

**MONGOLIAN SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
IN QUEST OF FRIENDS AND PARTNERS, NOT ALLIES**

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For much of its history, Mongolia has been hostage to the realities of political geography. China's Qing dynasty, founded in 1644 by invading forest-dwelling Manchus from north of the Great Wall, was able to gain control of tribal (Inner and Outer) Mongolia by the end of the seventeenth century. With Qing's downfall in 1911, what was then Outer Mongolia declared its independence from China. But hardly a decade had passed when independent Mongolia, reconstituted as a Marxist state, fell under the sway of the new Soviet Union: Marxist Mongolia became the first Soviet satellite. All the while this was happening; Inner Mongolia remained a part of the Chinese state, whether under Guomindang or communist rule. More than two years before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in October 1949, in the midst of the Chinese civil war, the Chinese Communist Party created the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, one of several such units in the People's Republic of China.

It should occasion no surprise that independent Mongolia, wedged between two giant neighbors and isolated from potential allies, with a vast land area, a population of only 2.4 million, and a tiny army should be preoccupied with the question of its future security. For centuries, Mongolia has been regarded by its neighbors, China and Russia, as an important buffer between them. And owing to the military exploits of Genghis Khan and his successors and the presence of ethnic Mongolians in northern China and eastern Russia, Mongolia has also been the object of wary suspicion by those neighbors. These are elements in both the communist-ruled People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) ruled over by the Guomindang Party who, thinking imperially, still dream of reconstituting China as the Middle Kingdom, surrounded by tributary states that once included *inter alia* the territories of present-day Inner Mongolia and independent Mongolia.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, it is little wondered that independent Mongolia might be attracted to a traditional balance-of-power approach to the question of how to provide for its national security: a weak, vulnerable state searching about for allies who would help it be independent and secure. But on close inspection, such an approach is seen to bear the weight of a self-defeating paradox: were such allies available, in Chinese and

Russian eyes Mongolia would seem far more dangerous than it presently is to its two giant neighbors, rendering weak Mongolia even more vulnerable than it is today to their predatory, possibly expansionist, designs.

In this article, we will argue that a balance-of-power approach is largely irrelevant to Mongolia's security problem; that such an approach might even imperil Mongolia; and that in an increasingly globalize world there may be far more effective ways of enhancing Mongolia's independence and national security.

Mongolia and the Asian Balance of Power

Traditional balance-of-power theory, largely derived from the European experience, teaches us that Mongolia is something of a power vacuum and that each of its powerful neighbors, China and Russia, will be tempted to fill that vacuum in order to prevent the other from doing so. In fact, in the case of Mongolia the balance-of-power approach is neither theoretically valid nor practically useful.

Traditional balance-of-power theory predicates four important assumptions about the nature of the international system: first, that there is a more or less equal distributor of power among an optimal number of states (usually five); second, that power is easily measurable; third, that allies are available for balancing the power of any potential aggressor(s); and fourth, that states are prepared to switch their alignments in order to confront any potential hegemony. In other words, in a balance-of-power system there are no permanent friends or enemies, and ideology is limited to a consensus over maintaining the system itself. Few of those conditions obtain in contemporary global politics, none in the case of Mongolia.

Practical obstacles also stand in the way of achieving a viable balance of power with regard to Mongolia. According to balance-of-power theory, the hegemonic ambitions of any actor or group of actors must be neutralized by countervailing power. Such countervailing power can be mobilized either by building up the military strength of the threatened state or by the formation of alliances of expediency. Since Mongolia cannot hope to develop its military power sufficiently to deter or defeat either of its neighbors, the first possibility can be immediately dismissed. Mongolia's hopeless military situation is seen in these facts: China's armed forces are larger than the population of Mongolia; currently at a level of five thousand, Mongolia's army can neither deter nor repel an incursion or invasion by the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

