

## MONGOLIAN BALANCING ACT

Outer Mongolia is one of those semi-imaginary places that, like Timbuktu or the far side of the Moon, conjures up mental pictures of extreme remoteness and desolation. Of course, Mongolia is in reality very much an actual place. Once the largest landlocked country in the world (a title it lost to Kazakhstan in 1991) modern Mongolia has only two neighbours. That these are Russia and China gives some indication of why Mongolia may become of significant geopolitical interest in the future.

Today, Mongolia is an independent state of some 604,000 square miles, but with a population of only 2.9 million. Around a million of these are nomadic, so the country has one of the lowest settled population densities in the world. It comprises those regions which, in Chinese nomenclature at least, were regarded as 'Outer' Mongolia: Inner Mongolia has tended to be less well defined politically, but can be taken to be those southern and eastern regions of Mongol inhabitation that lie closer to the Chinese centre.

The small Mongolian armed forces comprise four main branches. There are general purpose land forces, border troops, internal security forces and a small air force, which is not an independent command but is administered by the army. Ground forces include around 600 tanks, 450 mobile artillery and 100 anti-air defence and other general purpose vehicles. Most of the equipment is Soviet in origin, dating mainly from the 1980s. The air force comprises an assortment of aging Soviet types, with serviceability problems being a major issue. Mongolia's main fast jet capability is provided by various marks of the redoubtable MiG 21 'Fishbed', once the mainstay of Warsaw Pact forces but now rapidly approaching obsolescence. The air force also possesses a number of ground attack and transport helicopters. With a defence force severely limited both in terms of size and capability, Mongolia is unlikely to be in a position to defend its independence against concerted foreign attack, especially with neighbours of the military strength of Russia or China. National security is therefore dependent on other factors, not all of which are directly within Ulaanbaatar's ability to influence.

The modest armed forces of modern Mongolia are of course a far cry from the vast Mongol hordes that forged, under Genghis Khan in the 13th century, the greatest land empire the world has ever seen. The early Mongols were nomadic herders and traders who periodically banded together into immense marauding confederations, with China being the traditional target for their depredations. China's response to these attacks, including its construction of the Great Wall, is a recurring motif in Chinese history. Genghis Khan, whose reputation has undergone a significant rehabilitation in recent years, bequeathed to the Mongolian people a code of law, a written language and a sense of national identity that endures to this day. His successors, however, were unable to maintain the unity of his empire and the subsequent history of Mongolia has generally been one of decline and a gradual sapping of military and political strength. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century what remained of independent Mongolia crumpled and in 1691 the whole country fell under the sway of the Manchu Qing

Dynasty, which ruled until its general collapse with the Chinese revolution of 1911 and the creation of the Republic of China.

For nationalists throughout the Chinese empire, the demise of the Qing Dynasty opened up the possibility of creating independent states. In Outer Mongolia, a confused period of fighting saw the emergence of a theocratic regime in 1911, the autonomy of which the Russians forced the Chinese Republican government to recognize. Following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Outer Mongolia fell first to Chinese warlords and then to a White Russian general, Ungern von Sternberg. He in turn was displaced by Mongolian Communist guerrillas, who established the People's Republic of Mongolia in 1921. Mongolian independence was generally recognized in 1924, but in reality the Mongolian state was a satellite barely distinguishable from a full Soviet republic and political development closely followed the Bolshevik pattern of forced land collectivization, the suppression of Buddhist religious worship and the liquidation of dissidents who favoured a line independent from that imposed by the Kremlin. Most notable among these was Peljidiyn-Genden, Prime Minister from 1932-6, who refused to allow Red Army troops to be stationed in Mongolia, and eased restrictions on Buddhist monks. He paid the inevitable price of his truculence in 1936 when he was arrested and executed following a hard-line *putsch* engineered by Moscow. An estimated 30,000 were murdered in 1936-7 as Stalin's purges reached Mongolia.

