustments have been difficult, a fully sovereign nation-state has emerged out of the MPR. In retrospect, the Soviet contribution to building the foundations of the current Mongolian state was significant. In particular, Soviet dominance kept the MPR out of the Chinese sphere of influence – from the civil wars, Japanese invasion, Communist revolution, Maoist extremism of the Cultural Revolution, and the assimilation that ethnic Mongolians have experienced as Han immigration into Inner Mongolia overwhelmed the original inhabitants.

The contemporary Mongolian state

The 1992 constitutional transformation marked a peaceful transition from Communist to democratic state. The past fourteen years have seen a fair blossoming of democracy, though marred by a few lapses and crises. The economic transition has been less smooth.

The transformation from single-party dictatorship to multi-party democracy has marked the major swing in the Mongolia state. It facilitated the shift from monolithic Communism to pluralism. So far, democracy has been firmly implanted in the new political system, with several elections held for the *Hural*, local government, and President. The strongest party by far has been the MPRP (Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party), successor to the former Communist party, while numerous new parties have been most successful when forming a democratic coalition. Finding a satisfactory electoral system has been a severe challenge to the parties.

The 1992 constitution created a democratic form of government, with a President, Prime Minister, cabinet, parliament, and court system – a modified form of checks and balances, and unitary government. Two major issues have been the relationship between parliament and cabinet, and whether sitting members of the legislature can also serve in cabinet. A second issue has been the electoral law, as politicians seek to balance democracy and effective government.

Democratic Mongolia has seen expanded participation of numerous social groups, and the demise of ideology and social engineering. In economics, central planning has been abandoned, replaced by the market economy and privatization. There has been the emergence of a new civil society, and a new generation of Mongolians has been quick to take to the street and demonstrate on a wide range of issues.³ A number of NGOs has formed and serve as watchdogs and advocates for emerging interest groups in society. During last January's political crisis, parliamentary manoeuvring gave rise to increasing street demonstrations.⁴

³ "Loud demonstrations, wider demands. The Movement for Radical Reform (MRR) held a Sukhbaatar Square meeting last week demanding that the city authorities reduce public transport fares to their 2005 levels. With them were an interim transport committee, members of the Healthy Society-Civil Movement and trades unions' representatives, all claiming that the fare rises were harmful. They demanded the resignation of transport regulatory authority (TRA) head T. Purevdorj and his staff. They attacked the resignation of the MPRP cabinet members and burned a human figure with three heads, wearing a suit and tie, representing Purevdorj, MPRP leader M. Enbold and MP T. Badamjunai.

MRR leader S. Ganbaatar and a delegation entered the municipal offices and delivered a statement on what they claimed was corruption in Ulaanbaatar land privatisation and the fare rises. They demanded the sacking of bureaucrats.

⁴ <http://www.mongolmessenger.mn/issue/060103.php?vitab=1&vtab=100>

⁴ ..\..\News\06MNG\5M News 060121.txt

In foreign affairs, Mongolia was cast adrift from subordination to the Soviet Union, into a global sea of international uncertainty. With a huge population, expanding market economy, hegemony over Inner Mongolia, and pre-1921 domination of Mongolia, China was not the “near-shore” that offered a haven for national survival. In economics, China has been a cashmere threat, owing to the higher prices her merchants could offer, and the backward condition of Mongolia’s state-owned processing capacity. Nonetheless, relations have been cooperative and correct, and clarification of borders has demarcated mutual territory.

Normalization of Russia-China relations remains a dilemma for Mongolia’s foreign policy. Soviet military divisions were withdrawn and the one-sided relationship ended. Trade with the Soviet bloc dropped, although Russia remained the main supplier of petrol (80% of purchases⁵) and electric power.

Sino-Russian rapprochement was given limited multilateral form with the 1995 formation of the Shanghai Cooperative Organization, which also included the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Thus far, Mongolia has not joined, and her non-membership is probably due to several factors:

- Donor nations, especially the U.S. and Japan, are not eager to see Mongolia drift back into the orbit of her former semi-colonial masters.
- China sees Mongolia as distinct from the Central Asia Republics – historically a part of the Chinese empire, and during much of the twentieth century, a buffer between the Soviet Union and China. Moreover, contiguity with Inner Mongolia makes “Outer Mongolia” an attractive space for future Chinese assimilation and expansion. Should the democratic experiment fail, the donor nations lose interest, and the Ulaanbaatar government collapse, Chinese influence would be unstoppable. Mongolian membership in the Shanghai Cooperative Organization would place it in the ranks of Central Asian Republics which have much less likelihood of reincorporation into a restored Russian empire. Minimizing Russian interest in Mongolia is a China priority. The Sino-Russian agreement to build an energy pipeline bypassing Mongolia is also a symptom of China’s maneuvering to limit her independence.
- Mongolia’s leaders may also see the Shanghai Cooperative Organization as a club that seeks a new period of Sino-Russian amity and cooperation. As a predominantly Buddhist country, it has little in common with Islamic ‘stans’, or Orthodox Russia, or secular and nominally Communist China.

