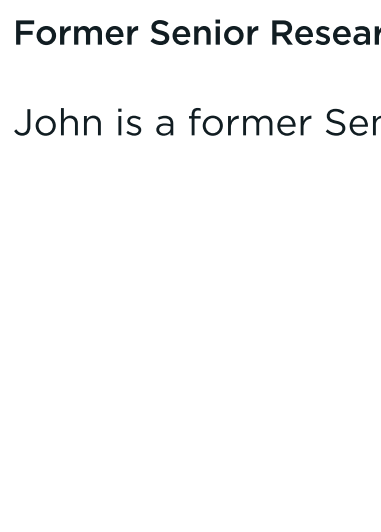


Mongolia's Current Political Situation: Implications for the OSCE

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John Tkacik
Former Senior Research Fellow

John is a former Senior Research Fellow.

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I know that the members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe are serious observers of Eurasian events and that you are concerned about the direction of Mongolia's democracy after the June 29, 2008, parliamentary election. I, too, am concerned. Mongolia was once thought of as a vast but isolated Central Asian desert with little relevance to the strategic interests of metropolitan Europe or East Asia. And, indeed, as recently as a quarter-century ago, that was a valid view.

In the 21st century, however, Mongolia has taken on a geopolitical importance that it has not had for nearly 1,000 years. Once a sparsely populated nation that was the colonial dominion of Chinese emperors, then Manchurian ones, and for most of the last century the Russians, Mongolia is now its own political entity, completely independent of its historical overlords.

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Mongolia possesses outsized mineral wealth, which today is still largely untapped. It is a vast and essential geographic buffer that diffuses border tensions between Eurasia's two superstates, China and Russia. But most important, it is a vibrant democracy that continues to grapple with internal challenges of corruption, ineptness, and a touch of intramural mistrust and suspicion.

For these reasons, it is in the profound self-interest of the members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that Mongolia's democracy and independence be nurtured. So, at the outset, I urge the United States, Japan, and South Korea to insist that Mongolia be included in any "North East Asia Peace and Security Mechanism"^[1] or permanent new "Guiding Principles of Peace and Security in Northeast Asia"^[2] that promises to evolve from the current Six-Party Talks process in Beijing.

A New Geostategic Role

I recall a joke my Russian diplomatic colleagues used to tell in Beijing 30 years ago. They posed a riddle: "What is most neutral country in world?" The answer, they said, was Mongolia, "because it doesn't even interfere in its own internal affairs."

But in the 21st century, Mongolia has become a geographic and political locus of surpassing strategic importance—to the United States, to the Russian Federation, and to China. By reviewing the dynamic of interests these three nations have in Mongolia, we can understand its importance to NATO and the broader global community of democracies and, of course, to the OSCE.

First, let me say that I count Mongolia as one of the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) that gained independence with the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Unlike the other SSRs in Central Asia, which all chose post-Soviet governing structures that were heavily presidential and hence easily twisted into authoritarian despotisms and dictatorships, Mongolia alone chose a parliament-centric government. This was because Mongolia was the first republic to become *de facto* independent from Moscow in 1986 when Mikhail Gorbachev sought to minimize the USSR's frictions with China by granting Ulan Batar diplomatic autonomy from Moscow. One of the first things that took place was Mongolia's establishment of diplomatic ties with the United States.

In the 1980s, China's leader, Deng Xiaoping, set three prerequisites for normalized relations with the USSR: the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, from Vietnam, and from Mongolia. By May 1989, when he made his historic visit to Beijing, Gorbachev had met all of China's demands.

This meant that by 1990, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Romanian revolution, Mongolia was desperate to define its new geostategic role in Eurasia—one that would keep it from being marginalized. As the patronage of the USSR receded, Mongolia felt that it had been left hung out to dry in China's back deserts. Wedged between its new imperial overlord, Russia, and its ancient imperial overlord, China, Mongolia's political leaders sought a "Third Neighbor." And their most important "Third Neighbor" was the United States.