Meanwhile, events in the nominally Chinese Inner Mongolia territories were greatly influenced by the overall weakness of the central Chinese government and by Japanese aspirations. Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria in north-eastern China, establishing in 1931 the puppet state of Manchukuo, which incorporated a number of regions generally considered to be part of Inner Mongolia. In 1936 the Inner Mongolian potentate Prince Da Wang declared the provinces under his control independent as 'Mengjiang' or 'Mengkukuo'. As the alternative name of his new state implied, Da Wang was heavily dependent on Japanese patronage in his endeavour. The puppet state of Manchukuo to his east was the fiefdom of the Kwantung Army, the independent Japanese army command that conducted both military operations and a wide range of commercial activities in the territory. The Kwantung favoured the establishment of a string of 'independent' client states on the Asian mainland that could be moulded into the 'East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' with their economic life geared to Japanese needs. Da Wang's Mengjiang fitted well into that strategy, and potentially offered the basis for further expansion into Outer Mongolian. To this end, a 'Mengjiang National Army' was created with Mongolian men and officers under overall Kwantung command.

During the late 1930s, probing attacks, either directly by the Japanese or by their surrogates, became commonplace along the contested borders between the Soviet and Japanese spheres of influence. In July 1938, in a significant escalation, the Japanese demanded the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the Bezmyannaya region, near Vladivostok, which they claimed to be part of Japanese-held Korea. The USSR refused, and a full scale battle ensued which, after initial Japanese advances, resulted in a Soviet victory.

Japanese expansionism similarly brought them into collision with the Mongolian People's Republic. Tensions flared over the demarcation of the Manchukuo/Mongolia border, with the Japanese claiming that the Khalkin Gol river represented the border, while the Mongolians and the Soviets argued that it lay further east. In May 1939 a Mongolian cavalry unit entered the disputed territory, where they were attacked by Manchukuoan cavalry and forced back across the river. Matters speedily escalated. In June the Kwantung Army staged an air strike against Soviet air bases in Mongolia (an action apparently not authorized by Tokyo) and at the end of the month launched a full assault using four Kwantung regiments supported by Manchukuoan elements. Fierce fighting ensued, but it became clear that the Japanese had severely overstretched themselves as well as suffering from defective intelligence concerning the scale of Soviet deployments. The Japanese were decisively defeated on 31 August 1939 – just a few hours before Germany, far to the west, invaded Poland.

Almost wholly forgotten in Western histories, Khalkin Gol had profound implications for the course of the broader global conflict. Since the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese war, a significant divergence of opinion had emerged within the Japanese military as to the correct course of imperial policy. The first group, the 'Strike North' faction, favoured consolidating the gains of the 1904-5 war and envisaged the eventual subjugation of China, Mongolia and much of Siberia, securing vast swathes of territory rich in resources. This view remained in the ascendancy in the 1930s as Japan successfully invaded and occupied first Manchuria and then parts of China proper, but as the decade progressed, hardening Chinese resistance and the massive costs of the colonial war raised increasing doubts as to its sustainability. The defeat at Khalkin Gol put a decisive end to the Strike North policy and truncated the Kwantung's prestige and influence within imperial strategy circles. Japan never again seriously threatened an attack on the Soviet Union. This meant that it was Germany, rather than the USSR, that eventually faced a war on two fronts. Equally importantly, the demise of the Strike North policy led to the adoption of the rival Strike South maritime strategy. Japan initially scored significant successes against the British and Dutch in the East Indies, but the fatal consequences of Japanese over-extension and the attack on Pearl Harbor are well known.

At a more personal level, Khalkin Gol was also the first major engagement fought by General (later Marshal) Georgy Zhukov, winning him the first of his four Hero of the Soviet Union awards. It was at here that Zhukov first deployed the armoured pincer tactic that was to become his hallmark in later battles, including the pivotal victory at Stalingrad and the final capture of Berlin. At Khalkin Gol, Zhukov had at his disposal 500 tanks, three rifle divisions and 250 aircraft against the lightly armoured Kwantung divisions. The Mongolian contribution, of two cavalry divisions, was more symbolic than militarily relevant. In the decisive stage of the battle, Soviet forces pinned down Japanese forces in the centre, while Zhukov's armour attacked from the flanks and rear in a rapid encirclement.

The USSR was also able to use Mongolia as the jumping-off point for the invasion of Manchukuo, which took place in August 1945 in the dying days of the Second World War. In 'Operation Autumn Storm' over 1.5 million Red Army troops swept into Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, routing the Japanese and local defenders. As in 1939, Mongolian forces played a limited supporting role alongside the Russians. Soviet gains did not, however, lead to the widespread annexation of territory, either by the People's Republic of Mongolia or the USSR, that might have been expected. Instead, in a spirit of solidarity with their Communist allies, the territories were handed over to the nascent People's Republic of China, which consolidated its Inner Mongolian holdings into an Autonomous Region in 1947, forming a rough crescent around southern and eastern Mongolia. In 1949 the People's Republic of China formally renounced all territorial claims over Outer Mongolia.

