Mongolia at 800: Towards Enhanced U.S. and International Support

by Stephen E. Noerper, Ph.D

Introduction

2006 marks the 800th anniversary of Mongolia's Great Empire, when its influence spanned the known world and laid origins for state relations. Renewed interest in that period has seen marked sales of Jack Weatherford's New York Times bestseller Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World, now moving briskly in paperback. Several recent travel features and a Fifth Avenue window display noting the exoticism of early 20th Century treks across the Gobi mark heightened popular awareness and increased interest in Mongolia. Emphasizing its modern commitments on the international stage, Mongolia in the United Nations and elsewhere in recent months has emphasized its leadership role among nomadic nations. Reflecting enhanced U.S. interest President Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld visited Mongolia in November and October 2005 respectively.

Though a small country in terms of population and contemporary political importance, Mongolia deserves that enhanced US and international recognition, not only in light of a rich cultural and historical legacy, but given a decade and a half of progress toward democracy, a free market economy and active regional and international role. As Washington faces intricate challenges in Iraq and elsewhere, Mongolia has quietly and resolutely laid democratic institutions and a process of governance that though facing many challenges—most evident in January 2006—affirms US goals.

Situated between giants Russia and China, this land of blue skies lies at a cross roads of increasing geographic significance. The prospect of the uniting of an inter-Korean railway and transportation and energy corridors that link Asia and Europe imply added potential for the broad Mongolian expanse. Both China and Russia have expressed interest in mineral and energy resources within Mongolia, with copper mines in southern Mongolia potentially feeding the needs of eighty percent of the Chinese copper market. During the Cold War, Russia used Mongolia as a listening post onto China and the two giants in recent years have pressed Mongolia for support in a multilateral counterterrorism and economic development forum, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. As both giants have pressed trilateral and other arrangements, Mongolia has sought to counterbalance these external forces through its Third Neighbor approach, including good relations with the US and others as an important third spoke. Mongolia has emerged as an active proponent for regional institutions and actively encouraged attention from the United States, European Union and others in fostering aid, foreign direct investment and military cooperation.

To that end, Mongolia is advancing a regional peacekeeping training center and provided quick support to US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Among the first of Asian nations to offer condolences post-9/11, Mongolia, despite some internal controversy, afforded swift over flight rights to US aircraft toward Central Asia and committed troops to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. That participation has emerged more significant than one might assume of small nation support in several instances, namely in Mongolian troops' unique rapport with Hazara forces in Afghanistan (the Hazara being descendents of the Mongolian Golden Horde and identifying with the Mongolians on ethnic lines); in the skilled marksmanship of Mongolian forces in Iraq that prevented a suicide attack; and in the continued rotation of Mongolian troops into the combat theaters, despite some opposition at home that mirrors concerns more broadly across Asia. Former Mongolian President Bagabandi's 2004

visit to Washington came the same week as the Philippines' withdrawal from Iraq, underscoring Mongolia's continued support at a time difficult for the Pentagon.

Small State Model and Facilitator

Well beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, though, Mongolia has a larger and in the long-term more strategic role to play—one in US and regional interests. Mongolia, despite challenges to the process, is a potential harbinger of democracy for Central Asia—where autocracy continues to dominate, borne of the Stalinist legacy—and where Washington might appreciate greater democratic presence given its positioning of forces and energy interests. Accordingly, the US need support further Mongolia's democratic consolidation and encouragement of the Mongolian model for the institution-weak Stans of Central Asia.

Mongolia also stands as a potential harbinger of democracy and transition from a Stalinist economy to North Korea—only 1800 miles to the east. Though the regime of Kim Jong-il has no ready inclination to discuss Mongolia's political model, it has expressed continued interest in how Mongolia had transitioned to free market capitalism and privatized eighty percent of once state-held assets. Beneath the rhetoric, North Korea desperately needs stimulation in its economy and will have to find ways to spur productivity and spin-off state-held economic behemoths of the Stalinist era. Kim Jong Il has demonstrated willingness in this regard through allowing small markets, Chinese businessmen, and South Korean economic cooperation at Kaesong and elsewhere. As North Korea scours the region for working models, China in the long term may prove less apt given economies of scale. Mongolia, the first nation outside the Soviet Union to recognize North Korea, presents an attractive and more appropriate model. This was expressed on a very personal level by the delegation of the North Korean foreign minister visiting Ulan Bator, as delegates appeared impressed by the rapid rate of construction in Mongolia's capital, the prevalence of cell phones, and the colorful swath wrought by Mongolia's dynamic and fashion-forward youth, hovering at hundreds of Internet cafes, and neon and video signage for everything from credit cards to international travel. What a striking thought that the Mongolian urban aesthetic had appeared so similar to that of North Korea little over a decade ago. Given Mongolia's continued relations with both North and South Korea, historical ethnic linkages, adoption of Korean War orphans from the North and recent quiet facilitation of North Korean refugees, and its low-key, small nation approach, North Korea appears to trust Mongolia in unique ways. The two have seen mutual exchanges at the popular levels, attendant discussions of a range of activities—from small joint ventures to arts exchange and farming cooperation—and some senior-level visits. One senior North Korean official described the Mongolians as "our only true friends" in the region, an area in need of confidence-building and where historical issues continue to impede progress.

