



**Mongolia's Geopolitical Gambit:  
Preserving a Precarious Independence  
While Resisting "Soft Colonialism"**

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## Mongolia's Geopolitical Gambit: Preserving a Precarious Independence While Resisting "Soft Colonialism"

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### Abstract

After centuries of dependence on the Qing and Soviet domains, Mongolia became independent in 1990. Since then, it has sought to preserve independence while balancing the interests of its two neighbors, Russia and the People's Republic of China. To counterbalance the influence of these two actual neighbors, Mongolia has cultivated relations with states that do not border it, but which serve as metaphorical "third neighbors." Chief among those external balancers is the United States, the involvement of which provokes anxiety in Moscow and Beijing. Thus, Mongolia's independence has affected, and is affected by, geopolitical rivalries among the great powers. One manifestation of rivalry is competition for access to Mongolia's mineral and energy resources, leaving Mongolia vulnerable to "soft colonialism," in which its economic and political autonomy may be compromised, even if territorial integrity is not. Ulaanbaatar's clever foreign policy has enhanced Mongolia's status, but its independence is threatened by factors it cannot control.

1. Mongolia
2. geopolitics
3. geostrategic
4. Great Game
5. third neighbor
6. mining
7. soft colonialism
8. buffer
9. Sino-Russian relations



## Introduction: Geopolitical Buffer

For centuries, Mongolia was a territorial buffer. When the Manchus conquered China and established the Qing empire, they swept Mongolia into their realm. When the Qing collapsed, Moscow sucked Mongolia into its own expanding domain and, during the period of Sino-Soviet enmity from the mid-1960s to 1989, the Soviet Union stationed troops and military equipment in Mongolia to enhance its strategic advantage over the PRC. For Moscow, Mongolia was then a territorial buffer—the particularities of Mongolian terrain underscored its salience as a shield behind which Russia felt more secure than if Mongolia had been in China’s hands (Garver 1988, 217; Liu 2006, 342). While Mongolia apparently sought Soviet protection against the prospect of Chinese irredentist expansionism, its territory was used by Moscow to ensure shorter lines of attack on the PRC than the Soviet Union would have otherwise had and to offer greater strategic depth in which to combat a PRC assault, had Beijing launched an assault on the Soviet Union (Soni 2002).

Since Mongolia became independent of the Soviet Union in 1990, neither Beijing nor Moscow has viewed Mongolia as a territorial buffer. However, Mongolia has played the role of what might be called a geopolitical buffer. What Moscow and Beijing seek of Mongolia is not a barrier that can be subordinated by one to enhance the defense of the homeland territory from assault by the other, but a neutral region where each of the two neighbors can be assured of Ulaanbaatar’s political pliability and an absence of menace. It suits Beijing and Moscow that Ulaanbaatar is deferential to their own core interests, so long as Mongolia does not give precedence to the interests of one over the other. In that sense, Mongolia is still a buffer, but its role is defined politically and economically, rather than territorially, by its determination to be an unaligned zone of neutrality in a region with a fierce and bloody history of geopolitical friction. If Mongolia were to align itself too closely to either of its proximate neighbors, it would surely spark alarm. Should it lean too far toward Moscow or Beijing, the other would swiftly see Mongolia as a territorial buffer subject to exploitation by the other side. Likewise, both Moscow and Beijing would balk if Mongolia were drawn too tightly into the embrace of the United States.

As a geopolitical buffer, it is not specific features of Mongolia’s territory—its passes and impasses once judged to have strategic merit for transiting men and armaments—that matter to its neighbors. Mongolia’s place on the map, though, does seem to matter. It is located too close to both Russia and the PRC for either to allow it to be used as a base from which harm might be done to the interests of Moscow or Beijing.



For the time being, it appears that Moscow is content to have some influence in Ulaanbaatar and comforted by the knowledge that Beijing does not dominate there. Likewise, Beijing seems confident that Mongolia's economic needs will ensure a reasonably high degree of deference to the PRC, blunting any possibility that Ulaanbaatar will lean too far toward Moscow in the near term.

The greatest irritant in this otherwise mutually accepted, albeit ephemeral, balance is the role of the United States. Ulaanbaatar's approach to security in the period since 1990 has been to assert its determination to remain balanced in its relations with both Moscow and Beijing—historic rivals for influence in Mongolia—while cultivating relations with a roster of states beyond its two nearest neighbors. For Ulaanbaatar, one function of these relationships is to generate interests for those states, dubbed “third neighbors,” in Mongolia. By having powerful states take interest in some facet of Mongolia's autonomy—whether that be economic, strategic, or ideological—Ulaanbaatar believes that it raises the cost to either Moscow or Beijing of imposing its will on Mongolia. It is not that Ulaanbaatar expects that any of its “third neighbors” will ride in to the rescue should one of its two proximate neighbors seek to undercut Mongolian sovereignty. However, these third states are viewed as external balancers, ensuring that Mongolia is not entirely isolated by making manifest that potential impositions by Moscow or Beijing will be viewed abroad as incursions on the interests of states other than Mongolia.

Chief among those “third neighbors” to which Ulaanbaatar has looked is the United States of America. Its comparative power, wealth, democracy—and distance from Mongolia—make the U.S. a much-valued source of support and security. Of course, Ulaanbaatar is well aware that the close bond that has arisen between it and Washington is viewed with wariness in Moscow and Beijing. Ulaanbaatar understands that it must tread carefully, enjoying some fruit of the U.S.-Mongolia relationship, but curbing its appetite for too close a relationship out of concern that it not alienate its two proximate neighbors. Mongolian statesmen well appreciate that they must live with and within implicit bounds imposed by Moscow and Beijing. They have cleverly navigated a treacherous course that has enabled them to take advantage of U.S. good will toward Mongolia without stumbling over either Moscow or Beijing's implicit “red lines.”

However, dangers for Ulaanbaatar abound. Indeed, with the intensification of interest in Mongolia's mineral and energy resources, what should be straightforward commercial matters appear to have rather consequential geopolitical undertones. Who should have access to Mongolia's natural resources? What enterprise should establish the infrastructure to extract and transport them? What stake should Mongolia take for itself and under what conditions should profit from the extraction of resources be shared?



Ulaanbaatar now struggles to resolve these questions. As it does, it is keenly sensitive to the official interests of Moscow and Beijing, as well as private interests of Russian and Chinese enterprises that may operate in concert with their government, or simply out of interest in profit.

Just as Ulaanbaatar strains to convey an impression to Beijing and Moscow that its policies are balanced as between the two bigger powers, it must now strain to ensure that the development of its mining industry does not result in the recurrence of a dependent relationship on one or both of its neighbors. So, Mongolia has cultivated investment interests from mining enterprises based in third countries, but has experienced some pressure from Chinese and Russian sources to privilege their interests over those of states further afield. In some measure, Mongolia has already perceived the effects of “soft colonialism.”

Thinking of more conventional strategic competition, since 1990 Mongolia’s independence has provided both Beijing and Moscow a degree of relief during a moment when each is prepared to tolerate the influence of the other on Ulaanbaatar’s policy choices. Of course, this official nonchalance arises during a period in which Sino-Russian relations have been relatively cooperative. Looking back on the history of Sino-Russian relations, one knows that the present period is anomalous.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this Sino-Russian cooperation appears to be *a*—or, perhaps, *the*—structural element in the international context on which continued independence is conditioned.

As of April, 2009, Russia and the PRC appear determine to extend their amity. The defense ministers of Russia and the PRC went so far as to announce a “strategic partnership” to mark the sixtieth anniversary of their bilateral relationship. As part of this enterprise, twenty-five joint military activities were announced and an enhancement of the security dimensions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was anticipated (Halpin 2009). One analyst questions the durability of the Sino-Russian partnership by labeling it an “axis of convenience,” but another sees in the ostensible amity between Moscow and Beijing evidence of a new “great game” at play. This plays out as intense ideological and strategic rivalry between the “Eurasian base of Power”—essentially Russia and the PRC—contesting for influence in a band of “buffer zones” with

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<sup>1</sup> Since at least the seventeenth century, China and Russia were locked in competition for control of a swath of territory stretching from the Altay Mountains in the west to the Sea of Okhotsk on the east—territory that both empires sought as their own and in which Mongolia is located. Thus, the present absence of competition about territory is unusual in the Sino-Russian relationship as is the generally collaborative relationship that has emerged in the period since normalization of relations between Beijing and Moscow in 1989.



the “Peripheral base of power,” that is: the U.S. and Western European states (Lo 2008; Nazemroaya 2009).