Now let us consider whether there are potential allies to whom Mongolia might turn in the event of a threat from either China or Russia. Put simply, there are no such allies. Mongolia's geographic isolation, its relative unimportance to other states with significant military capabilities (e.g., the United States), and the West's growing unwillingness to incur large numbers of wartime casualties suggest that for Mongolia a strategy based on seeking military allies is doomed to fail. Today, as in the past, only Russia has the potential capability and interest's necessary to protect Mongolia from Chinese coercive bullying or military invasion¹, and only China is in a position to afford Mongolia similar protection against Russia. Under these conditions, Mongolia may seek to be one of two in a sphere of three, but the asymmetry in power between Mongolia and either of its potential "protectors", China or Russia, is so great that the result once again would be to render Mongolia a dependent satellite.

Mongolians may also be tempted to seek to construct a semblance of balance by playing off each of its two neighbors against the other. This would be very dangerous for Mongolia. Efforts by a weak, vulnerable state to play off great powers against each other often leads to penetration by all such powers as each great power seeks to shore up its position in the "pawn" by preempting its rival great powers. Both China and Korea sought to use this tactic against the Western imperialist powers and Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The result was to strengthen the hand of foreign imperialism in China and Korea².

The Changing Nature of Security and the Value of Weakness

Since it is well nigh impossible for Mongolia to assure its independence by increasing its own power, we must consider whether the country's very weakness can be transformed into an asset. To Mongolians, China and Russia loom like giants and constitute the alpha and omega of Mongolian security concerns. By contrast, it is probable that Mongolia hardly appears on radar screens in China or Russia (except as it relates to the Sino-Russian relationship)³.

There are, however, actions and policies that Mongolia might initiate that would bring the country the unwelcome attention of its two giant neighbors. The most dangerous would be to take up the cause of Pan-Mongolians and play the part of an Asian "Serbia" or "Piedmont"⁴. Chinese of all political and ideological stripes agree on the imperative of China's unity. With the death of Deng Xiaoping, many observers feared that China would fragment. Although there

are few signs that the regime is eroding, a de facto division of the country based on the growing autonomy of the freewheeling capitalist south may someday put the issue of China's unity to a crucial test. Only time will tell whether China can pursue economic liberalization without an erosion of political control from the center.

Even more dangerous from Han China's perspective are secessionist movements among the country's minority nationalities living along the borders. Restiveness is evident in Chinese Tibet and in Xinjiang Province with its large Muslim population, much less so in Chinese Inner Mongolia. In Tibet and Xinjiang, Beijing continues to crack down hard against all signs of unrest, particularly secessionist activity. While there has been some strain in the 1990s between the Mongols and Han majority in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the province has continued to evince political quiescence under strong, effective communist rule. How long this condition will obtain is a matter for conjecture. Let it suffice to note that the political status quo has already been challenged—in recent days, from abroad: on July 19, 1997, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Inner Mongolia as an autonomous region in China, a small group of Mongols demonstrated near the Chinese Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia. Associated with a new Inner Mongolia People's Party formed in New York in March, the demonstrators demanded that Beijing halt the process of cultural assimilation with the Han majority in Inner Mongolia; stop the dumping of nuclear waste in Inner Mongolia; and rid the region of smog. They also demanded that political prisoners in Inner Mongolia be freed and that democracy be instituted there. The demonstrators said that their long-range objectives were to end control by the Chinese Communist Party over Inner Mongolia and to establish an independent country on its soil⁵.

An increasingly powerful and resourceful China can be expected to resist all such challenges, probably successfully. The limits particularly of external pressure on China over the matters of its domestic composition and its international boundaries may be gleaned from the cases of Bosnia and East Timor, respectively, in Balkan Europe and the Indonesian archipelago. Accordingly, Mongolia must take great care not to allow political, possibly irredentist Pan-Mongolians to develop on its soil. While Mongolia's democratic constitution does allow for the free expression of dissident views, including those favoring independence for Inner Mongolia, and, in effect, the dismemberment of the Chinese state, the government in Ulaan Baatar must carefully weigh that consideration against the reality of China's great sensitivity over the question of na-

tional unity and territorial integrity. If groups such as the Inner Mongolia People's Party are left free to propagate their views and possibly organize an anti-Chinese front in independent Mongolia, then China can be expected to react vigorously, possibly even with military force, to suppress such a threat. If ever China were to take that action, Mongolia would be faced with a serious threat to its own sovereign independence and national security.