Recognizing that unique position in Northeast Asia, Mongolia has floated in recent years the idea of Ulaanbaatar as a sight for regional negotiations. Mongolia has not been included in the current six party talks and its antecedents, which may provide even more reason to find fresh venues. This works on several levels. First, Mongolia is largely lacking in the realm of historical animosities that plague a number of bilateral relations among China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Russia and the United States. Its own historical animosities are toward China and are muted given growing economic and political relations. Nothing by way of the resentments in China-Japan, Korea-Japan, Russia-Japan relations—attendant to textbook, territorial claims and other such issues—persist. Mongolia is a fairly blank slate for regional planners, who might see benefits in distancing talks from more traditional venues. Second, Ulan Bator's location is increasingly and surprisingly convenient; whereas it was once remote and at a seemingly far-flung corner of Northeast Asia, an increasing numbers of carriers and routes make it easily accessible, at only ninety minutes to three hours from every major

Northeast Asian capital. Third, Mongolia has taken a lead in defining human security interests, hosting a United Nations Conference on Human Security. As has been seen throughout South and Southeast Asia in 2005 and 2006 -- not to mention in the hurricane-wracked southern US—natural disasters and food and shelter shortages present new challenges and new suggestions for government responses, institution-building, and military roles and missions. Mongolia, which has suffered under its own winter zud, which decimated livestock earlier in the decade, seeks to play an important role in hosting discussions meant at identifying common solutions to new security challenges. Interestingly, despite the zud, Mongolia quietly airlifted meat and other donations to the eastern part of North Korea after flooding in 2001—a contribution that went largely without international notice.

The US may find ready reason beyond the current peacekeeping initiative to encourage development in this area. The international community may as well as discussions on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula proceed, and as those discussions eventually get to broader issues of peace treaties, resolution of territorial differences, and common development needs and solutions for the region. Mongolia, with developmental challenges common to rural China, the Russian Far East, and North Korea, also will find itself linked in future talks on regional solutions, so bringing it to the table by meeting at its table makes sense. In the near term, Mongolia can contribute its development as a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) as a backstop to the current emphasis on the need for the two Koreas to return to their 1991 Denuclearization Agreement. Mongolia's Institute for Strategic Studies and the United States' Georgia Tech hosted discussions on Mongolia's NWFZ, and the opportunity for discussions relative to the Korean peninsula waits.

Whither Democracy?

To realize potential on strategic cooperation fronts, the US and international community must find ways to help rectify Mongolia's political fragility. Mongolian politics sees many parallels to the personality-led, political upheaval of South Korea in the late 1980s, and the precariousness of the current process, especially in light of its potential role as exemplar, demand enhanced US support. Mongolia's embrace of the democratic process has been remarkably rapid in historical terms, especially given seven decades of communist rule. Though impressive in its gains, democracy's grip is tested, as instincts remain toward centralization, resource distribution along clan lines and identification with strong leaders.

Mongolia hosted its first national elections and introduction of a constitution in 1992. Though the once-Communist Mongolian Peoples Revolutionary Party (MPRP) won that election, the opposition assumed the Presidency shortly thereafter. 1996 saw victory for the Democrats, but internal divisions saw tumult and a return to MPRP rule four years later. 2000 saw a win by a MPRP in Parliament, lopsided with control of all but four seats. 2004 provided the starkest challenge to democracy in Mongolia since its inception with essentially a draw in votes for Parliament. To his credit, then President Bagabandi, apolitical in his role by law, opted to allow the democratic coalition to strike at a bargain with the MPRP. Then-Prime Minister Ts. Elbegdorj, a Harvard Kennedy School of Government graduate, held together a fragile coalition in the ensuing months, with challenges coming from the MPRP and from within the democratic coalition. Former Prime Minister N. Enkhbayar was elected President in 2005, bolstering MPRP viability relative to the democratic coalition.