Mongolia unsuccessfully attempted to maintain a neutral stance as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the 1950s, and Mongolian/Chinese relations cooled in parallel with those of Moscow and Beijing. This period witnessed a massive build up of Soviet forces, with the Mongolian armed forces becoming little more than an extension of the local Soviet command. Mass expulsions of Chinese from Mongolia also occurred. (Ironically, many of the Chinese had moved to Mongolia under Communist-sponsored 'friendship and reconstruction' programmes in the early 1950s.) Perestroika and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union had much the effect on Mongolia that it had in Eastern Europe and among the Soviet republics themselves. A managed transition from Communism to a multi-party market economy took place and a new constitution was introduced in 1992.

It will be seen from this canter through the regional history of the past 700 years that Mongolia has often been a key geopolitical concern to its neighbours, especially China. Equally, the ability of Mongolians themselves to sustain a genuinely independent foreign policy has been severely circumscribed by the relative strengths and ambitions of their neighbours. Today, Ulaanbaatar needs to keep a close eye on developments in Beijing and Moscow, and on regional implications of changes in Sino-Russian relations. Moscow and Beijing may be moving towards the view that an alliance between them offers, in the short term, the only realistic counterweight to American global hegemony. But such an alliance will only endure until one partner feels strong enough to exert itself unilaterally, and in that event Mongolia, not for the first time, might be caught in the resulting crossfire.

Meanwhile, both China and Russia retain an acute awareness of their common far eastern border, the scene of tensions and actual clashes during the Sino-Soviet Cold War. For Moscow, the problems of defending or economically developing the vast territories beyond the mountains surrounding Lake Baikal remain immense. For Beijing, the reverse is the case - the region is perilously close to the economically vital Chinese eastern seaboard, and modern China, with its land borders to the south and west relatively secure, is well aware of its historical weakness to invasion from the north - whether by the Mongols, the Japanese or the Russians. However, since the end of the Cold War and the economic rise of China, the balance of power in this region has drifted inexorably in Beijing's

favour. China enjoys a massive demographic advantage, and has actively encouraged the settlement of Chinese communities on the Russian side of the far eastern border, building up a potential client population buttressed by economic investment. Pessimists with long memories – and there are plenty of those in the Kremlin – may see in this process an echo, under Beijing's auspices rather than Tokyo's, of the imperialist strategy of the 1930s. Largely unreported in the West, in July 2008 China and Russia signed a regional agreement that reflects this imbalance. In addition to protocols on economic co-operation and development, Russia undertook to return to China the Yinlong Dao and Heixiazi Dao riverine islands, which Russia had held since 1945 and over which China and Russia had fought in 1968. As real estate, the islands are insignificant. But it is virtually without precedent for the Russians to voluntarily surrender *any* territory - particularly over which blood has been spilled - and their willingness to do so on this occasion clearly demonstrates Moscow's growing vulnerability to Chinese pressure. It may also be significant that Moscow received only lukewarm support from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the security and development group linking Russia, China and the Central Asian states, for its recognition of the breakaway South Ossetian and Abkhazian republics in Georgia. 'Separatism' is one of the 'three evils' (the others being terrorism and extremism) that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization specifically opposes. In Inner Mongolia, a number of small groups exist calling for independence and there are undoubtedly also irredentist supporters who favour unification with 'Outer' Mongolia. (There is also at least one group that favours the restoration of Manchukuo.) As in other outlying territories of China, these factions argue that Beijing's rule is essentially colonial, involving the exploitation of local resources and the in-migration of economically dominant Han Chinese settlers to create client communities and undermine local culture. Inner Mongolian separatists are, however, in an appreciably weaker position even than their opposite numbers in Tibet and Xinjiang, not least because the proportion of ethnic Mongolians within Inner Mongolia is only around 14%. However, the Mongolian population of China in total considerably outnumbers that of Mongolia itself, and Beijing certainly does not want them to start drawing any inferences from the South Ossetian precedent.