Given Mongolia’s location in that buffer zone, one is prompted to question whether there is, in Mongolia, evidence of a new great game. Are Russia and the PRC working to limit the influence of the “peripheral base of power”—those states that constitute Ulaanbaatar’s “third neighbors” in Mongolia?

As an independent state bounded on the north by Russia, on the south by the PRC—and by no other states—Mongolia takes the concerns of its two large neighbors seriously. One is justified in questioning, though, whether there are limits to Chinese and Russian tolerance. Moreover, considering the great disparities in power that emerge from any comparison of Mongolia with either Russia or the PRC, it is also worth questioning how pressures from Beijing or Moscow may degrade or constrict Ulaanbaatar’s autonomy. Bluntly put: If Moscow or Beijing pressures Ulaanbaatar to limit its relations with other states, what does this imply about Mongolia’s independence?

## Geography Matters

Every state is constrained by circumstances and seeks security and the realization of national interests within a sea of ever-shifting limitations. A dominant influence on Mongolia’s national security is geography. Its security has, for the past six centuries, been intertwined in its relations with Russia and China and in their relations with one another.<sup>2</sup>

From 1755 until 1911, Mongolia was under the dominion of the Qing empire (1644–1911), a realm that was, roughly, inherited by the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912 and,

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<sup>2</sup> Territory governed by Mongolians was subordinated in phases, beginning with an alliance established in June, 1626, between the Khorchin leader Ooba Khung Taiji and the Jurchen leader, Nurhachi—the man who ruled the Latter Jin Dynasty (1616-1636) and who would posthumously be designated as Qing Taizu, the founder of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). That alliance was sought by the Khorchin Mongol ruler as protection against the Khalkha and Chakhar Mongols, but resulted in a division of Mongol territory. The Khorchin region became “Inner Mongolia” because it was ultimately viewed as within the domain of the Qing. The remaining Mongol territory was understood as “Outer Mongolia” because it lay, at first, beyond the Qing domain (Elverskog 2006, 14-39). In time, the Qing conquered that region, too. Ultimately, in 1755, the last independent Mongol realm—the Zünghar Khanate—was crushed by forces fighting for the Qianlong Emperor (Atwood 2004, 621-624; Baabar 1999, 86-92).



thereafter, by the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Babaar 1999, 86-92). However, early in the twentieth century Mongolia was pried loose from the rest of China by Moscow (Kotkin and Elleman 1999, 70-1). As Moscow's power waxed and Beijing's waned, Mongolia sought independence but—along with other former Qing territories—was actually subsumed by the Soviet Union, which exercised an intrusive form of suzerainty over its far weaker neighbor.

Formally, Mongolia was independent of China but, in fact, on September 14, 1921, it was swept up into the evolving Soviet empire. A newly-established People's Government of Mongolia organized with Bolshevik support, declared its independence and renounced again its earlier recognition of China's suzerainty—becoming the world's second communist state (Paine 1996, 319-321).

This was a development the Republic of China government resolutely refused to acknowledge, maintaining that when it supplanted the Manchu's Qing dynasty with a Chinese republic, it inherited the territory of the Qing empire, including Mongolia. In Chinese eyes, Mongolia was part of China. Nevertheless, from 1921 until 1990, Moscow exercised suzerainty over what had been known as "Outer Mongolia," preserving it as a strategic buffer between the Soviet Union and China (Liu 2006,19; Lan 1999, 52-3; Paine 1996, 288; United States 1984, 12).

Chinese experienced this loss as a terrific blow to sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the impotence of the ROC government in the first half of the twentieth century and the dependence on Moscow of the PRC after 1949 meant that Chinese were constrained from reclaiming what they saw—and what some may still view—as China's territory. Indeed, at the Cairo Convention of 1943, Chiang Kai-shek told Franklin Roosevelt that the question of "Tannu Tuva, together with that of Outer Mongolia, must be settled in time to come through negotiations with Soviet Russia" (Liu 1996, 144, 310-11; United States 1961, 323-25).

Stalin's machinations at Yalta in 1945 ensured that the illusion of Chinese sovereignty over Mongolia that the ROC government had sought to sustain was dashed (Garver 1988, chapter seven). Pursuant to the accord resulting from the conclave of the triumvirate on the Crimea, "The status quo in Outer Mongolia (the Mongolian People's Republic) shall be preserved" (United States 1950). In practice, that meant Mongolia remained a Soviet dependent, despite Chinese convictions that the territory was China's.

From 1949 until 1991, PRC leaders repeatedly expressed to Soviet officials their dismay at China's loss of Mongolia, even though the PRC has not formally contested Mongolia's status (Kalabukhov, n.d.; Westad 2003, 235; Radchenko 2004, 5; Liu 2004, 8-9, 13). Long after Mongolia became independent of China, and even though the PRC has





had official diplomatic relations with Mongolia, an undercurrent of irredentism has tinged the views some Chinese express about Mongolia—to the considerable discomfit of Mongolians (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 1964; Radchenko 2004, 29).

Deng Xiaoping referred to this in a discussion with former U.S. President George H.W. Bush. According to Bush, Deng said

I hope you will look at the map to see what happened after the Soviet Union severed Outer Mongolia from China. What kind of strategic situation did we find ourselves in? Those over fifty [years old] in China remember that the shape of China was like a maple leaf. Now, if you look at a map, you see a huge chunk of the north cut away (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, 95-6).

In 1989, Deng told Romanian Ambassador to the PRC, Angelo Miculescu, that the Soviets used unequal treaties, including the Yalta Accords, to take from China approximately three million [square] kilometers of territory, including that territory now known as the People’s Republic of Mongolia, “which is [rightfully] China’s” (Cold War International History Project).

So, it appears that as late as 1989, the PRC leadership considered Mongolia to be China’s lost territory.<sup>3</sup> China had lost Mongolia and Mongolia had lost its independence.

During the period when Mongolia was under Moscow’s thumb, it was nominally independent. In fact, though, it was a satellite of the Soviet Union and did not exercise autonomy commensurate with that of an independent state. Dependence on the Soviet Union brought Mongolia certain developments that Mongolians even now refer to as “civilization,” such as infrastructure associated with modernity and urbanization. However, Mongolian’s “paid with their freedom, their personal property, and their freedom to think” (Babaar 413). Among the burdens of dependence was the expectation on Moscow’s part that Mongolia’s resources were available for exploitation. In 1966, Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed a twenty-year “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” that heralded the transfer of 100,000 Soviet troops, tanks, and missile units to Mongolia where they were “ideally situated for an attack on the Chinese capital” (Dittmer 1992: 188; Soni 2002, 241).

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<sup>3</sup> If Deng did state that the territory of Mongolia “is China’s,” this raises a tantalizing question: Why is it that the PRC acceded to the loss of Mongolia? There is ample evidence that Beijing did try, in the years after 1949, to reopen discussion of Mongolia with the Soviets. However, it was thwarted in an effort to recover sovereignty over Mongolia by Stalin’s refusal to renegotiate the status of what had, by then, become a valued Soviet buffer state (Liu 2006, 376ff).



This condition of subordination inhered until 1990, by which time the Soviet imperium was rapidly disintegrating. Then, at just that grand juncture when former Soviet Republics, nominally independent states on the Soviet periphery, and even autonomous authoritarian regimes allied to the United States cascaded toward democracy, Mongolia declared itself a democracy and has, since that moment, consciously repositioned itself in the international community (Huntington 1991).

As Mongolia has tried to establish itself within the international arena as an independent actor, it is reminded at every occasion of where it is located. Mongolia cannot escape its situation: landlocked between Russia and China. It is bound by the history of its own relations to each of its proximate neighbors, as well as to their history of relations with one another. That history is, to a considerable degree, a product of interests arising from geography.

## Geopolitical Gambit

What Samuel Huntington characterized as a “third wave” of democratization reached Mongolia and accelerated in late 1989 (Huntington 1993; Embassy of Mongolia [a]). A resolution was passed by Mongolia’s Small Khural (legislature) on October 4, 1990, to establish a new constitution, and that constitution took effect on February 12, 1992. With that, the Mongolian People’s Republic was renamed, simply, Mongolia.