In 1990, and again in 1991, American Secretary of State James Baker made visits to Ulan Batar, where he made a point of meeting with young leaders of the anti-Communist student democratic movement. So impressed by Secretary Baker's attention to these young democrats was Mongolia's ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) that the MPRP unilaterally divested itself of its monopoly on power and reorganized the country's constitution into a truly democratic document, complete with new political parties, free parliamentary and presidential elections, a free press, and media journalism—all before the other Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics became autonomous.

Since 1990, Mongolians have voted in five general parliamentary elections for Mongolia's Great Hural, or parliament, with power flowing back and forth between the old Communist MPRP and the new coalition of Democrats (in the Democratic Party, or DP) and other independents. Some political parties are wholly based on personalities, others on ideas, but it is certainly one of the most vibrant new democracies in all of Asia.

This is not to say that Mongolia is now a Jeffersonian republic. The MPRP still maintains a powerful and well-organized political machine left over from Soviet times, and the MPRP is still the champion of strong central government control of the economy and welfare. In contrast, Mongolia's Democrats are in favor of lower taxes, easier foreign investment, and a truly independent judiciary necessary for the rule of law to take firm root.

The Hural Election and Its Aftermath

This brings us to the June 29, 2008, election. I have communicated with a number of people who say their independent surveys had led them to believe that the Democrats were headed for a victory, especially in the urban voting precincts of Ulan Batar. One person e-mailed me, saying that as of 3:00 a.m. on the morning of June 30, the vote count showed that, "By the result, 64 out of 76 seats at the Parliament were coming to Democratic Party candidates."^[3]

Yet, by 3:30 a.m., MPRP Secretary General Yo Otgonbayar had announced that the MPRP had won the vote, and the MPRP headquarters issued similar press releases every two or three hours until 6:00 p.m. June 30 saying that the MPRP had in fact won. Allegedly, election commission units around Mongolia that were controlled by MPRP commissioners fiddled the election results so that fewer than 28 DP candidates were successful.

In the end, the General Election Commission, which has eight MPRP members and one DP member, certified a major MPRP victory—45 seats in the 76-seat Great Hural.

There seems to have been quite a bit of questionable involvement by MPRP local officeholders in the oversight of polling places. Then there were allegations that MPRP officeholders denied polling registration to DP voters. There were allegations of improper MPRP busses transporting voters to the polls, and of vote buying, of multiple voting, missing ballots, lax security for ballot boxes, etc. How many of these allegations are based on firm evidence rather than partisan suspicions I cannot say, but international election observers did not report any problems.

One anomaly seems to have stirred serious puzzlement, however. The MPRP candidate for the Hural seat representing the city of Darkhan, Mr. Khayankhyarvaa, a local governor who was blamed for a major environmental disaster in the city (a mercury spill), was elected to the seat with the highest number of votes. Clearly, something fishy was going on.

On July 1, DP activists began collecting petition signatures in Ulan Batar's main square, Sukhbaatar Square, demanding an investigation of the election oversight. A large crowd gathered, both sympathizers and onlookers. At 6:00 p.m. that evening, a group of the DP coalition attempted to present the petition at the MPRP headquarters building on Sukhbaatar Square. Security guards blocked their approach, and apparently two television news stations broadcast live footage of the security guards beating the petitioners on the steps of the MPRP building.

At this point, rocks were thrown, and police fired rubber bullets. This was followed by more rocks, followed by Molotov cocktails—and outright rioting broke out. Five people were killed, and apparently 300 or so were injured, including 30 police. Several hundred were arrested. The Democratic Party now calls for the release of 200 of the arrestees who are apparently still in custody.

This was the only such incidence of mass political violence in Mongolia's modern history, and apparently it shook up not just the government, but the rioters themselves. By midnight, Mongolia's president (formerly an MPRP leader) declared a four-day "state of emergency"—an unprecedented move—and closed all TV stations except for the state-run national TV outlet.

There was some indication that the MPRP intended to blame the riot on the instigation of top Democratic coalition leaders, specifically Tsakhia Elbegdorj, a former prime minister, and have them arrested as well.^[4] Thus far, cooler heads have prevailed.