In Soviet times, Russia, as the core Soviet republic, benefited from not one but two rings of buffer states - the Soviet Republics themselves and the Central and Eastern European 'satellite' states, which were integrated into one military bloc through the Warsaw Pact. Mongolia served a similar purpose in the east, shielding what would otherwise for the USSR be a long and exposed border with China. Narrow points of contact in Norway and Turkey aside, this left Russia vulnerable to land attack from only one direction – the far east. Although the Soviet Union projected itself as being the victim of foreign encirclement, its objective basis for so doing was far less than that of modern Russia, now that NATO is lapping at its borders, the Americans are in Central Asia, and China is stirring. In this regard, the Russian incursion into South Ossetia must be causing some anxiety in Mongolia. Current Kremlin strategy looks very much like an attempt to re-create, however incompletely, the system of buffer states that defended the old Soviet Union. This in turn may lead Moscow to cast a renewed

and covetous eye on Mongolia as a potential lever in its developing relationship with Beijing.

Faced with the challenge of maintaining independence while sandwiched between two of the world's great powers, neither of whom have shown themselves in the past to be over-encumbered by scruples surrounding the rights of sovereign nations, the Mongolians have played the limited cards at their disposal with some originality and subtlety. Economically, Mongolia's strongest ties are inevitably with China and Russia, but it has also courted investment from Japan, Korea and the United States, and in 1997 was admitted to the World Trade Organization. In international diplomacy, Mongolia has similarly sought a balanced and pro-active approach in pursuit of the Government's aim of an "independent, open and multi-prop (sic) foreign policy". While retaining cordial relations with both its neighbours, with each of whom it has signed a 'Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation', Mongolia unequivocally condemned the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and supported the US-led 'war on terror'. In 2003, Ulaanbaatar hosted the Fifth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies, at which over a hundred countries were represented. In the following year, Mongolia was invited to become a partner nation at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, while also becoming the first observer nation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Mongolia's leaders also see the military as a resource for bolstering the country's overall international standing. Looked at from a purely defence standpoint, it is clear that no conventional military build-up would ever be sufficient to counter or seriously deter an aggressor. But Ulaanbaatar has consciously used its armed forces in other ways: to modify Clausewitz, Mongolia has developed a doctrine that peacekeeping is diplomacy by other means. Mongolian forces have contributed to internationally sponsored peacekeeping activities in Ethiopia/Eritrea, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Liberia and Kosovo. Although the actual numbers of troops deployed is of necessity quite low, this is nonetheless an impressive record. Indeed, apart from the 'usual suspects' of the larger NATO states, it is unlikely that many countries have been involved in more international interventions. Nor is Mongolian involvement mere tokenism; the robustness and professionalism of the Mongolian soldier has earned them the respect of representatives of much larger powers and, for example in Afghanistan, the very obsolescence of Mongolia's Soviet weaponry was turned to good advantage. The Mongolians proved to have unique practical experience in keeping vintage Russian kit operational - a useful skill given that much of the equipment available to the Afghan National Army is similarly 1980s ex-Soviet material.

A highlight of this policy was the Mongolian sponsorship of Exercise Khaan Quest, a grandstand event in the US-managed Global Peace Operations Initiative. Conducted in August 2006 at Ulaanbaatar and the Five Hills Training Area in Tavan Tolgol province, forces from six nations received training in peacekeeping operations, including tactical operations designed to test international communications, interoperability, and their ability to respond to humanitarian and civil infrastructural needs. Successfully participating units

were awarded 'Training Recognition' by the United Nations. Six hundred and fifty Mongolian soldiers participated, supported by around 500 troops from other nations, around half of them American. Apart from its practical benefits in the training of international peacekeeping forces, Exercise Khaan Quest undoubtedly also contributed beneficially to US/Mongolian military and diplomatic relations.

Whether Mongolia's diplomatic balancing act proves adequate to the task of preventing the nation being sucked into the orbit of one or other of its neighbours remains to be seen. Certainly, the failure of the United States to protect its Georgian ally does not set a comfortable precedent for Mongolia's ability to call on practical support from Washington should Moscow – or Beijing - seek to re-assert its hegemony. That aside, the Mongolian military's current role, of enhancing national standing while seeking to positively contribute to international security, is surely an honourable one for any soldier. Whether Genghis Khan – a shrewd diplomat when the circumstances demanded - would approve we cannot judge, but Mongolia's very modern experiment in military diplomacy surely deserves sympathetic attention.

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