Mongolia’s legacy of dependence led it in independence to reach beyond geographic constraints to cultivate relationships with states far afield. Mongolia shifted from a “satellite” foreign policy of dependence on Moscow to what Ulaanbaatar describes as an “independent, non-aligned, multi-pillar, open” foreign policy (Embassy of Mongolia [b]). Ulaanbaatar has adopted a plucky posture of gracious defiance, embodied in the “National Security Concept” and the “Concept of Mongolia’s Foreign Policy,” which articulates a policy of balance that is known as the “third neighbor” policy (Embassy of Mongolia [c]; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006, 225–230).

In essence, Mongolia has enlisted Mercutio’s refrain, “a plague o’ both your houses,” rejecting dependence on Russia or China and reaching out to states that can counterbalance the inclinations and serve as a check on the economic, political, and strategic ambitions of Moscow and Beijing (Shakespeare; Altantsetseg 2003:59-74). Ulaanbaatar’s unspoken premise is that neither Russia nor the PRC will cavalierly “gore the ox” of those other powers.



Mongolia has succeeded in this venture, and now has burgeoning relationships with a roster of “third neighbors,” states prepared to underwrite a portion of Mongolia’s development, invest, and encourage the democratic transition that is under way. Ulaanbaatar has consciously built relations—including several with military or defense-related elements—with the United States, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, Germany, and other influential states in Europe, among others (Bedhi 2007; Misake 2007).

Mongolia’s effort to establish bonds to other powers may have aroused uneasiness in Beijing and Moscow. It is not accidental that among Ulaanbaatar’s greatest foreign fans are states that are, themselves, democratic states, several of which have had pre-existing friction with Russia and the PRC.

Since 1990, Beijing and Moscow have generally tolerated Ulaanbaatar’s independence and—with some trepidation—its military relations with other states. Considering that this tolerance marks a break from past practice, one is justified in worrying—as Mongolians do—about how long it may be sustained.

After all, Chinese are vigilant about the prospect of encirclement. Russians are especially unsettled by the prospect of a democratic state on their border entangled with powerful Western democracies elsewhere, notably the United States.

This is the geopolitical gambit: Can Mongolia secure its independence by forging ties with states that arouse geopolitical anxieties in Russia, the PRC, or both?

One source of friction that complicates the underlying rivalries among the great powers is the scramble to exploit Mongolia’s mineral and energy resources. Before 1990, Mongolia was dependent on Soviet subsidies. Since then, it has struggled to sustain itself, depending initially on the revenue derived from the export of copper, gold, and cashmere, as well as coal and fluorspar. According to a World Bank report, the greatest profit has been derived from the “state-owned Erdenet copper mining company, which earns about half of all foreign exchange and provides almost 25 percent of government revenues” (World Bank 2008, 9).<sup>4</sup> However, Mongolia’s as-yet-untapped resources are staggering. To date, more than six thousand sites promising more than eighty different commodities have been identified. By far, the greatest resources are copper, zinc, gold, coal, uranium, and fluorspar. The prospect of extracting resources from Mongolia has drawn a great deal

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<sup>4</sup> Commodity prices have fallen precipitously since their high. According to a statement about Mongolia released on April 1, 2009, by the International Monetary Fund, “Mineral revenues, which accounted for more than one-third of budget revenues at the peak of the commodity boom in 2007, have fallen sharply and expected to account for only 12½ percent of total revenues in 2009, putting significant pressures on the fiscal position” (International Monetary Fund 2009).



of foreign direct investment in both mineral and petroleum explorative enterprises, contributing hugely to Mongolia's GDP. According to the World Bank, "The boom in exploration has resulted in the discovery of an impressive pipeline of potential world class mineral projects including Oyu Tolgoi (copper and gold) and Tavan Tolgoi (coal) in the South Gobi as well as Tsagaan Suvraga (copper and molybdenum), Tumurtei (iron ore), Ulaan (lead and zinc), Gatsuurt (gold), and Golden Hills (gold)" (World Bank 10).

As an indication of how substantially the exploitation of these resources could affect the economy of Mongolia, it is worth observing that the investment needed to *begin* extracting resources from both the Oyu Tolgoi and the Tavan Tolgoi deposits has been estimated at US \$5 billion, a sum that is twice that of Mongolia's GDP. That is, before Mongolia derives revenue from the sale of the commodities that would be extracted, its GDP would be considerably boosted by investments by foreign enterprises selected to establish the means of exploiting the mineral resources (World Bank 10). The opportunities, and risks, that the development of large-scale mining operations introduce to Mongolia are immense.

Mongolia has been wrestling with how to manage this process. Not only does the development of Mongolia's mining sector have the potential to transform utterly the nature of the state's economy, but it is very likely to affect its relationship to Mongolia's two proximate neighbors, Russia and the PRC.

Both Russian and Chinese enterprises have taken great interest in securing access to certain resources. Russia is principally focused on Mongolia's uranium, while PRC enterprises are eager for Mongolia's coal, copper, and other strategic minerals. Indeed, passing as it is through a phase of rapid construction and development, the PRC has been scouring the world for access to energy and mineral resources, aggressively moving into markets where it had not been before, spending liberally to ensure access in ways that have prompted some observers to cry "neo-mercantilism," (Holslag 2006). The same label has been applied to Russian practices (Mansourev 2005).

This leads Mongolia to worry that a form of "soft colonialism" will manifest itself, whereby China and/or Russia will seek to exploit Mongolia's apparently vast mineral deposits and energy resources while bending Ulaanbaatar's will to serve their own interests.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The term "soft colonialism" has no established meaning and has been used by others to identify a variety of ways in which one state exercises hegemonic control over certain affairs within another apparently sovereign state in a manner that emulates colonialism, but without the conventional implication that domination is effected by a population transplanted from the colonial state to rule the colony (Hamamoto 2006; Nasr 2001, 41; Reka 2003, 153, 319). "Soft colonialism" might also be



Mongolia is in a tough spot. While Mongolia wants very much to capitalize on subterranean natural resources that have a potential to expand the nation's prosperity, Ulaanbaatar is deeply anxious that enterprises wishing to invest in the exploitation of the resources will be dominated by Moscow and Beijing—a prospect that could render Mongolia dependent, again, and defenseless in the face of political expectations originating in Russia and China. Mongolia is thus torn between a commitment to economic development and wariness of the vulnerabilities that might evolve should it become excessively dependent on Moscow, Beijing, or both.

For the past several years, Ulaanbaatar has been driven by debate about how to enhance the prosperity and national security of the state without becoming dependent on any single foreign protector. This internal dispute has unfolded during a period when the great powers exercising influence in Asia are, themselves, readjusting their relationships to one another and to other states to accommodate the more prominent economic and military capabilities of the PRC, a more assertive Russia, and an over-stretched United States. The competition for advantage is far more subtly expressed than it was during earlier periods when national interest was enmeshed in and masked by more obvious ideological ambitions.

Yet, even in an era of less evident cleavage between states and alliance blocs, one detects the persistent hold that geography has on the minds of state leaders and strategists, who envision in cartographic terms political alignment and security. Distance, terrain, and access still dominate the thoughts of those charged with defending national security and enhancing national prestige.

The general rivalry for influence in Asia has apparently manifested itself in a particular rivalry for influence in Mongolia. So, steering its way around the impediments imposed by great power competition, Mongolia finds itself seeking prosperity and security in relationships with states that are, separately, competing with one another for their own prosperity and security. These conditions leave one to wonder whether Mongolia's independence has provoked a new "great game" with Mongolia's territory

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understood as a form of neo-imperialism. Neither term has a precise definition and relate to concepts that overlap. The phenomenon they aim to characterize is a form of political and economic exploitation by a powerful state of resources in a less powerful state by the selective penetration into and pressure on the mechanisms of governance in the weak target state, accomplished without explicit efforts to undermine the sovereignty of that state, but resulting in a form of domination perceived by the target state as unfair or contrary to a preferred policy outcome.



and allegiance as the prize.<sup>6</sup> At the very least, the rivalry for influence in Mongolia does seem to arouse a sense of geostrategic disquiet on the part of Russia and the PRC.

In view of where Mongolia is situated—to say nothing of the colossal imbalances in power and other indices that distinguish Mongolia and its neighbors—Chinese and Russian perceptions of Mongolia and policies affecting relations with Mongolia have contributed to, and will continue to shape, Mongolia’s autonomy, development, and security. A fundamental question arising from these conditions is: how is Mongolia’s sovereignty and security affected by reactions by Beijing and Moscow to Ulaanbaatar’s approach to foreign relations?