Implications for Eurasia

The survival and success of Mongolia's infant democracy is no trivial matter for the democracies of Eurasia. It alone of the former Central Asian Soviet states has a parliamentary system and therefore has the most promising hopes for continued political pluralism. The MPRP are generally honorable men, but no well-organized former authoritarian party in a new Asian democracy should be given the impression that the world is not watching what is going on in its land.

Mongolia has been a valued contributor to the community of Eurasia's free states in a number of ways, most notably by its strong support of the West in the war against terrorism. But there is a danger in permitting that kind of support to turn into a get-out-of-jail-free card (or a put-dissidents-into-jail-free card) as it has for some of our other Central Asian partners.

The success of Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy also has a broader implication for Eurasia's geopolitics. Mongolia is wedged tightly between Russia and China. In 2007, China accounted for over half of all Mongolia's foreign trade; over 70 percent of Mongolia's exports go to China, and 30 percent of imports. China accounts for almost half of all Mongolia's foreign direct investment.^[5]

This brings up another problem. While official figures for unemployment are only around 3.2 percent, the general consensus in Ulan Batar is that the numbers are near the twenties—for the simple reason that many traditional Mongolian men don't think working for a wage is manly.

Most construction work in Mongolia's capital (and on all Chinese-invested projects) is done by Chinese crews. One report has over 15,000 Chinese legal construction workers in Mongolia, with "several thousand more working illegally; many employers prefer to hire Chinese, who cost less and are believed to work harder."^[6] A cynical joke goes like this: "Why are there so many Chinese people constructing new buildings in Ulan Batar? So they will have some place to stay after the invasion."^[7]

One simply cannot take for granted Mongolia's continued independence from China. Although rarely recognized, Mongolia is of critical geopolitical importance. Its 1.5 million square kilometers of real estate is a stabilizing element in Eurasia that keeps border frictions between its two giant neighbors, Russia and China, from reaching a critical mass of conflict.

In 1969, the specter of a Soviet nuclear strike on China was the immediate threat that galvanized President Richard Nixon into exploring a strategic alignment with China. In 2008, the U.S. sees an independent Mongolia as a stabilizing buffer between Russia and China. But how long Mongolia can remain economically independent from China is problematic. Once its economy is absorbed by China's, how much political independence it retains may simply be a matter of opinion.

Looking to the Future

No one expects China to be happy with an independent Mongolia, but it is the best way to help keep China and Russia apart. The best way to ensure that Mongolia's two neighbors respect her independent identity is to integrate that isolated land into regional and global security structures like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, NATO's Partnership for Peace, and, of course, the OSCE's Asian Partner for Development Program.

Additionally, it is up to American diplomats to shame their counterparts from other European and Asian democracies into supporting those efforts. After all, it's for our own good.^[8]

John J. Tkacik, Jr. is Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

^[1] Christopher R. Hill, "Afternoon Walk-Through at Six-Party Talks," July 12, 2008, at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2008/07/106959.htm> (September 1, 2008).

^[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Press Communiqué of the Heads of Delegation Meeting of the Sixth Round of the Six-Party Talks," July 12, 2008, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t456096.htm> (September 1, 2008).

^[3] Personal e-mail received by author, July 3, 2008, time-stamped 9:17 a.m. (Eastern Time).

^[4] See BBC News, "Mongolia Calls State of Emergency," July 1, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7483286.stm> (September 1, 2008). Mongolian Prime Minister Sanjagiin Bayar alleged that Democratic Party leader and former Mongolian Prime Minister Tsakhia Elbegdorj was "misleading people and inciting violence."

^[5] This number is 47.4 percent between 1990 and 2006, according to Mongolia's Ministry of Industry and Trade. See Mongolia Ministry of Industry and Trade, Web site, at <http://mit.mit.gov.mn/en/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=38>.

^[6] Ola Wong, "Mongolia's China Syndrome," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 20, 2008.

^[7] See Ulaan Baatar Eagle TV Managing Director Tom Terry's blog, at <http://thomasterry.com/blog/index.php?page=2>.

^[8] See John J. Tkacik, Jr., "Mongolia's Democratic Identity," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 21, 2005, a version of which is available at <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed062205a.cfm> (September 1, 2008).

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Former Senior Research Fellow

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