⁵ *CIA World Factbook*, “Mongolia”(2006)

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/mg.html#Govt>

In the final analysis, succumbing to membership in the SCO would close the door to Mongolia's "third neighbour" policy

Conclusion

The Mongolian people have been a nation subjected to empires for most of their history. After seven decades of Soviet tutelage, they are creating a MSNS, and have numerous precedents to emulate. But they remain prisoners of geography and carry the burden of twentieth century history into their enterprise. Immediately after establishment eight centuries ago, the Mongolian state rapidly transformed into a transcontinental empire. Subsequently, it fragmented and the East Asian component was absorbed into the Chinese empire. A decade after the Manchu dynasty collapsed, an independent Mongolia emerged but soon became a client of the new Soviet empire. In the post-Soviet twenty-first century, the Mongolian state is pulled in three directions:

- The strongest influence will be from China, which has emerged as the undisputed powerhouse in East Asia. Her increasingly market-based economy, growing military might, pragmatic politics, demographic immensity, cultural unity, and centralized authoritarianism are indicators of an expansive regime that will make neighbours uneasy, regardless of protestations of innocent intentions. Sometimes shrill irredentism based on territory once claimed or ruled by previous dynasties implies an expansive agenda which includes a Chinese future for Mongolia. Chinese recalcitrance on Tibet and Taiwan is worrisome, and could also be activated under altered political circumstances in Mongolia in the future.

- Russia desires to maintain all its Asian territories, though it is willing to allow the former soviet Central Asian Republics to exercise sovereignty. Putin no doubt wants to retain influence over Mongolia, but has inadequate resources to bring it back within Russia's orbit. A neutral Mongolia is his best option at present.

- Mongolia actively pursues its "Third Neighbour" policy, reaching out to Chinese and Russian Cold War adversaries. Pre-World War II Japanese designs on Mongolia, as part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, were thwarted by Soviet tanks and Mongolian infantry. Today, the Japanese presence is in the welcome form of investment and development assistance. South Korea has an increasing commercial and diplomatic presence. The EU and Canada have been expanding investment, aid, and cultural exchanges. The American presence and commitment to Mongolia has been heightened partly to monitor

democracy and autonomy, and partly to have an outpost in a previously inaccessible and strategically important area.

Thus, Mongolia has arrived at a stage of MSNS existence with territorial borders clearly delineated with its two neighbours, but also with hints of unresolved claims that might return to provoke disputes in the future. A stable *modus vivendi* is reinforced by the presence of third countries whose commercial, religious, cultural, NGO, and diplomatic representatives can insure that Mongolian sovereignty will not be neglected by their various home countries.

Government institutions have undergone growing pains as the experience and efficiency of the MPRP have enabled former Communists to maintain their dominance, while the democratic parties unite or fragment in response to electoral fortunes and personal ambitions of leaders. The legal and constitutional framework remains intact, though the question of whether supreme power resides in the President or Prime Minister and cabinet remains unclear.

Mongolian society has taken advantage of the new democratic order, and expresses disappointment or disapproval both through the ballot box and in the street. The combination of democratic elections, civil society (NGOs), and globalization/marketization/privatization of the economy has been a major positive factor in entrenching human rights as well as new habits of democracy within the population. A youthful generation of leaders is also emerging to challenge the hegemony of those politicians who came of age during the MPR, while the MPRP has adapted to democracy with pragmatism, cunning, and confidence.

The primary function of the state is to provide security, and few have illusions that Mongolians alone could defend their territory if either neighbour wished to occupy it by military force. In recognition, Mongolia has stressed human security as its response to the challenge of survival.⁶

As the Mongolian state enters its ninth century of existence, it must navigate pragmatically within the confines of a region defined largely by geography and history, adapting to the institutional forms and potentials provided by the post-Cold War nation-state. Global institutions such as the WTO, World Bank and U.N. can provide helpful assistance, but can never substitute for the security and prosperity which only the MSNS can provide. Despite predictions that the MSNS will become obsolete, the modern international order remains based on constellations of nation-states and their

⁶ Nelles, W. (2001). "Reconciling Human and National Security in Mongolia." Vancouver, University of British Columbia, Institute of Asian Research, *North Pacific Policy Papers* No. 6.

collective power. Mongolia's very survival depends upon building a strong Modern Sovereign Nation-State. Pursuit of the UB Forum offers an additional platform for consolidating Mongolia's modern progress.

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