



MONGOLIANS ARE PARANOID ABOUT CHINA, AND THEY SHOULD BE

BY DENNY ROY

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Many Mongolians [fear](#) China will eventually take over their country. They are correct to worry.

Mongolia is structurally vulnerable. It is a large chunk of land (four times the size of Germany) with a sparse population of only 3 million. It is completely surrounded by two much larger and more populous countries that could easily conquer it if they wished. Mongolia has considerable economic value. It is rich in mineral wealth, including coal, copper and uranium. The Chinese happen to be big users of coal, are net importers of copper, and need outside supplies of uranium to fuel their growing number of nuclear power plants.

Since the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Mongolia was briefly independent (until 1919), seized by China (1919-1921), liberated by White Russia (1921), then made a satellite of the Soviet Union (1921-1990). It broke free of the crumbling Soviet empire at the end of the Cold War and became a non-aligned democracy via a bloodless revolution. Since then both Beijing and Moscow have tolerated an independent Mongolia because it forms a convenient buffer between them and because each wants to avoid antagonizing the other.

The question, then, is whether Beijing would ever decide to annex Mongolia. There are several reasons why it could happen. Possessing Mongolia would

solve the problems that an independent Mongolia poses for China.

Mongolians having their own country across the Chinese border is an obstacle to China's project of assimilating its own ethnic minority populations. Mongolia sustains and inspires Mongolian nationalism among ethnic Mongolians in China. In June 2020 the Chinese government announced plans to curtail the use of the Mongolian language in favor of Mandarin in Inner Mongolia's schools. Citizens of Mongolia [protested](#) in their capital in cultural solidarity with their cousins in China. The former Mongolian president sent a letter to the Chinese government calling the language policy change an "[atrocity](#)."

Independent Mongolia has established a cordial bilateral relationship with the United States as part of its "third neighbor" policy, which aims to cultivate counterweights to Chinese influence. The links with the United States are threatening to China in two ways. First, they include security cooperation. Mongolia is a "NATO partner country," participates in joint training and educational activities with the USA and has contributed troops to the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, the US-Mongolia links emphasize the two countries' shared interest in democracy. Since the Chinese government [views](#) the promotion of democracy as a US effort to overthrow CCP rule, in Beijing's eyes Mongolia has become a potential outpost of subversion on the Chinese border. The transparency and accountability required by liberal democracy also interfere with China's preferred modus operandi of corrupting the elites of partner countries to pave the way for bilateral business deals.

An independent Mongolia represents a strategic space that a potential adversary of China could fill. Chinese remember that the Soviet Union placed troops and weaponry in Mongolia during the Cold War, and that a Soviet-Mongolian army entered China from Mongolia in the waning days of the Pacific War. The Mongolian border with China is only 350 miles from Beijing.

Chinese irredentism, or Chinese expansion in the guise of irredentism, applies here. Chinese people

commonly think Mongolia historically belongs to China. (The old Republic of China constitution, still in use on Taiwan, includes Mongolia as part of China.) Inner Mongolia, which borders Mongolia to the south and east, is already a province of the PRC and contains more ethnic Mongolians than Mongolia does.

China is showing an interest in claiming land on its periphery as Chinese territory. Furthermore, China's claims are not historically static. In other areas bordering China, Beijing's claims have increased in recent years. As late as the 1940s, the Chinese Communist Party leadership [said](#) Taiwan should be independent; today's CCP says Beijing should rule Taiwan. Serious PRC interest in the South China Sea only followed survey results in the early 1970s indicating substantial hydrocarbon reserves. Thereafter, CCP-led Beijing dusted off the "nine dashed line" map made by a previous Chinese government that the CCP considered illegitimate. Early this century, a Chinese government-supported research project [asserted](#) that in pre-modern times northern Korea was part of the Chinese empire, implicitly laying the basis for a Chinese claim on what is today North Korean territory. This caused an [outcry](#) in South Korean media and society. In 2013, Chinese official media reported two Chinese scholars and a Chinese general [questioning](#) Japan's sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands, a key part of the "first island chain" that includes US bases on Okinawa. This year China [enlarged](#) its claim on a disputed part of its border with India to include the entire Galwan Valley.

If China moves in, the Mongolians should not count on their "third neighbor" rescuing them. The United States did nothing to turn back Russia from seizing Crimea or occupying eastern Ukraine. America abandoned its Kurdish allies in Syria in 2019. It is almost impossible to imagine US forces attempting to militarily intervene in a land war against China in a region deep inside Asia and literally surrounded by Chinese and Russian territory and airspace.

What about the second neighbor? Up to now China's interest in maintaining good relations with Russia has deterred China from annexing Mongolia. The balance

of power between China and Russia, however, is shifting in China's favor. Russia, with an economy the size of Italy's and its own dependence on Chinese investment, is becoming the little brother in this relationship. If China's relative economic and military growth continue, Beijing may soon be in a position to demand that Moscow acquiesce to China swallowing Mongolia, and Moscow will reluctantly comply.

Unfortunately for Mongolia, the strongest argument that being annexed by China is unlikely is that Beijing already controls the country through economic domination. China takes in 80% of Mongolia's exports, provides vital direct investment, and hosts Mongolia's economic connection to the outside world in the form of a rail link to the Chinese port of Tianjin. China has not hesitated to use its economic leverage to [punish](#) Ulaan Baatar over political issues in the past, such as when Mongolia has hosted revered religious figure the Dalai Lama.

In the pre-modern era, Mongolia presided over the largest empire in human history, which included China among its conquests. Its precarious national security situation today represents perhaps history's most extreme reversal of fortune.

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