

## Ten Things We Get from Mongolia

By Stephen E. Noerper

*Dr. Stephen Noerper [stephen.ny@koreasociety.org] was a foundation resident representative, Fulbright senior scholar and visiting professor to the National University of Mongolia's School of Foreign Service.*

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit this week to Mongolia is significant in both symbolic and substantive terms. She last visited as first lady – 17 years ago – when Mongolia was in the early throes of democratic and economic transition from its communist era. Mongolians remember her visit then, when she offered support for change and women's rights, with fondness and no small degree of sentimentality. And so the return of the 'rock star' Madam Secretary to a Mongolia that now boasts the world's highest growth rates for the second year running was a call for celebration. That she addressed the gathering of new democracies from Mongolia was especially opportune: the United States has a vested interest in pointing out Mongolia's success in political and economic transition. Here is a list of 10 things we get from Mongolia (and I'll leave mineral wealth – the subject of most media focus – to last):

1) *An American (and international) success story:* that's right, in the wake of the noughts, a decade that saw tremendous challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mongolia boasts a vibrant democracy and flourishing economy. The Reagan administration first tilted toward Mongolia with its Modest Initiative in 1986, and an early academic mission led by the late, great Asianist Robert Scalapino of Berkeley put Mongolia on America's thought-map. Twenty years after normalization with the US, Mongolia displays a real and rich commitment to democracy and development. Interestingly, the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations have all claimed a "special" relationship with Mongolia; Clinton as first lady visited; George W. Bush visited, received the Mongolian president in DC and made Mongolia a Millennium Challenge recipient; Vice President Biden visited last year, Secretary Clinton this, reflecting a remarkable level of consistency and bipartisanship in approach.

2) As Secretary Clinton underscored, an *Asian model of democratization*, demonstrating the universal appeal of liberty and human rights. Clinton's comments were the nail in the coffin of the argument by former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who argued famously in the 1990s that democracy was not an Asian value. Korean activist, later president, Kim Dae-jung argued against Lee at the time, likening democracy and economic liberalization to two wheels

on a cart or two sides of the coin. Mongolia's leaders picked up that mantle, and Clinton gave it well-deserved focus.

3) *A model for the autocratic Central Asian nations* to its West. Though Mongolia identifies more with Northeast Asia in its political and economic leanings, in a broader historical context it is a gateway to Central Asia. That is no small matter considering the decline of the impact of the colored revolutions of the mid-noughts, Russia's rise, and the viability of Afghanistan recovery. Should Central Asian bases or the Pakistani supply corridors prove less viable, Mongolia offers an alternative, for both material support and perhaps more importantly, ideas.

4) *A source of information on and harbinger of economic development and possibly democracy for North Korea.* Ulan Bator is unique in terms of having relations with both Pyongyang and Seoul. As a smaller nation and with its communist history, it is a non-threatening and tested partner for North Korea. Ulan Bator has shared unique insights into where it thinks Pyongyang stands. It is no small coincidence that North Korean refugees who make it through the Chinese underground railroad appear in largest numbers in Mongolia, which discreetly facilitates passage onward to South Korea; Mongolia plays an important bridge role. But more importantly, as an isolated and recalcitrant North Korea seeks models for its development/continued economic viability, Mongolia is perhaps the best suited (China is too large and Vietnam is distrusted by the North Koreans). Lastly, its interest as a nuclear-weapons free zone (prohibiting transport of fissile materials of nuclear Russia or China) speaks well to support for a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

5) *Ears on China.* The Cold War period saw not only the East-West schism but a power contest between China and the Soviet Union, which led to hot conflict in 1962. The Soviet Union used Mongolia as ears onto China through listening posts. In an updated sense, Mongolia affords the United States (and the international community) ears on China in a different way. How is China treating the nations on its periphery? How do these nations balance things like the promise of Chinese loans with expected tradeoffs (Mongolia famously refused a \$300 million loan in one case)? A central aspect of Clinton's visit to the nations surrounding China is just that: to better understand the realities facing these nations and suggest strategic diversity on economics, trade and political relations. Though the Chinese press will lambast the visit as US

encirclement; if that, it is encirclement in its most benign form.