Considering how thoroughly Mongolia’s history has been entangled with China’s and Russia’s, it is entirely understandable that Mongolia’s attitude toward its neighbors and Ulaanbaatar’s approach to foreign relations and national security will be seen by Beijing and Moscow as relevant to the welfare and security of their own states. One is justified in wondering how Beijing and Moscow view an independent Mongolia—an entity they have in the past dominated but not dealt with as a sovereign equal—and what confidence they have that Ulaanbaatar will conduct its own relations with states beyond its borders in ways that take into account Chinese and Russian perceptions, ambitions, and anxieties. Mongolia’s geopolitical gambit is that it can balance these interests, while entangling itself with states that Moscow and Beijing view with suspicion.

## Mongolia in the middle

Since the late 1980s, one observes evidence of Beijing’s equanimity and propriety in many matters that affect Mongolia, but sensitivity about some decisions made in Ulaanbaatar that seem, from Beijing’s perspective, to affect the PRC’s security. Moscow was,

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<sup>6</sup> The term “great game” is associated with the nineteenth-century competition for control of Central Asia in which Great Britain was pitted against Russia. It may have been coined by Captain Arthur Connolly, a British officer serving in Afghanistan. He wrote in a letter of 1841 about “a great game, a noble game” between his country and Russia. Sir John Kaye, a military historian, quoted the letter, thus introducing the notion of a “great game.” Some years later, in 1901, the term was popularized in Rudyard Kipling’s novel, *Kim* (Myer and Brysac 1999, xxiii; Hopkirk 1992). The present contestation for access and influence in Mongolia, though, is different from the original notion. To date, the rival powers do not seek to dominate and control the territory of Mongolia, so long as they can assure themselves that no other power does and that in the absence of domination, economic benefit can still be had.



understandably, utterly preoccupied with the dissolution of empire and in the final years of the twentieth century, rather remote in its relations with Ulaanbaatar. A return to what might be seen as a proprietary interest in Mongolia by Russia began in the early twenty-first century, and has evolved swiftly.

Sino-Mongolian relations have evolved amicably, even if strains and mistrust are evident. For instance, there has been a sequence of high-profile meetings between leaders in Ulaanbaatar and Beijing, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs records in its annual report on foreign relations “the good neighborly partnership of mutual trust between the People’s Republic of China and Mongolia made steady progress,” suggesting, in the veiled style of diplomatic rhetoric, that progress was needed and welcomed (People’s Republic of China 2007).

In public statements, PRC officials are wont to trumpet Beijing’s respect for Mongolia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, leaving one to wonder why such assertions are now necessary. Public statements by both the PRC and Mongolia are suffused with rhetoric of friendship, neighborliness, and mutuality.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Mongolians are reflexively suspicious of Chinese, a suspicion born of anxiety about Chinese irredentism and observations of how Inner Mongolia has fared under Han domination.

In Mongolia, one hears from statesmen and political analysts tales of Chinese exercising great-power prerogatives to impose—at Mongolia’s expense—the PRC’s political will. Mongolia’s economic, spiritual, and defense policies have, in some measure, been hampered by limits established by the PRC. This is not to say that the Sino-Mongolia relationship should be seen as essentially disputatious or hostile. Mongolia understands that it derives enormous benefit from its relationship to the PRC. Rather, it is that Mongolia perceives in PRC actions implicit bounds on what Beijing will tolerate of Ulaanbaatar and tacit ambitions that Beijing will pursue, whether Ulaanbaatar likes it or not.

From the perspective of the PRC, it seems that Mongolia’s “third neighbors” are the sources of potential threat, not Mongolia itself. It is principally the possibility that the territory of Mongolia will be used—again—by Beijing’s rivals to affect adversely the welfare or security of the PRC that appears to concern some Chinese analysts. After all, a principal stumbling block to the reestablishment of Sino-Soviet relations after the two-

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, when PRC Premier Wen Jiabao met Mongolia’s Prime Minister S. Bayar in Astana at the end of October, 2008, the PRC Foreign Ministry reported that “Wen hailed the continued development of the good-neighborly partnership with mutual trust between the two countries, describing the two countries as good neighbors, friends and partners” (People’s Republic of China 2008).





decade long split between Moscow and Beijing was the presence of Soviet military installations and troops on Mongolian soil—most along the border with the PRC. With good cause, Beijing looks warily at what privileges or access Ulaanbaatar grants to its “third neighbors” and what is the nature of the relationship between Ulaanbaatar and friends from afar.

Chinese sensitivity about Mongolia’s foreign and security policies seem to reflect several factors. Historically, successful invasions of China have come often from the north. Moreover, China has a long and uneasy history of specific vulnerability to Mongolia. After the Mongols invaded China and integrated it into their empire in the thirteenth century, the principal security concerns of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and through much of the first half of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) security concerns were dominated by a sense of vulnerability to Mongolian tribes. Indeed, it is no accident that China’s Great Wall is built where it is. While Chinese strategists have observed how there are natural sources of protection in the east, south, and west (the sea, jungles, and mountains), there is none on the north. The wall was a man-made effort to shelter the populous heartland of China from horse-borne raiders in the north, a strategic response that did not ultimately offer the protection it was intended to provide. Of course, the Soviet efforts to use Mongolia as a buffer and base for troops and military assets that threatened the PRC seared in the collective memory of many Chinese a sense that, left in the wrong hands or too weak to defend itself, Mongolia might be a strategic liability for China.

In the aftermath of the cold war, the PRC has experienced some sense of relief that its borders are generally secure and its former adversaries preoccupied with other pursuits. However, there are plenty of Chinese strategists who concern themselves about the possibility that the U.S. will encircle China, establishing relations with China’s neighbors in ways that, should push come to shove, would limit the PRC’s military options in times of crisis. In this regard, the emergence of a robust military-to-military relationship as one component of the U.S.-Mongolia relationship is a provocation to unease in the PRC. Chinese strategists wonder what Washington intends in its cultivation of the Mongolian Armed Forces.

Finally, there are three largely domestic factors that affect Beijing’s attitude toward Mongolia. First, Mongolia’s mineral and energy resources—particularly its coal—are immensely appealing to the PRC. It is actively acquiring access to materials in far more distant locales, so the nearness of Mongolia’s resources is an added source of attraction. Of course, where coal is at issue, China’s nearness is also a virtue for Mongolia, because the cost of transportation is less than it would be to a more distant consumer.





Second, the PRC must manage policy toward the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (Inner Mongolia). In past years, there have been moments when Chinese leaders worried about the possibility of a pan-Mongol movement for unity, a potential “separatist” threat that would arouse concerns of the sort that are associated with Tibet and Xinjiang. All of the foregoing is coupled with a palpable sentiment of attachment to the idea that Mongolia, fundamentally, is Chinese. One does not need to look for long to find evidence of irredentism commingled with Chinese national chauvinism, leading to the publication of essays, on-line materials, and statements suggesting that Mongolia should, one day, be recovered as part of China’s territorial patrimony.

Russia’s relationship to Mongolia is also complicated. Russians who were adults at the time the Soviet Union collapsed will surely recall a relationship with Mongolia in which Moscow was entirely dominant. Adjusting in the period since 1990 to interaction with Mongolia as a sovereign equal cannot have been easy for them. For one thing, Moscow did not have to “share” Mongolia with other powers during the years when the Soviet Union existed. Now, Chinese, American, Canadian, Indian, Japanese, Korean, European, Australian officials and entrepreneurs, as well as those from a host of international institutions, roam the corridors of Mongolian bastions of power seeking deals, offering investments, and exercising clout.

Most unnerving, in the early 1990s, “China sought to fill the trade vacuum created by the erosion of Mongolia’s special relationship with Russia” (Lhagvasuren 2000). Thus, some analysts perceived that in the last decade of the twentieth century, Mongolia was “a focal point in the struggle between China and Russia for regional influence (Lhagvasuren 2000).

In 1993, Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed a Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation in which, among other matters, Moscow recognized Ulaanbaatar’s right to deny foreign troops passage through or basing rights on Mongolia’s territory (Soni 2006, 32). However, the relationship did not revive until the end of the decade. Then, President N. Bagabandi visited Moscow in 1999 and Vladimir Putin visited Ulaanbaatar, November 13-14, 2000.

