



**Bush to Mongolia: riding forward with a new U.S. commitment** by Steve Noerper

The arrival of President George Bush in distant Mongolia this week marks the first visit by an American president and is an opportunity for the U.S. to explore new notions of democratic support, small state realities, and opportunities for assistance in resolving problem areas like North Korea.

In 1990, Mongolia cast off seven decades of communism, and this nation of nomads began the arduous ride toward free and fair governance and market liberalization. In a short period, it has made quiet and determined strides forward on the path of democracy, little recognized outside this nation of 2.5 million, and it has done so in a period when the U.S. had shed blood and spent capital in the name of spreading democracy elsewhere with far less success. In fact, Mongolia has stood by the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan, with its troops preventing a suicide attack in Iraq and having special rapport in Afghanistan with tribal descendants of the Mongols.

Mongolia has established democratic institutions that make it a harbinger for the autocratic nations of Central Asia and for communist North Korea – only 1,800 miles to the east. Mongolia straddles both East and Central Asia, non-Islamic and Islamic Asia, and giants China and Russia – a position which the U.S. should carefully weigh as it considers its commitment to democracy abroad. That unique positioning has seen Mongolia active in its regional commitments. Its position also leaves Mongolia vulnerable to a Russia and China eyeing Mongolia's mineral and other natural resources, illegal labor, and transnational health threats like avian flu and HIV/AIDs.

In considering its expanding regional role, Mongolia warrants special U.S. attention as a potential contributor on problem areas like North Korea, in that Mongolia enjoys relations and a special trust with both North and South Korea. Its status as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) nation provides a further exemplar for the Korean Peninsula, and Mongolia has offered itself as a site for quiet mediation. Mongolia's economic transition will provide valuable lessons for a North Korea that eventually will have to transform itself from its Stalinist economy and communist past. But with four hundred North Korean migrants now appearing on Mongolia's doorstep monthly, Mongolia's leadership finds itself struggling to clothe, feed, employ, or move on these North Koreans, especially given the lack of social safety nets.

All this augurs for increased U.S. financial, institutional, and political support for Mongolia. President Bush visits a Mongolia weathering the difficulties of democratic consolidation, with a coalition government balancing on a knife's edge. One-third of the nation remains in abject poverty, with a stark divide growing between a few newly rich and vast

poor lacking food, shelter, and basic services. President Bush needs to hold up Mongolia as a nation that has done the U.S. right by way of democratic growth and foster continued progress, economic gain, and greater social equity with a dramatically heightened U.S. commitment.

The U.S. spends more in a month in Iraq than it has in a decade and a half in Mongolia, and Mongolia too is a straddle country and potential democratic watershed. Mongolia next year celebrates the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the largest empire in human history, one stretching the entire Eurasian arc; the U.S. should help this horseman of the north not only recall its rich past, but ride forward.

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