The downfall of Mongolia's coalition government in mid-January 2006 marks a relapse for freedom's progress, striking given Mongolia's aforementioned roles as a harbinger for new democracies in the region. The acceptance of the resignation of ten cabinet members from the formerly communist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) was led by MPRP

parliamentarians, effectively robbing the democratic coalition and a large portion of Mongolia's population of a voice. Employing strong-arm tactics akin to the Soviet-influenced era, MPRP parliamentarians decried efforts by Elbegdorj, who had held the position for less than two years, and verbally assaulted Member of Parliament Sanjaasuren Oyun, leader of the minority Civil Will Party, the first female deputy speaker the year prior, and standard bearer of anti-corruption and good governance. A majority of Mongolians objected to the stifling of Elbegdorj and Oyun. MPRP parliamentarians publicly blamed Elbegdorj for poverty and recent economic woes, although the MPRP has dominated government the majority of the time since Mongolia's turn to democracy. Supporters of the former PM cried foul and described the MPRP move as orchestrated by the President and accelerated given investigations into customs and other fraud. Mongolia now may see a period of political turbulence, even violence if popular opposition flares, that could lay waste to its democratic gains.

Those in Asia, Europe and the Americas concerned with recent trends toward neo-authoritarianism and a rollback of democratic gains note the striking similarities of the political crises confronted in January 2006 by Elbegdorj in Mongolia and President Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. Both flank a Russia that in recent years has curtailed personal and press freedoms, countered reformers and used energy resources as a weapon, in Ukraine's case to register its anger and in Mongolia as a result of the Yukos affair. Putin has become an exemplar for neo-authoritarians across the Eurasian arc, from Uzebekistan to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan—and to Mongolia. The light proffered by the "colored" revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan has been dimmed, rather than brightened, by recent events, including those in Mongolia.

Recent developments fly in the face of President Bush's praise for Mongolian gains during his November visit. Mongolia's democratic progress and economic reform had merited it a spot as the only Asian continental player qualifying for funding under the President's Millennium Challenge Account.

Shoring Democratic Bases

Despite the setbacks in the political process in early 2006, Mongolian institutions have evolved with time and remain progressive relative to other parts of Central Asia. Though evolving, Mongolia's institutions are in desperate need of professionalization support from the United States and others. Increasing charges of corruption continue to concern donors and outside observers. In his 2005 text Modern Mongolia, Professor Morris Rossabi of the City University of New York and Columbia University lays the blame squarely on the Washington Consensus and shock therapy, which created imbalances that led to graft. To its credit, Mongolia has several homegrown efforts to stem corruption, with MP Oyun and the Zorig Foundation playing crucial roles in the push for accountability and good governance. From supporting such home-grown initiatives to providing technical resources and encouraging adjustments upward in public service wage levels, the US and international community can play a critical role in supporting Mongolian democracy in consolidation. Support for further professionalization of media—fair and free by regional standards, but under heavy political pressures—need increase as well.

Key to shoring democratic bases, the basic social contract needs to be fostered in Mongolia. Many citizens appear unaware of basic government services, with the government citing the lack of an effective tax base for programs in turn. Economic development is essential as well, as part of the turnover in the political process lies with crises in performance-based legitimacy. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and others have made progress on many of these fronts over the years. Mongolians also had hoped that the US Presidential visit

would see fruition on MCA funding. The latest package of proposals had taken on poverty alleviation, notably in the tented, or ger, districts that have accompanied rapid urbanization, as well as health care and rail improvements.

Compounding the frustrations of extreme poverty in Mongolia—one third of Mongolians live below the poverty line—are perceptions of growing economic and social inequities. A very few have become extremely wealthy, and foodstuffs and fuel have skyrocketed, creating real fissures between the haves and have-nots. Oil price hikes were associated with the cutoff in the wake of Russia's Yukos crisis, indicative of the suggestion that when China or Russia sneezes, Mongolia catches a cold. That may literally be the case in the severest manner as Mongolia confronts a range of non-traditional security threats in forms ranging from the H5N1 strain of avian flu to the HIV/AIDs pandemic, on the rise in neighboring China and Russia. Avian flu struck northern China in October 2005, and the migratory flocks that pass through could impact Mongolia in a manner that culling of poultry may not check. Hoof-and-mouth disease at times has led to Russian and other European blocks on Mongolian exports. The economic impacts of quarantines could compound state responses to the very real public health risks.