Putin’s visit was evidently envisaged in Moscow as a means of reestablishing Russian preeminence as Mongolia’s “most favored neighbor.” One product of the visit was a jointly-signed 25-point Ulaanbaatar Declaration. The two presidents asserted a determination to expand bilateral trade, affirmed a coincidence of views on security matters, and stated a wish to strengthen a means of ensuring security in the Asia Pacific region (Lhagvasuren 2000). The Russian Ambassador to Mongolia, O.M. Derkovsky, is quoted as having said “Before, the determining aspect for the Russian-Mongolian



relations was the ideology. Now it is a mutual interest. Thus, the basis of cooperation is changing but the mutual interest is remaining,” (Lhagvasuren 2000).

One source of irritation in the bilateral relationship was the issue of debt that Mongolia had incurred during the Soviet period. According to Mongolia’s Ministry of Finance, since 1947 Mongolia had racked up a “debt of \$11.4 billion to the Soviet Union and its legal successor, Russia. . . . This puts Mongolia third on the list of Russia's debtors, behind Cuba and Syria, and equates to roughly \$4,800 for each of Mongolia's 2.4 million inhabitants” (Sumiyabazar 2004). However, skeptics within Mongolia challenged the whole notion that Ulaanbaatar should owe anything at all to Russia, reasoning that Moscow had dominated Mongolia as a republic during the Soviet era and that following its dissolution, the Russian Federation never pressed other republics for repayment of debts.

Beyond that, one Mongolian economist, G. Purevbaatar, argued that while Moscow had extended loans to Mongolia, it had also inflated the cost of Soviet expenditures in Mongolia, undervalued what it purchased from Mongolia, wreaked havoc on Mongolia’s environment, seized portions of Mongolian territory at will, and prompted a period of political persecution in Mongolia, resulting in deaths, destruction, and terror.

He said that the Soviet Union sold its goods and technology at a 20 to 30 percent premium over their real value on the world market and spent 20 percent employing inefficient Soviet cadres. The net effect was, for example, that Russian work in Mongolia cost two to five times more than it should have. In addition, he contended that the USSR bought goods and raw materials from Mongolia at 40 to 50 percent less than their market value, that it illegally seized two tracts of land, and that its troops ruined 420,000 hectares of Mongolian land (Sumiyabazar 2004).

So, even if the Russian Federation could be said to have inherited the right to collect debt from Mongolia, the sum owed should be recalculated to account for the enormous costs imposed on Mongolia during the Soviet era.

Despite this challenge, the government of Mongolia did reach a settlement with Russia at the end of 2003. A deal—the details of which remain confidential —was announced by the Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, when he visited Ulaanbaatar on January 13-14, 2004, and said Moscow had decided to write off 98% of the debt it claimed Mongolia owed. Ulaanbaatar agreed to pay the remaining two percent, approximately \$250 million, a sum equivalent to one quarter of the state’s GDP at that time (Sumiyabazar 2004). To some Mongolians, Moscow’s apparent magnanimity was a direct



response to the increasing dependence by Mongolia on the PRC. It was a decision taken in the context of the Sino-Russian rivalry for access to Mongolia.

While both Moscow and Beijing are eager to ensure that the other does not dominate Mongolia, the emergence of the U.S. as an actor in Mongolia's development is equally unsettling to them. The U.S. has made much of its commitment to Mongolia. In the two decades since the U.S. and Mongolia established diplomatic relations in 1987, the U.S. has showered it with attention, especially after Ulaanbaatar ended its vassal relationship to Moscow. In 2005, George W. Bush became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Mongolia, but even before his visit the stream of American political and military luminaries who passed through Ulaanbaatar was astonishing.<sup>8</sup>

Mongolia has also received from the U.S. considerable economic and military assistance. The United States Agency for International Development has provided approximately \$173 million in grants since 1991. The U.S. and Mongolia undertook a military-to-military relationship in 1991 that has, thus far, resulted in more than \$36.4 million in assistance to the Mongolian Armed Forces. In addition, more than 600 Peace Corps volunteers have served in Mongolia and the U.S. has offered support for the education of Mongolian students and exchange visitors in the United States. The U.S. government has also been instrumental in spurring support for Mongolia from private foundations, international organizations, and the American business community (Minton 2006).

In October, 2007, Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar met with President Bush at the White House and received Washington's pledge of an additional \$285 million in aid from the Millennium Challenge Account (Millennium Challenge Account 2007). Much of the grant—approximately \$188 million—was to be used to upgrade Mongolia's decrepit rail system.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State James A. Baker, III visited Mongolia in August 1990, and again in July 1991. . . . Secretary of State Madeline Albright visited Mongolia in May 1998, and Prime Minister Enkhbayar visited Washington in November 2001. Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage visited Mongolia in January 2004, and President Bagabandi came to Washington for a meeting with President Bush in July 2004. President Bush, Mrs. Bush, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Mongolia in November 2005. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld visited in October 2005 and Speaker of the House of Representatives Dennis Hastert visited Mongolia in August 2005. Agriculture Secretary Johanns led a Presidential Delegation in conjunction with Mongolia's celebration of its 800th Anniversary." In addition, there has been a constant flow of U.S. military officials to Mongolia, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (United States, Department of State).



To date, the stated rationale for U.S. largesse toward Mongolia is the recognition that the two states have “shared values and common strategic interests” (United States 2005 [a]). In other words, “its the democracy, stupid.”

Mongolia is one of a cohort of states that undertook the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the late twentieth century. Beyond that, it has become “the only post-communist country east of the Baltic states to have consolidated democracy” (Fritz 2002; Lee 2005; United Nations 2006). Indeed, American officials in Washington and at the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar are quick to underscore, as President Bush did in a speech to the Mongolian people, that “Mongolia has made the transition from communism to freedom, and in just 15 years, you’ve established a vibrant democracy and opened up your economy. You’re an example of success for this region and for the world” (United States 2005 [b]).

In addition to a considerable flow of economic assistance aimed at encouraging development, the U.S. has established a collaborative military-to-military relationship with the Mongolian Armed Forces. The stated focus of this relationship has been to help modernize and professionalize the Mongolian military and to help train it to assume international responsibilities as part of peacekeeping operations in regions of need. Indeed, the U.S. Pacific Command and the Mongolian Armed Forces have had an annual peacekeeping exercise—Khaan Quest—involving troops from both states, as well as representatives of militaries from other states. The U.S. has also been instrumental in assisting to establish the Five Hills Training center for Mongolian troops to learn skills associated with peacekeeping and, indeed, Mongolia’s forces have been deployed abroad to operations under the United Nations banner (Minton 2008).

Mongolia has contributed troops through ten rotations in Iraq and has dispatched soldiers to Afghanistan, despite domestic sensitivities and political pressure on the Mongolian government to desist. There were no fatalities among the ten Mongolian contingents, a fact that helped to sustain domestic support for the mission.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In October, 2005, when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Ulaanbaatar, he recognized the work of two Mongolian sergeants, G. Azzaya and Sambuu-Yondon, who were providing perimeter defense at Logistic Base Charlie near Hillah, Iraq. There, they guarded Polish forces and in February, 2004, thwarted what looked to be a suicide-attack on the facility by two trucks, one laden with more than 700 kg of explosives. Sgt. Assaya shot dead the driver of one truck who appeared intent on attacking the base. The involvement of Mongolia in the conflict labeled by the Bush administration as a Global War on Terror (GWOT) has certainly earned Mongolia the gratitude of the U.S. military and political leadership, but has raised concerns in the PRC about the nature of the U.S. relationship to Mongolia (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific 2004).



In view of Russian and Chinese geostrategic anxiety about Mongolia, the role of the U.S. raises troubling questions. Does the military dimension of Ulaanbaatar's relationship to the United States and other influential democratic states enhance or erode Mongolia's long-term security? Do Ulaanbaatar's democratic "third neighbors" assist Mongolia primarily because of ideological urges to nurture a young democracy, or because of where Mongolia is located, or for some admixture of both reasons?

Chinese observers seem to understand why Mongolia has reached out to friendly states beyond its two proximate neighbors, but see in the interests of the U.S. and other "third neighbors" nefarious rationales for taking interest in Mongolia. A common theme in PRC explanations of foreign interest in Mongolia is geopolitical or geostrategic ambition. For instance, one author writes that after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union

the U.S. took advantage of Russia's departure to fill the geopolitical vacuum, rapidly develop relations with Mongolia, and sustaining 'Mongolia independence' separatist forces. This must arouse us to be on guard against the penetration of U.S. forces that threaten the security of Inner Mongolia. (Shen 403-4).