It should be emphasized that China's rulers, communist or otherwise, will work mightily to block secession for any one or combination of the country's minority nationalities. And if ever blows originating at home and/or abroad prove powerful enough to cause China to fragment or break up as when major parts of the old Chinese Empire split off in the first generation (1912-1928) after the Qing downfall - then the remnants of power in China will strive to reconstitute the old patrimony-as did the Bolshevik rulers of the new Soviet Union. (By 1923, thirteen territories that had broken away from the old Tsarist Empire in the chaos of World War I and the Russian civil war were brought under the Soviet banner, often by force.) In sum, no exhortation or coercion, Islamic, Buddhist, or secular, will induce China to let Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia gain a place in the sun by secession and consequent sovereign statehood or irredentist unification with ethnic cohorts in established sovereignties(e.g., with one or another of the Muslim states born out of the Soviet collapse and with independent Mongolia).

Yet another caveat should be observed by Mongolia as it strains to cope with a powerful, possibly vengeful and covetous China on its southern border. This one involves the issue of Tibet, which merits highlighting here. As with Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, China will not let Tibet go. Even the Dalai Lama, exiled head of the Tibetan Buddhist theocracy, seems finally to have come to the realization that Tibet's future place will be in a Chinese firmament. Perhaps that is why, after a ten-year hiatus, in July 1993 the Tibetan leader sent an official delegation to Beijing, led by his older brother, to restart talks with Chinese officials-presumably about what the Dalai Lama has been campaigning for in recent years: a quasi-federal associative status for Tibet based on cultural autonomy short of independence. Thus far, the call for such a Tibetan entity within the Chinese state has had ambivalent effects -drawing wide support internationally, but falling on deaf ears in Beijing and creating deep fissures in the Tibetan Diaspora.

It should be noted that even if the Dalai Lama's proposal that Tibet be granted a measure of self-governance short of independence ever does strike a

responsive chord in Beijing and among a broad spectrum in the Tibetan Diaspora and in Tibet itself, there would still be extraordinarily difficult obstacles to overcome. These include delimiting the territory of Tibet and specifying the limits of cultural, spiritual, and political authority for a Tibetan theocratic entity endowed with a quasi-federal associative status within the Chinese state. With regard to the issue of territorial demarcation, there is no consensus between the Tibetan exile community in Dharmasala, India, and the Chinese authorities. There is a substantial Tibetan population in the Xizang(Tibetan) Autonomous Region in western China and also in each of four Chinese provinces: Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Three of the four provinces—Sichuan, Qinghai, and Yunnan—border the Xizang Autonomous Region; Gansu has borders with the other three provinces, but not with Xizang. Contiguous with each other, the five units constitute a large part of mainland China. “Greater Tibet” comes close to bordering Chinese Inner Mongolia and, by extension, its neighbor to the north, independent Mongolia. Together with Muslim Xinjiang Province in northern China, these territories form a wide arc extending from southwest China almost to China’s northeast quadrant — posing a potential threat, as China has seen it from time immemorial, to the vast Chinese state based on an ancient emporium.

Accordingly, the question of delimiting the Tibetan homeland continues to be deeply divisive. The Chinese government holds that the Xizang Autonomous Region is Tibet; the Dalai Lama and his followers contend that Tibet consists of all the Tibetan lands in the autonomous region and the four provinces.