6) *Eyes on Russia.* Clinton spoke of the “courage” of Mongolians relative to their nation’s squeeze between China and Russia. That courage can also be translated into real insights into Russia. As the reset button seems to have moved Russia-US relations more toward Soviet-era schisms – owed primarily to the hardline tactics of czar/president Putin – it is important to look for insights into Russian thinking. Mongolia provides both a physical and mental gateway onto the nation Mitt Romney has labeled (erroneously, I feel) our greatest threat. The fact is we need Russia, and Russia needs the United States, for security, economic, and political reasons. Cooperation in Asia, whether by way of security on the Korean Peninsula, enhanced energy corridors or another device, is a way forward (and an alternative to impasses over Syria and European missile defense). Though Western leaning, most of Mongolia’s senior leaders have been schooled in Russia, speak Russian, and understand Russia; let’s use that.

7) *A responsible international actor.* Mongolia has contributed to peacekeeping operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, has hosted peacekeeping training through its *Khan Quest* exercises, hosted the new and restored democracies gathering multiple times, sited UN initiatives on human security, and served as a model for civil society development, notably with its active NGOs tackling everything from nuclear weapons free zones to women’s rights. In fact, Mongolia commits to international fora in remarkably disproportionate ways. Though driven by its active Third Neighbor policy (a basic tenet that implies good relations beyond China and Russia), Mongolia also has experience in dealing with many of the challenges these fora address: from natural disaster to pandemics to crises in energy security.

8) *An important cultural contributor.* Though small in terms of current population, Mongolia has had a disproportionate impact in terms of its historical and cultural legacy. Though now the physical size of Britain, France and Germany combined, the Mongolian Empire of eight centuries ago covered the largest expanse ever known to man. Accordingly, whether through bloodlines or cultural elements, traces of Mongolia may be found across Asia and Eurasia. From historic temples to the Renaissance sculptures of Zanabazar to modern art, Mongolia boasts a colorful, rich cultural front.

9) *A vibrant youth culture and educated workforce.* Though the preponderance of recent media coverage of the bustling business scene has focused on deals promised or to be made, the foundation for opportunity lies in demographic realities. Mongolia is a young place (“the youngest place on earth,” according to a 1990s *New York Times* piece), with a

multilingual, globalized, and dynamic group of young professionals (and young leaders). President Elbegdorj has long advocated the idea of a high-tech corridor, with computer support call-centers (a la India). My students at the National University’s School of Foreign Service had on average three languages and great strategic mindsets – though anecdotal, a sound testimonial to the promise of the new generation. High literacy, a by-product of the Soviet era, when the State publishing house was active, remains; maintaining those levels is critical.

10) *Minerals.* I saved the most covered area and the source of Mongolia’s expanding national wealth for last. Mongolia sits on enormous fields of coal, iron, copper, gold, rare earth minerals, natural gas, and perhaps petroleum. With foreign support, it has the extractive capacities and is building the needed transportation lines. Managing this new wealth is a challenge for Mongolia’s leadership, and it has looked to nations like Chile and Norway for examples of effective management of the commons and sovereign trusts. Secretary Clinton was pushing for St. Louis-based Peabody Energy in its Tavan Tolgoi coal bid (a Chinese state entity is its primary competitor). The Economist Intelligence Unit put Mongolia’s 2011 growth in GDP at 17.3 percent, largely based on mining investment.

This top-10 list identifies Mongolia’s strengths. There is no shortage of concerns, from the disproportionate size of those still living below the poverty level, growing wealth gap, sprawl of rapid urbanization, global warming and urban pollution, and – as seen in the international media – continued challenges of democratic consolidation. Clinton publicly sidestepped this spring’s arrest and detention of Mongolia’s last president, which tarnished Mongolia’s international image (offering her frank assessment privately). The government now struggles with a new round of coalition-building. But young democracies see personality clashes (see the United States in the early 19th century...and since). The macros on Mongolia appear awfully good.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*