He Liangliang, a commentator for Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television, writes that after the collapse of the Soviet Union "The United States and Japan—especially Japan—have had a lot of interest in Mongolia, hoping to participate in the development of the mining industry in Mongolia and attempting to contain China" (He 2008).

Chinese perceptions of Japan are also implicated in their anxieties about Mongolia. Zhang Lijun, Deputy Director of the Department for Information and Contingencies Analysis of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), writes that Japan's interest in developing relations with Mongolia stems from Tokyo's geostrategic ambition. He states

Japan has been seeking a base for its expansion on the Asian continent in a bid to expand its influence in Asia and secure raw material supplies as well as markets for its products. Mongolia is the best choice for Tokyo. As early as the 1920s, the infamous "Tanaka Memorial," an imperialist conquest plan allegedly presented by warlord Tanaka Giichi to the Japanese emperor, advocated the conquest of Manchuria, Mongolia, China and eventually the whole of Asia, a testimony to Japan's emphasis on Mongolia's strategic importance (Zhang 2006).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tanaka Giichi was reputedly the author of a memorial written to the Japanese emperor that laid out a view that "To conquer the world, one must first conquer Asia; to conquer Asia, one must first



Zhang also asserts that Japan hopes to lure Ulaanbaatar to enter into a U.S.-led alliance system in Northeast Asia so that Mongolia may become a “deterrent against China and Russia” (Zhang 2006). The idea that Mongolia—which is envisioned by some Chinese as the PRC’s strategic “backyard”—has been co-opted into an American-led “strategic network” is one that seems to permeate PRC writings about the U.S.-Mongolia relationship (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2005). Another is that the U.S. is “trying to control Mongolia to drive a wedge between China and Russia.” (Liu and Liu 2002, 65-67).

Analysts in the PRC have taken note of the efforts by the U.S. to offer economic assistance, military training and equipment and the apparently benign nature of U.S. military engagement with the Mongolian Armed Forces, but have also taken umbrage at the fact of the engagement. In light of U.S. penetration of Central and Southeast Asia after September 11, 2001, strategic thinkers in the PRC are wary of Washington’s long-term intentions and some in the PRC see the U.S.-Mongolia relationship as nothing more than a strategic investment by Washington on which the U.S. may come to build in time. So, despite Mongolia’s protestations of a wish for good neighborly relations with both Beijing and Moscow, PRC analysts write with alarm about what they see as Washington’s insinuation into Mongolia. Plainly, some Chinese see this relationship as a menace to the national security of both Russia and China (Liu and Liu 2002, 65).

## Something to fear besides fear itself?

Even if Russia and the PRC refrain from naked expansionism, the asymmetry in Russo-Mongolian and Sino-Mongolian power leaves open the possibility of creeping annexation, through “soft colonialism.” Beijing and Moscow already wield incentives and disincentives in ways that constrict Mongolia’s foreign policy options, limiting the nature of its relations with other states to ensure that they do not feel threatened by choices Ulaanbaatar would otherwise make.

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conquer China. To conquer China, one must first conquer Manchuria and Mongolia. To conquer Manchuria and Mongolia, one must first conquer Korea and Taiwan.” Chinese have seen this memorial as the blueprint for Japan’s expansion, even though from the time the memorial was first referenced in a Chinese publication, its authenticity has been challenged (Stephan 1973).



This is not to suggest that either Russia or the PRC have an ambition to subordinate Mongolia. It would be far more accurate to state that they have developed a strong wish to establish greater strategic depth on the entirety of their land and maritime peripheries backed by the military capacity to defend it. However, one still wishes to know the degree to which the routine oaths of fealty by Moscow and Beijing to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Mongolia mask unease aroused by Ulaanbaatar's intensifying ties to states that Mongolia's proximate neighbor regard as rivals to influence in Asia.

Clearly, some Chinese analysts have published expressions of concern. Those who worry seem especially concerned that the U.S. will use Mongolia in an effort to encircle and contain the PRC, whatever that really means. For instance, in an article published in the *Hsin Wan Pao* of Hong Kong, the author asserts that "More than twenty years ago, the United States insisted on setting up a monitoring station in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, to collect information on China's northeast and northwest, the Soviet Union's Siberia, and North Korea. Later, an embassy was established in Mongolia in the 1980s. [Former U.S. Secretary of State] Baker's current visit to improve relations is of course part of the plan devised over the past decade or so" (*Hsin Wan Pao* 1990).

This theme was elaborated in an article by Sun Shuli, which states "The two sides signed a military cooperation agreement in 1993, providing a systematic basis for military exchanges. . . . Part of the agreement is a U.S.-Mongolian cooperation project in electronic military reconnaissance against China." The article states that on August 22, 1995, President

Clinton signed an administrative order to supply Mongolia with 'defense technology, equipment, and parts,' . . . By now Mongolia has already been incorporated into the U.S. security system. During Winston Lord's visit to Mongolia in 1995, it was agreed that Mongolia was to be incorporated into the United States' Asia-Pacific security system, and that the Mongolian Army was to join the U.S. Pacific units in military exercises.

The article continued, stating "Mongolia's State Security Conference Secretary Enkhsaikhan particularly pointed out that the United States has 'linked Mongolia's security directly with its own interests.'"

In a section concerning the "strategic intention of the United States," Sun asserts "It is out of its own strategic considerations that the United States is showing great interest in Mongolia and setting great store in developing relations with Mongolia." For one reason, Secretary Baker apparently explained that "Mongolia had been the first Asian country to warmly embrace communism, and now it has become the first Asian country to turn to





democracy.” In this sense, as a Rand Corporation report is cited as saying, “Mongolia is playing the role of ‘bell weather.’”

More importantly, Sun states that the U.S. aims “To use Mongolia as a base to watch and deter China and Russia.” From Mongolia

the Americans will get an extremely favorable geographic position to keep watch over their two strategic rivals, China and Russia. From here they will also be able to exert influence on these two countries at a certain time. In November 1994, the United States helped Mongolia build a monitoring station that ‘can monitor earthquakes as well as nuclear tests in foreign countries.’

To Sun, this signifies that “It is quite clear that the United States’ real intention is to make use of Mongolia’s geographic position neighboring China’s Xinjiang to monitor China’s nuclear tests” (Sun 1996, 32-34).

PRC analysts, like Sun, seem to express strong suspicion that the overriding reason why American statesmen and military officials have interest in Mongolia is its location. Chinese analysts believe U.S. relations with Mongolia are an outgrowth of Washington’s wish to penetrate Central Asia and check the influence of both the PRC and Russia. They believe that Americans think, as they do, primarily in terms of geopolitics. In the words of one PRC research scholar

As soon as the U.S. controls Mongolia, it will be in a strategic position to “restrain Russia to the north, and check China to the south,” and will proceed to connect its strategic plans for East Asia and Central Asia. As far as America is concerned, Mongolia is just a piece on its strategic chessboard in the Pacific region, not only to restrain China, but to use as a domino to unsettle China’s periphery (Nuo 2007, 4).

What one would like to know, though, is how widespread are such sentiments, and what, if anything, do they augur for PRC foreign policy? Is Beijing’s tolerance of Mongolia’s independence durable? Or, are there hidden “red lines” over which Ulaanbaatar should not step if it intends to avoid provoking a backlash from the PRC or, worse, an effort by Beijing to establish suzerainty over territory that some Chinese may still view as China’s.

Chinese who express such views believe Mongolia is valued by the U.S.—and Japan—because of where it is and they warn that Beijing should not allow Mongolia to be used as a bridgehead by foreign adversaries of China. At present, the PRC seems determined to





project an air of unthreatening preoccupation with economic and social development and the cultivation of harmonious foreign relations with its neighbors. It labors to assuage anxieties abroad about its rapidly expanding economic, political, and military power. Yet, where territoriality is concerned, Beijing has revealed a capacity for stridency, bellicosity, and unyielding assertions of sovereignty.