Toward a Mongolia Action Plan (MAP)

Contemporary Mongolia, with its challenges and potential offerings to the region, needs the United States to adopt a comprehensive Mongolian Action Plan (MAP). Critical aspects of a MAP would include:

1. *A continued and significant upgrade in the status of Mongolia-US relations*. Building on statements from the tenure of George HW Bush and James Baker, who provided early support for Mongolian democratization in line with the Reagan Administration's Modest Initiative, the second George W. Bush Administration should highlight Mongolia's transitions as it seeks to expand democracy's global reach. Mongolia has seen a string of high-level visitors over the years—former First Lady, Senator Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, journalist Tom Brokaw and others. What it has not seen is a commitment that has included regular senior Executive level visits and senior US Congress-Parliamentary exchanges. In the course of daily management of relations, Mongolia merits higher levels of consideration at the Departments of Defense and State and in the National Security Council. At State, Mongolia needs to be sprung from the China desk and either grouped with Korea, with which it shares more commonalities and where it might be useful relative to the North Korea impetus, or be approached on its own accord. Stronger outward support needs to accompany structural approaches in the relationship. US co-sponsorship for Mongolian resolutions in the UN— such as that just proposed to mark the 800th anniversary of Mongolian statehood and contribution to nomadic cultures—would be perceived by Mongolia as a step forward in support.

2. *Upgrade in MCA support, educational exchange and institution-building*. MCA and other new aid ventures need to be more clearly defined for the Mongolians, and Mongolia appears ready given a revision of its original materials and new leadership on the national council coordinating appeals on MCA. Early mentions of the program included suggestions of an expansion of Fulbright fellows to Mongolia of over 100 annually, with a similar number in return. As a former Fulbright Senior Scholar to Mongolia, I can think of few greater opportunities. Washington needs to encourage US foundations and organizations aimed at fostering Mongolian solutions in meeting the needs of democratic consolidation and reinforcing institutions. It also is critical to identify and empower a few of the more creditable Mongolian entities that should receive the lion's share of US support; the Zorig Foundation stands as one such necessary recipient. The Open Society Institute (OSI)—borne of Soros

Foundation efforts in Mongolia—represents a spin-off of outside-initiated programs into Mongolian hands.

3. *Support for Mongolia's abilities to meet its new strategic realties*. Mongolia needs friends to help address its security realties in new and creative manners. The October 31, 2005 Business Week, reviewing Robert D. Kaplan's work Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground, described the contribution of former US Defense Attaché Colonel Thomas Wilhelm in helping Mongolia define essential, new missions to: "secure Mongolia's borders not against a Chinese military invasion, which would be impossible, but against migration from that country and infiltration by Central Asian terrorists; improve its ability to respond to natural disasters; and train peacekeeping forces, which would raise the country's profile and provide diplomatic protection from Russia and China."

4. *Support for Mongolia in regional security fora and contributions relative to approaches on North Korea and Central Asia*. Despite support for Northeast Asian cooperation, some proponents have left Mongolia off the slate for track 1.5 (semi-official) and track 2 (unofficial) fora, such as the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD). This needs to be corrected in light of new security realities and potential contributions. This would include identifying Mongolia as a locale for dialogue on East Asian and Central Asian development and encouragement of Mongolian exchanges and confidence-building with North Korea. Discussion of Mongolia's NWFZ merits heightened attention in the context of the ongoing six party talks on DPRK nuclear issues. As the development challenges of infrastructure, energy, environment and poverty alleviation warrant, dialogue may expand or see spin-offs in the forms of expanded multilateral organizations or minilaterals initiatives—more defined, mission-oriented, ad-hoc small groupings—that should include Mongolia.

5. *Support for new economic initiatives*: including enhanced foreign direct investment, development of a free trade agreement and associations, and encouragement of real progress on establishing a common economic agenda. Mongolia needs to be included in and encouraged forward in its continued economic opening. A free trade agreement with the US and establishment of a Northeast Asia free trade association with the United States, Japan and Korea would further enhance Mongolia's Third Neighbor options and reinforce the Mongolia-Korea-Japan natural economic territory. Japan has been Mongolia's largest aid provider, and South Korea plays a significant role. A greater US commitment should encourage Mongolian imports to the US and US tourism to and investment in Mongolia—beyond mining to airlines (Boeing, US carriers), information services and elsewhere.

