

**MONGOLIA'S CHANCES IN EAST ASIAN  
CULTURAL RELATIONS AND EXCHANGE**

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The geopolitical position of democratic Mongolia can certainly be considered to be unrivalled. Enclosed by Russia in the North and by China in the South, both neighbour countries being closely interrelated through a strategic partnership and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Mongolia did not only manage to create relations of good neighbourhood and friendship with both of them, but a strategic partnership as well. Even though, her historical experiences with her two neighbours induced Mongolia to balance out and restrict their influence on her own development through "third neighbour" politics (those "third neighbours" being the U.S.A., EU, Japan, Korea, India and others). Nevertheless, it is more than understandable that the principle of good neighbour relations is what counts in her foreign politics. The flexibility of her other foreign political premises is highly dependant on the quality of these relations. On the other hand, these premises are of vital importance for Mongolia, being a landlocked country and in need of free access to the world market with respect to the exploitation of its strategic raw materials. If you take a look on Mongolia's foreign trade statistics of the first six months of 2011, it will be immediately clear how necessary the access to the world market and the diversification of trade and economical relations are for the stabilization of Mongolia's independence. 89.1 percent of her exports are going to China, and 31.3 respectively 24.6 percent of her imports come from China or Russia. A look at the structure of imports is also very instructive: 20 percent are covered by the purchase of mineral products, and among them 89.5 percents are oil products.<sup>1</sup> If one takes into account that Russia is delivering 91.5 percent of these oil products, it becomes quite clear that it is Russia who is holding the vitals of Mongolia's economy in her hands.

How do the neighbours look at their strategic partnership with Mongolia?

In the common declaration on the occasion of the state visit of President C. Elbegdorž in Russia, it is said that the president's visit "in the 100<sup>th</sup> year of the Mongolian revolution of national liberation and on the 90<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the opening of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Russia (...), elucidates the continuity of Mongolian-Russian friendship and cooperation and of their former and actual interrelationship."<sup>2</sup> In 2010, their bilateral foreign trade turnover amounted to about one billion USD, thus again reaching the volume before the world financial crisis. Both sides have extended

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<sup>1</sup> Gadaad chudaldaany önөөгийн bajdal, in *Ardčilal*, 27.09.2011.

<sup>2</sup> Mongol-Orosyn chamtarsan medegdel, in *www.president.mn*/31.05.2011.

their traditional defence cooperation. They are now conducting common peacekeeping and anti-terror manoeuvres. During recent years, Russia has provided Mongolia with weapons and military equipment worth 100 million USD. The fact that Mongolia has decided to direct her newly planned railway lines northwards and has opted for broad-track construction, not only seems to have complied with Russia economically but also concerning security matters.

While Mongolia and Russia are emphasizing their 100 years' continuity of friendship and cooperation, Mongolian-Chinese relations are, on the other hand, of a different quality. In spite of all progress reached both neighbours still feel obliged to underline that they recognize each other's "independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and respective development choices". In their common declaration of June 2011, Mongolia confirmed that "the Government of the People's Republic of China is, in her opinion, the only legal representative of China, and underlined its consistent support for the fundamental positions of the Chinese side concerning the Taiwan question and questions connected with Tibet and Xinjiang." In response, China confirmed that she supports "Mongolia's endeavours to guarantee her national security and basic interests by political and diplomatic means".<sup>3</sup> China is, in fact, Mongolia's biggest investor and foreign trade partner. This year, the bilateral foreign trade turnover will reach the magic mark of five billion USD. While it can be taken for granted that China has overtaken Russia considerably, one has to take it only comparatively since Russia is not at all dependent on Mongolia's raw materials.

Wan Shaolin, China's Ambassador in Ulaanbaatar, is trying to win over Mongolia's "understanding and support (...), preferably of her good neighbour" for the "peaceful development" of China which, in the Ambassador's words, is a "historically unavoidable" option.<sup>4</sup> He and one of his predecessors, Ambassador Gao Shumao, have emphasized once again in recent interviews that the Mongolian-Chinese borderline of 4,710 kilometres represents China's longest border with another state, and to make sure that this border remains a peaceful one is an important part of China's foreign politics.