As if all of this were not complicated enough, the issue of Tibet is bedeviled also by the strong support the Dalai Lama and his fellow exiles continue to receive in the international community particularly in the U.S. Congress and the film industry in Hollywood. In 1997, the Dalai Lama was warmly received on a visit to Taiwan, whose Guomindang party-government, like its communist rival in Beijing, persists in the view that Tibet is legally and legitimately part of China.

The vast majority of the population of the secular Mongolian state is nominally adherents of Tibetan Lamaism Buddhism, whose leader is the Dalai Lama. In 1979, the Dalai Lama visited the then Marxist state of Mongolia, a Soviet satellite. Since then, the elevated seat on which he sat continues to be unoccupied in the Gandan monastery—an institution in Ulaan Baatar that has long been the center of Lamaist Buddhism in Mongolia. Plans were made for the Dalai Lama to visit again.

The intensely political issue of Tibet’s future continues to be hotly contested around the world. A security-conscious independent Mongolia must

take care not to be drawn into a political thicket which it may not fully understand; which would present it with little room for effective maneuver; and in which there would be high potential for making calamitous errors. If it becomes too closely wedded to the Dalai Lama's political agenda, dressed up as a religion-cultural platform, then independent Mongolia may someday find itself truly imperiled by China. Mongolia will risk catastrophe if it tries to play "Pakistan" to China's "Kashmir in Tibet". If weak, vulnerable Mongolia seeks to play a Washington or Hollywood card over the issue of Tibet, carrying favor with elements in the United States who are sympathetic to the Dalai Lama and his cause, Ulaan Baatar will discover that it had gained little more than rhetorical support from its "American friends" in the face of a vengeful and covetous China.

Just as there are policies that Mongolia should avoid, there are paths the country can take in order to increase its value to its neighbors without stirring their anxieties. Apropos of this, it is well to recall the case of Switzerland, whose traditions of passivity in foreign policy and strict adherence to neutrality made its independence sufficiently valuable to both the Allied and the Axis Powers during World War II so that its sovereignty was never seriously threatened. Mongolia has an opportunity to make it useful to both China and Russia. As long as each of those neighbors does not appear to threaten Mongolia's independence, there is little reason for the other to become alarmed. And in the spirit of Finland, which pursued a live-and-let-live policy vis-a-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Mongolia should eschew giving unneeded offense to either China or Russia.

At a deeper level, it should be recognized that potential coercive diplomacy by its two giant neighbors is not the only, or even the greatest, threat to the security and well-being of Mongolians. Far more critical to most Mongolians are the dangers posed by poverty, deteriorating health and educational facilities, and environmental pollution. In the years ahead, these conditions are likely to pose far greater and more certain threats to Mongolians than that of foreign coercion or military intervention. In the event, Mongolia has brighter prospects for meeting those threats than others which involve military security. A welcome climate for direct foreign investment and the transparent privatization of state enterprises hold out the hope of sustainable economic growth and development. The exploitation of key raw materials-oil, coal, and tungsten-by investors requires investment in infrastructure that may in large part be financed from foreign corporate sources. Such an influx of investment in extractive industries and other potentially beneficial sectors such as eco-tourism and hunting,

the processing of cashmere and wools, and even the export of meat products, will gradually integrate Mongolia into the global economy, with all the benefits and costs which may derive from globalization.

Critically, Mongolia's economic development increases the value of its independence to both China and Russia. Foreign investment in Mongolia will generate joint ventures with a variety of foreign firms, including Chinese and Russian enterprises.

Mongolian petroleum can help fuel China's economic growth, and Mongolian beef, lamb, and dairy products can play a key role in feeding China's increasingly prosperous urban population. Mongolia, in turn, will benefit from that prosperity as Chinese (and Russian) investment and tourism grow.

Friends and Partners, Not Allies

It was pointed out above that if Mongolia had strong allies, its independence might be imperiled by the fears and suspicions that such allies would arouse among Mongolia's powerful neighbors. The answer to Mongolia's insecurity, then, lies not in its having allies, but rather, friends and partners. An ally is a state that provides or promises to provide military assistance in the event of war. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is probably the best known among a series of alliances formed by the United States as part of a policy of "containing" the Soviet Union and its Warsaw-Pact allies. With the Cold War over, NATO has become an alliance without an adversary and is developing a new mission that centers on maintaining political stability at Europe's peripheries.