Mongolia's independence and the attitudes in Beijing and Moscow attitude toward it may seem of marginal relevance to analysts concerned about Asia, where an array of "flashpoints" insistently commands attention because of the perceived imminence of potential calamity. However, among observers who have been attentive to the post-Cold War politics of Eurasia, some see there a "potentially dangerous reality taking shape: the emergence of two competing security camps" between the PRC and the United States. Furthermore, "As the competition accelerates, more and more states are finding themselves forced to choose sides" (Caryl, et.al. 2007). In that respect, Beijing's and Moscow's attitudes toward Mongolia may be linked to their concerns about a hegemonic competition throughout Central Asia, a struggle that unfolds at a comparatively gradual and often barely perceptible pace.

How significant this competition is prompts debate among those who devote themselves to the interpretation of evolving dynamics in the region. On one end of the spectrum are those who dismiss concerns about a new "great game" as "exaggerated" (Weitz 2006). On the other end, are those who are troubled by the "eastward transfer" of U.S. military forces from Europe to Asia, including those in the PRC who question the rationale for Washington's evolving military-to-military relationship with Ulaanbaatar.

In Mongolia, friction between major powers appears now to be subtle and subordinated to more explicit aims of commercial interchange and development. To the degree that competition spills out into the open, it is as often about access to mineral and energy resources buried beneath Mongolia's soil as it is about anything grander.

No power overtly seeks to dominate Mongolia's territory. Yet, the fault lines are evident and appear to reflect not only concerns about Mongolia's loyalties, but about the entire band of territory that had been dominated by the Soviet Union in Central Asia.

According to Wang Jisi, a prominent PRC analyst of Sino-U.S. relations, some Chinese perceive the intensified interest by Washington in the military dimension of relations with Pacific and Central Asian states, coupled with efforts to champion democracy in states close to China's territory, as "attempts to export American ideas and destabilize the region at the expense of China and Russia" (Wang 2007).



To be sure, even those who are concerned about the possibility that the PRC, the U.S., and Russia are resuming or reinforcing habits of hegemonic competition for influence in Asia do not assert that military confrontation is impending, or even inevitable.

For better and for worse, Washington's posture toward Mongolia has drawn critical scrutiny in Russia and the PRC. By encouraging Mongolia's democratic development and aiding its armed forces, the United States risks triggering a response from Russia and the PRC that flows from a determination to put distance between their territorial domain and potential hegemonic competitors, as well as from residual Chinese irredentism. Thus, PRC perceptions of Washington's relationship to Mongolia may be at once emblematic of Beijing's attitude toward the foreign relations of other states on China's periphery, and also idiosyncratic. Beijing's ambitions to exclude hegemonic rivals from its neighborhood—an impulse that some observers characterize as analogous to the Monroe Doctrine—are superimposed on latent notions that Mongolia is rightfully China's territory, was stolen away, and should not become again a bridgehead for foreign rivals to menace the Chinese heartland.

PRC statements affirming Beijing's respect for Mongolia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity are suspect. First, affirmations by Beijing have become a regular feature of bilateral interaction with Ulaanbaatar. This, alone, prompts thoughts that the Chinese "lady protests too much, methinks." If it were true that the PRC fully respects Mongolia's independence, why state it as frequently and emphatically as Beijing does? It is conceivable that Beijing's pledge of allegiance to the inviolability of Mongolian sovereignty is a warning to others—Moscow and Washington, perhaps—that they must, also, refrain from gradually subsuming Mongolia to their own orbits of influence?

There are, of course, nationalistic tracts in the PRC that make evident a view that differs from the stated policy of respect for Mongolia's sovereignty. For some Chinese analysts, Mongolia is China's "lost territory." This disturbs Mongolians—many of whom have a predisposition to suspicion of Chinese intentions—intensely. The question is, how widespread are these views and are they linked to any sense that the PRC should, in some way, subordinate Mongolia in a suzerain relationship?

Mongolia has also experienced some taste of hegemonism from its two neighbors. For example, in November 2002, when the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia, the rail link between the PRC and Mongolia became inoperative for what Chinese asserted were technical reasons. The Dalai Lama arrived in Mongolia on Monday, November 4, 2002.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A plan to visit earlier, in September, was postponed when Korea's Asiana Airlines refused to issue a ticket, in the face of strong protests to Seoul by Beijing. The Dalai Lama had been in Mongolia in



On Tuesday, November 5 and Wednesday, November 6, trains were stopped at Erenhot, the principal border crossing located on the boundary with the PRC region Inner Mongolia. It was reported that approximately 500 passengers were stranded at the Zamiin Uud border station. On November 6, the Dalai Lama spoke before 5,000 Buddhists inside the Ulaanbaatar Palace with a crowd, estimated to be of equal number, standing outside the building. The disruption to rail service was taken up by the PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mr. Kong Quan, at a press briefing on Thursday, November 7. He acknowledged that the trains had been stopped, but said that local railway officials had said the stoppage was for “technical reasons.”

By Wednesday afternoon, service was resumed. While Kong did not explicitly link the rail disruption and the visit by the Dalai Lama, he did decry the visit of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia and to other states, objecting to the provision by those states of a forum for what the PRC views as the Dalai Lama’s “splittist” activities (AFP 2002). Kong was quoted as saying, “He’s not simply a religious figure . . . He has been involved with activities splitting China. Therefore, China has always been against countries giving him a stage for his splittist activities” (Bodeen 2002).

While the Foreign Ministry spokesman would not link the rail stoppage to the visit of the Dalai Lama, the Associated Press reported that an unnamed executive in the PRC’s copper industry said that Beijing ordered Chinese railway authorities to suspend all shipments from Mongolia due to the Dalai Lama’s visit (McDonald 2002).<sup>12</sup> In Ulaanbaatar, the stoppage was seen as an effort by Beijing to interfere with Mongolia’s internal affairs, a warning by the PRC of what leverage it can exercise.

As to Russia, disturbing signs of how a resurgent Russian state might act on its periphery were on display in Georgia, during the summer of 2008 and in its dispute with Ukraine over natural gas, in the fall of that year. While Mongolia is hardly like Georgia in having enclaves of people within its boundaries who crave independence from

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1995 on a trip engineered by the then Minister of Culture, a devout Buddhist, Nambaryn Enkhbayar. By 2002, when the trains were halted, Enkhbayar was Prime Minister and, in 2005, was elected became president—a post he holds as of this writing and for which he is standing for reelection.

<sup>12</sup> The disruption to rail service had a discernible effect on copper prices in London, where “prices hit a 16-week high on the London Metal Exchange.” There, the cost of three-month contracts that had stood at \$1,587 before the disruption “rose 1.3 percent to US\$1,607 a ton before falling back below US\$1,600.” At the time, copper was Mongolia’s greatest export commodity—accounting for about half of all Mongolia’s export revenue (Associated Press 2002). When the Dalai Lama visited again in 2006—his seventh visit to Mongolia—there was no repetition of the rail stoppage, although an Air China flight was delayed from 8:30am to 7:00pm. The Air China spokesman claimed the delay was weather related, weather in Mongolia was fine (Bazar 2006).



Ulaanbaatar, and while Mongolia's leaders have certainly been far more adept at the arts of diplomacy than were Georgia's, there is in the Russian incursion lessons for Ulaanbaatar. Considering Mongolia's dependence on Russia for petroleum, Ukraine's dispute over the supply of natural gas may be of greater concern in Ulaanbaatar.

Equally relevant are efforts by Russia and China to limit how states on their periphery interact with the United States. For instance, in 2005, Uzbekistan evicted the United States from the "K-2," the Karshi-Khanabad air base, which had been used for both combat and humanitarian missions flown into Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The July 29 eviction notice came only weeks after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—in which Russia and the PRC have considerable voice—met in Astana, Kazakhstan, and issued a call for the United States to establish a deadline for withdrawal of forces from facilities in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Eurasia Insight 2005). Both Moscow and Beijing made evident their apprehensions about the American presence in Central Asia, particularly one that seemed to offer succor to political movements that toppled leaders and regimes friendly to the large Asian neighbors. Washington's support for the "color revolutions" in former Soviet republics grated on Moscow and Beijing (RIA Novosti 2005). Although U.S. operations at K-2 were subsequently authorized anew in March, 2008, the U.S. was not granted the same degree of access to the base that it had had prior to 2005 (Daly 2008).