These types of economic options are critical for a Mongolia that finds itself highly dependent on China's economic boom. Having experienced nine percent economic growth annually over the past twenty-five years, China has emerged as the obvious regional economic leader. Though this may have immediate benefit in terms of increased demand for Mongolian resources, it also leaves Mongolia—like other small states in the region—in a bind given economic security concerns ranging from the influx of illegal Chinese labor into a state with a weak social safety net to broader geostrategic concerns about protection of vital resources and boundaries. Affording Mongolia alternatives is in the vital US interest—as well as that of Mongolia—and it is crucial for enhanced regional development and security for the United States to move forward on the MAP.

Conclusion

Although Mongolia's democratic consolidation remains challenging, its political and economic transition merit support when examined over time and when considering that Mongolia freed itself from seventy years of Soviet domination only in 1990. Mongolia is following a peaceful

process that invokes and augurs for enhanced US support for the rule of law and its effective development as a regional player. As Washington seeks through the six-party talks to check a North Korea potentially armed with nuclear weapons, neighbor Mongolia provides evidence that communist systems can reform, can liberalize, can democratize—and can even declare themselves nuclear weapons free zones.

Together with North Korea and Bangladesh, Mongolia ranks among the poorest nations of Asia with per capita income of around US$600. Yet, its 2.5 million people maintain an adult literacy rate of nearly 99 percent, making them more literate than the citizens of the much richer United States. Although some Mongolians must ride a horse or camel to a polling station set up in a tent, voter turnout and participation in the 2004 election was approximately 80 percent of the adult population —far higher than for the U.S. presidential election.

Mongolia is a productive and increasingly active member of the regional and international community, an early supporter of the Global War on Terror. Although sandwiched between the massive super-states of Russia and China, Mongolia defied both to join America's coalition against Saddam Hussein.

During the effort to draw closer diplomatically to the United States, Mongolia has maintained working connections to the remaining communist states, including Cuba and North Korea. With its old connections and new alliances, Mongolia is in a unique position to help the United States maintain ties with some of its most persistent adversaries.

Despite Mongolia's increased commitment to the United States and in regional affairs, outsiders need to do more for Mongolia, especially by way of trade and foreign direct investment. The country stumbled through its own tradition to democracy and capitalism with steady, but largely minimal political assistance. With the collapse of Soviet subsidies in the 1990s, the economy came close to collapsing. Health care for people and animals fell. When three years of zud followed, hoof-and-mouth disease and anthrax broke out among the animals, and the plague among humans. With a hardiness and determination born of centuries of herding life, the Mongolians not only survived but persevered in their quest to create a democratic and free society. Even recent political challenges and economic woes have not muted that quest and commitment in Mongolian civil society.

Today, Mongolia faces enormous problems from rising oil prices to declining health care. As the people of Mongolia struggle to grow their democracy through challenges and crises, the U.S. and other nations need to enhance support to guarantee that Mongolian democracy continues to serve as a harbinger for Central and East Asia. Mongolia has proven that it deserves American and international help and heightened respect for its accomplishments.

About the author

Stephen Noerper, Ph.D., teaches Asia Today and Ethic Conflict at the NYU Center for Graduate Studies. He spearheaded Mongolia efforts for a U.S. foundation, revitalizing the field operation; he diversified grant support to dozens of new recipients and initiatives and upped Books for Asia distribution to 50,000 volumes per annum. He served prior as a foreign affairs analyst with the U.S. State Department, where he wrote on North Korea, Mongolia and other Northeast Asian concerns, and as a Fulbright Senior Scholar and visiting professor to the National University of Mongolia (NUM). Professor Noerper taught courses to Mongolian graduate and undergraduates at the NUM's School of Foreign Service on U.S. and Mongolian foreign policies, globalization, the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asian security. Noerper also lectured at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and appeared at several US Embassy programs. Dr. Noerper served from 1996-2000 as a Professor of International Relations at the

Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), where he taught representatives from Mongolia's foreign and defense ministries, military, and executive offices, among delegates from three dozen Asia Pacific nations. He has published widely on Mongolian, Korean and other Northeast Asian concerns, globalization and sustainable information society. Professor Noerper appears frequently in print and electronic media—including NHK and VOA television, Australian Broadcasting Corp and U.S. National Public Radio, and in leading dailies—and at international conference events. He has addressed prominent international groups on Mongolia and Northeast Asia in Japan, Korea, Thailand, Sweden, the UK, and U.S. Dr. Noerper holds graduate degrees from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the London School of Economics.