The NATO experience is especially instructive, underlining as it does that alliances are formed against an adversary and or adversaries. NATO was established to counter a perceived Soviet threat. When that threat was finally lifted, NATO's mission became unclear. However defensive the purposes of an alliance, non-members will inevitably perceive it as a potential threat to their security. Thus, early in the post-Cold War era Russia continues to be suspicious of NATO's eastward expansion and would probably react negatively were the NATO alliance enlarged still further to include the Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

In contrast to "allies", friends and partners are not united by opposition to or fear of third parties. Instead, friendship and partnership has to do with bonds of sentiment and perceptions of a broad range of common interests. The "special relationship" between the United States and Great Britain is less an alliance

than a friendship, and NATO was not necessary to assure that each country would assist the other when asked to help. Anglo-American friendship is cemented by a long history of good will, cooperation and empathy, a common language and cultural heritage, and a high level of exchanges ranging from trade and tourism to marriage and education.

Friends need not provide each other with military assistance when a threat looms. However, they may provide potential or actual victims with political and economic leverage that is even more valuable. As a case in point, the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and Korea are in no position to provide military aid to a beleaguered or endangered Mongolia. They are, however, in a position to impose steep costs on a country that may contemplate or commit aggression against Mongolia, e.g., China or Russia.

As noted earlier, Mongolia is presently of little importance to Beijing. China has far greater interest in, among other things, acquiring foreign investment, technology and markets and membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Moreover, as China becomes a stronger and more mature military and economic power, it will seek international recognition of and respect for that attainment in commensurate political and diplomatic status. In a word, China will want to join the most exclusive “club” in global politics, one whose members are the world’s most advanced and highly globalize countries. Were China to bully or attack a friend or partner, e.g., Mongolia, of the leading members of the club, it would invite a reduction or cessation of trade and other exchanges and would find itself excluded from the club, shunned by its members, and treated as a pariah. China would be made to pay a high price for its actions, costs that would likely outweigh any potential benefits that might accrue from bullying tactics or outright aggression committed against a weak, vulnerable neighbor.

At present, Mongolia is only beginning to develop friendships and partnerships. To do so with the United States, Western Europe, and Japan— which, along with China and Russia, are of the greatest importance to Mongolia’s economic and political development—requires cultivating a role for itself and an image that will appeal to their publics and elites. Most Mongolians already recognize what the elements of such an image are — a small non-threatening country that is seeking to reconstruct itself as an open and democratic society in the midst of a difficult transition from state socialism to a market economy. Mongolia can foster this image also by associating with other small countries that are in the midst of a similar transition, e.g., the Central Asian Muslim states born out of the Soviet collapse.

Few Mongolians reside in the United States elsewhere in the West, and Americans know little about Mongolia. In consequence, most Americans have not formed a clear image of Mongolia or its people. There are, however, cultural traits among Mongolians that Americans would find very appealing. As befits a nomadic people without a Confucian tradition, Mongolians view themselves as egalitarian, industrious, and individualistic, all traits that Americans believe are characteristic of themselves. And “democracy” and the “free market”, which Mongolia has committed itself to develop, are the bases of an American mythology about themselves and their history and society.

But understanding the elements of an image is only part of what is required of Mongolia as it looks to the future. The more difficult task will be for it to foster public awareness of that image among potential friends and partners. That will require Mongolians to learn how their friends’ and partners’ political systems and societies function. During the years of its alliance with the former Soviet Union, Mongolians learned that it was sufficient to have strong ties between communist governments and ruling parties. By contrast, friendships and partnerships with the United States and American interests will require forging ties with individuals and groups in the private sector, that is, the elements of America’s civic society. As Alexis de Tocqueville, a shrewd French observer of American politics and society, recognized over a century and a half ago, pluralism and civic virtue are the pillars of America’s democracy. Tocqueville laid the basis for our understanding that the path to political influence upon the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch runs through the offices of America’s corporate and religious leaders, local officials, and even tourist agents. They are the “opinion leaders” whose positive perception of Mongolia is likely to influence official American policy toward Mongolia, whose sentiments are worth more to Mongolia than even large numbers of troops⁶.