The other focus of the SCO initiative was use by the United States of the air base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan. On February 4, 2009, Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, met in Moscow with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev to announce receipt from Russia of \$150 million in aid, the forgiveness by Russia of \$180 million in debt, and the provision by Russia of \$2 billion in loans. It was widely believed that Russia had outbid the United States for the sympathies of the Kyrgyz government. Kyrgyzstan had let it be known that it believed the U.S. was paying too little for the privilege of access to the base at Manas, but it was hard to ignore indications that the decision by Tashkent resulted from the machinations of Moscow (Bumiller and Barry 2009).

While the events arising from U.S. relations in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan may serve as a warning to Mongolia, a recent event suggests that Moscow is prepared to act in Mongolia in ways that reflect its displeasure with U.S. involvement there. The U.S. had announced that Mongolia would receive \$285 million in loans from the Millennium

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<sup>13</sup> The Uzbek decision appeared to reflect irritation at Washington's political pressure on the government of President Islam Karimov for greater deference to human rights and political reform, especially following the shooting of protestors at Andijan, May 13-14 (Wright and Tyson 2005; BBC News 2008).



Challenge Account, \$188 millions of which were to be used to upgrade the rail system in Mongolia.<sup>14</sup>

According to a report in the *Mongol Messenger*, an English-language publication, the implementation of this project was stopped in May, 2009, because of Russian objections. One legacy of dependence on the Soviet Union is the co-ownership of the Ulaanbaatar Railway Joint Stock Company, (UBTZ). Both Mongolia and Russia share equally in ownership. According to the *UB Post*

In October 2007, Mongolia and the US signed 285m dollar compact assistance, of which 188.38m dollars is projected to be spent on a railway project that primarily funds the formation of a different wholly state-owning rail company (Mongolian Railway), purchase rail assets and lease them to the Ulaanbaatar Railway JSC (Sumiyabazar 2008).

On January 19, 2009, a team selected through an international tender comprising Onch Audit LLC of Ulaanbaatar in association with the Grant Thornton Amyot LLC began to audit the accounts of the UBTZ in anticipation of imminent work to upgrade the rail system (Batbayar 2009). However, on March 5, 2009, Gennady Petrakov, Chairman of the General Committee of UBTZ (head of the Federal Railway Transport Agency, Russia) wrote to his Mongolian counterparts to ask that the auditing process be halted, claiming the grant from the U.S. Millennium Challenge Account was “unnecessary.” On April 20, the UBTZ’s General Committee met and officially ended the process. The *Mongol Messenger* reports

A. Gansukh, Deputy Minister of Road, Transport, Construction and Urban Development, said “The Mongolian side did not officially inform to Russian side about the implementation of MCA project and that was so irresponsible on their side. There is no choice but to consider the Russian side’s position” (Oolun 2009).

This is quite a blow to Mongolia’s plans and might be seen as a slap in the face to Washington. A skeptical Mongolian press has suggested “the audit had been stopped because of fear that unsavory details would emerge,” but when asked about that rationale,

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<sup>14</sup> The Monstame News Agency reports “The rail system is the transportation backbone of the Mongolian economy. With its antiquated infrastructure, equipment and practices, the current system cannot meet demand for rail services. It poses a serious economic bottleneck by contributing to inflation and limiting growth in both domestic and foreign trade” (Batbayar 2009).



Mongolia's Deputy Minister for Road, Transportation, Construction and City Development, A. Gansukh, replied that the suspension of the audit pertained to an "internal matter of the company" about which he could not comment.

Asked why Mongolia has to accept the Russian stand, the Deputy Minister said Russia was right in saying that as an equal shareholder in the joint venture, it should have been formally informed of the MCC offer at an appropriate time. Russia is offering a USD150 million loan on easy terms to the Railway to compensate for the loss of the USD188 million grant. He said the Railway "was deemed the most appropriate sector when the MCC grant was being negotiated, but it was never a good idea to select a joint venture for the aid" (Ardiin Erkh, Montsame, The Mongol Messenger 2009).

While the reason why the Russians halted the project are not yet clear, it is also not clear what is meant by the assertion that Mongolia had failed to formally notify the Russian side. There are ample accounts in both Russian and Mongolian press of meetings that occurred in the past year to address the implementation of the MCA grant. One is left to wonder whether the Russian posture is motivated by financial concerns only, or whether this late expression of objections to the use of the U.S. MCA funds is motivated by geopolitics.

Whatever will yet be learned about the issue of the MCA funds, indicators of a more determined and capable Russian incursion into the geopolitical fray in Central Asia surely have implications for Ulaanbaatar's relationship with the three big players: Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. It cannot have gone unnoticed in Ulaanbaatar that, like Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are landlocked, small, marked by the legacy of Soviet domination, impoverished by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and yet situated, still, in Russia's penumbra. All are located in a zone that Moscow has felt and does feel inclined to dominate so as to assure itself of security. In the case of Mongolia, though, Russia cannot hope to dominate. At best, it can work to ensure that no other power does, either.



## Conclusion

Although the emergence of a weak independent state in the midst of great powers accustomed to rivalry over the control of space occupied by the new polity has the potential to disrupt a regional system of international interaction in a way that aggravates existing rivalries, Mongolia has succeeded in establishing and preserving its independence without impelling any of the three big states to demand Ulaanbaatar's primary loyalties. Mongolia has deftly played to and allayed the anxieties and ambitions of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington in a way that has allowed it to secure itself in the context of subtle, but persistent, rivalry for influence and security. Mongolia's independence, though, appears to be vulnerable to any fundamental shift in relations among the three great powers. One presumes that both Russia and the PRC have the capability of asserting control over Mongolia and that whatever military resistance Ulaanbaatar could field would present no more than a sequence of "speed bumps" on the road to a swift victory by a determined and much better armed adversary. Mongolia does not have the capacity to defend itself from a land grab by either of its proximate neighbors and it has no reason to expect that the U.S. or other powers friendly toward it would do more than lift its voice in opposition to an incursion on Mongolia's territory.

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it appears that Mongolia has no adversaries, no territorial disputes with its neighbors, and no need for anxiety about military incursions that would violate its territorial integrity. However, Mongolians are justified in feeling insecure.

For one thing, Mongolia's security appears to rest on too many factors that are beyond its control. The greatest of these is friction arising in relations between Mongolia's two big neighbors and "third neighbors", principally—though not exclusively—the U.S. This systemic friction is not Mongolia-specific, but related to the shift in geopolitical power on a global scale. Mongolia is just one of many arenas in which this competition plays out. In a sense, it makes Mongolia a canary in the geopolitical mineshaft of Eurasia.

In addition, commercial self-regard has led enterprises based in Russia and the PRC to engage in what is perceived as predatory behavior, where the exploitation of Mongolia's natural resources is concerned. Mongolians are eager to avoid a circumstance in which either or both of its two neighbors engage in what might be termed "soft colonialism." Neither has any apparent inclination to control the territory or strangle the government of Mongolia, but both are strongly attracted to mineral and energy resources in Mongolia that have already impelled behavior that Mongolia finds worrisome. Some





observers in Mongolia fear that as opportunities evolve to enable foreign enterprises to exploit Mongolia's natural resources, Russia—and especially China—will incrementally penetrate the market in ways that will create powerful levers that Moscow or Beijing could use to manipulate policy decisions taken in Ulaanbaatar.

As Mongolia's neighbors become increasingly attached to the notion of assuring themselves access to Mongolia's resources—and excluding from access commercial rivals whose interest might be judged to be an extension of geopolitical rivalry—Mongolia may find itself subjected to extraordinary pressures, some political, that will erode Ulaanbaatar's independence. With expanding interests in Mongolia that may be viewed as strategic in Moscow and Beijing, the possibility of friction between Russia and China in competition for influence in Mongolia is real. So, while it may be an exaggeration to assert that a new "great game" is afoot with control of Mongolia's territory as the prize, there is certainly a "not-so-great game" with Mongolia's resources, if not its political autonomy, at stake. ■





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## Acknowledgements

This article reflects research conducted as part of a book project supported by a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation, the generosity of which I gratefully acknowledge. I appreciate, too, the supplemental support provided by the East Asia Institute (Seoul) and the extensive hospitality and assistance offered by Mongolia's Institute for Strategic Studies. I am indebted to the many civilian and military officials, as well as professional colleagues in academia and beyond, who welcomed me into their offices in Ulaanbaatar, Washington, and Beijing, and gave generously of their time and wisdom to help me understand how Mongolia's foreign relations appeared from their vantage.





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