The fact that both, Russia as well as China, put special importance on Mongolia in their security politics, might have less to do with Mongolia herself, having been a peaceful country ever since, but with certain factors of insecurity related to the perspectives of Russian-Chinese relationship. In her history Mongolia, not only once, had to play the role of a military buffer zone between the two countries. What is new in quality is the fact that Mongolia's enormous raw material resources, especially her energy resources, are playing a particular role in Chinese security conceptions. The problems emerging for Mongolia's independence and development from its geopolitical situation are enormous. For sure, Mongolia could decide to look for her own development in the framework of the upcoming sphere of prosperity all around China. Viewing at her achievements, she might already have become a brick stone of this sphere. But among those Mongols with a national awareness, the impression that they will have to pay a high price for it is deepening: step by step, they might lose their independence and their national and cultural identity. The imagination that, in the near future, Chinese citizens might be allowed to enter Mongolia without visa in great numbers, is sufficient to cause anxiety among Mongols. Only through means of harmonious minority politics in China proper, these anxieties could be dispelled by the Beijing government. More than other countries China would have the potential to do this. Her political line of "one state-two systems" has been the proof of it.

For a small country without any *hard power* like Mongolia things are more difficult. Taking her complicated situation into account, it would be the best to advise her to assume a position of strict

<sup>3</sup> Mongol Uls, Bүгд Najramdach Chjatat Ard Ulsyn choorond strategijn түншлелин Charilcaa togtooch tuchaj chamtarsan medegdel, in [www.mfat.gov.mn/21.06.2011](http://www.mfat.gov.mn/21.06.2011).

<sup>4</sup> Enchtajvny chögzil ba Chjatat, Mongolyn charilcaa, in *Ardyn Erch*, 23.09.2011.

neutrality, have it internationally recognized and provide it with a lining of the necessary *soft power*. A stronger network engagement in her regional environment, mainly in East Asia's flourishing economies, but also in the direction of her cooperation with Europe, would suit Mongolia's vital interests. In that way, she could substantially grow to her part as a bridge between Europe and Asia. In this connection, a suggestion of the former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama seems to be of special importance for initiating a process of East Asian integration. In 2009, he suggested to establish an East Asian Community after the model of the European Union, being just an economic community in its first phase. Besides Japan, China and South Korea, also the ten ASEAN member countries as well as Australia, New Zealand and India could join it. Taking the fact that such a bloc would coincide with half of the world population and a quarter of the world economic performance, and also with respect to the continued crisis of the world financial system, this concept would offer great chances of bundling the region's economic, political and security influence potentials.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile the project has been put on track. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the Secretariat for Trilateral Cooperation has been inaugurated in Seoul. Mongolia can claim to have good relations with each of the countries mentioned above, especially with East Asian countries in the proper sense (including North Korea), and with some of those even on the basis of strategic partnership. Since some of the presumptive community members having been addressed by Hatoyama correspond, even today, with Mongolia's "third neighbour" classification, such a model could offer new possibilities of interest balance.

In view of such integration process perspective, how could Mongolia prepare? Mainly by practising *soft power* which means, firstly, her attractive culture, secondly, her political values, and thirdly, her foreign politics having been accepted by the outside world as legitimate and morally unassailable. Concerning my first point I would like to go more into detail. Like Japan Mongolia is, according to Huntington's classification, a "lonely country", i.e. the main and only state of Mongolian civilization and culture.<sup>6</sup> She is a national state based on ethnicity with an imperial past. Her nationality law is determined by blood-law. 93 percent of the country's population are Mongols, and 82.4 percent of these are Khalkh Mongols. 53 percent of the believers claim to be Lamaist<sup>7</sup>, while about 80 percent of the whole population adhere, due to traditionalist reasons, to Lamaism, which they share only with the Tibetans. That means that the Mongolian population is a highly homogenous one. And internally, their homogeneity is further enhanced through bloodline and other social relationships resulting from their nomadic life. The Mongols' pride of their Imperial past and culture ties them together and immunizes them to a certain extent against influences from outside. This relatively strong cultural immunity has enabled them to get completely rid of, or absorb beyond recognition, the cultural influences from the times of Manchurian Qing Dynasty and Soviet rule as well. However, this does not mean that the Mongols are about to isolate themselves. On the contrary, in their psyche which has been formed over the centuries by their nomadic life, they have always preserved openness towards the world outside and curiosity for the different. And then, it is up to their own nomadic-and-pragmatic decision what they will chose for themselves and in which way they will use it.