Conclusion

Traditional foreign-policy options based on balance of power and alliances of expediency are not available to independent Mongolia to provide for its security vis-a-vis its two powerful neighbors, China and Russia. Although Mongolia’s difficult location distinguishes it from most other states, it should be emphasized that the declining utility of force to assure national security is a fact of life facing many countries. In these days, the autonomy, integrity, and security of most states is threatened far more by the prospect of fragmentation brought on by ethnic or religious strife within and by the difficulties associated with efforts to resist external economic and cultural pressures than by the threat

or fact of old-fashioned military invasion. Indeed, it may be that Mongolia is less threatened, than most countries because of its ethnic and cultural homogeneity and, thus far at least, its relatively greater insulation in the economic and cultural spheres from negative penetration by external forces.

The incidence of foreign invasion has declined sharply in recent decades, as countries discover more subtle and effective ways to influence one another and as growing popular awareness of and participation in politics make occupation of one country by another far costlier, politically and economically, than ever before. Clearly, then, the security of Mongolia and its people is far more threatened by the country's general underdevelopment than by its military weakness. And, in the unlikely event that Mongolia is ever bullied by either or both of its powerful neighbors, then friendships and partnerships established with other leading countries in the international community in the course of the economic and political transition from state socialism to an open market society will be more important to its survival and general well-being than any military alliance. In sum, Mongolia can work best to ensure a bright future by getting on with the tasks of political, economic, and social development⁷.

FOOTNOTES

1. Although Russia's military forces have deteriorated significantly in the post Cold War era, this is probably a temporary condition. It should be noted, too, that even in its weakened state, Russia retains the second most powerful nuclear arsenal in the world.

2. See, for example, Peter Duus, *The Abacus and Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). A similarly futile effort to achieve national security vis-a-vis threatening neighbors can be seen in the case of Poland - in its interface with Germany and the Soviet Union in the interwar years. See, for example, Jan Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland: 1919-1945, From Versailles to Yalta* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

3. Ironically, were Mongolia able to defend itself against its neighbors, it would also appear as a threat to those neighbors. A good example is Israel in the midst of the Arab world.

4. In the years leading up to World War I, independent Serbia was a magnet for Slavic inhabitants of the polyglot Austria-Hungarian Empire; the assassination of the Habsburg heir in Sarajevo in 1914 by a Bosnian patriot

who received assistance from Serbian authorities was the pretext for Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia. Following the war, Serbia became the core of a new state, Yugoslavia, based principally on the South Slavs in Balkan Europe. Piedmont played a similar role in the middle of the nineteenth century for Italians who sought to unify their country.

5. No mention was made of a Greater Mongolia irredentism, i.e., of combining Inner Mongolia with independent Mongolia to form an even larger Mongolian state between China and Russia.

6. In this regard, we should recall Stalin, whose dismissal of papal influence with the rhetorical question "How many [military] divisions has the Pope got?" revealed a frightful ignorance of the power of ideas in global politics. Conclusive evidence of the myopia reflected in Stalin's remark was provided years later when papal support was crucial in assisting the Poles to bring an end to communist control of their country. Mongolia can learn much from the experience of the People's Republic of China, which in recent years has come to rely heavily on the American business and banking communities, especially their foreign-investment and international-trade sectors, to champion Chinese economic interests in the corridors of power in the United States.

7. On the importance of giving priority to development in Mongolia, see Henry G.Schwarz, "The Security of Mongolia", *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, no.3 (1996), p.87