As far as their history is concerned, and due to their inner social structure and peculiarities, the Mongols have been able to carry out their revolutions of 1911, 1921 and 1990 without bloodshed-a fact which, strange enough, has never attracted the interest of scholars until today. These characteristics as well as their political consistency during the democratic process and, not least, the continuity in pursuing their concept of foreign politics, are constants which, sometimes, give the impression that Mongolia seems to be determined, much stronger than other countries, by Confucian wisdom. In order to systematically improve her own standing in the region, these advantages should be communicated to the countries

<sup>5</sup> H. Loewen, Neue Modelle regionaler Gemeinschaftsbildung in Ostasien, in *SWP-Aktuell* 68/Dezember 2009.

<sup>6</sup> S. P. Huntington, *Kampf der Kulturen*, München 1998, S. 213-214.

<sup>7</sup> Чүн ам, орон сууцны 2010 оны улсын тооллогын үр дүн, Улаанбаатар 2010.

of East Asia. A precondition, yet, has to be that the Mongolian government, in order to strengthen the bases of successful culture foreign politics and of Mongolia's cultural charisma abroad (Mongolian minorities beyond her borders included) must care considerably more for the development of her domestic education, culture and science. This is not a question of quantity any more, but of quality. Doubtlessly, there do exist several starting points for international cultural cooperation, as, among others, the following ones.

Huntington's classification of the Mongolian and the Japanese unique cultural spheres have been already mentioned. Mongolian and Japanese scholars, for instance, could do research on peculiar and common traits in order to gain results for their bilateral and regional cultural cooperation.

Exchange of scholars and common research projects could be strengthened bilaterally, and also under the patronage of UNESCO. Meanwhile, a great number of Mongolian students went to Japan and China for studies. In a few years to come, they will be back with the knowledge they have acquired there and, maybe also, with new values and ideas. And one has to ask, how far Mongolia is prepared to deal productively and to its own advantage with this input?

As far as China is concerned, Mongolia should lead a constructive, but also offensive bilateral dialogue in order to settle the still existing disputes in the sphere of each other's national history. Of course, such a dialogue requires broad, intensive and serious endeavours of scientific research about the respective sections of Mongolian national history. Only through such a dialogue the irritations and misunderstandings in their bilateral relations can be removed, and confidence can be built up.

Mongolia and the Far Eastern states are connected with each other by Buddhist roots and confessions although, sometimes, of different schools of belief. What is special with Buddhism is its principal orientation towards a peaceful and harmonious world. The emphasizing of this aspect in a religious dialogue with East Asia would enable Mongolia to take initiative also in other fields of her foreign politics, for instance she could become as an agenda-setter for the creation of a regional security system. Cultural and humanitarian exchanges constitute a dialectic unit. A broader development of tourism could improve Mongolia's standing in the tourists' home countries considerably, provided they will get some mental impulses during their stay.

For decades Mongolia has fostered good relations of well-balanced friendship with both Koreas. As a former socialist country she is, more than others, in a position to understand North Korea's development problems, and also in the cultural field. Because of this she could seek a dialogue with North Korea over questions of cultural development and communicate her own experiences in the process of cultural transformation accompanied by radical social changes. In such a way she could provide her North Korean partners with some new impetus of thinking.

These few examples might be sufficient to make clear what kind of possibilities do exist for Mongolian cultural exchange with East Asia. The importance of their realization should not be underestimated since it would strengthen the notion and the status of Mongolia in these countries and, at the same time, it would increase the application of *soft power* in the region through Mongolia's foreign politics. The history of modern international relations has proved that, in such kinds of processes, small countries can gain even more than big ones when they are trusted by their respective counterparts and when they, at the same time, resort to offensive and initiative action. In a world of partners, networking and localization are important factors for Mongolia. It is self understood that in such a global perception the own region is playing a peculiar role.