

## **YUMJAAGIIN TSEDENBAL ON MONGOLIA'S INDEPENDENCE: EVOLUTION OF A STATESMAN'S STANCE**

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**M**ongolia's history during the Cold War era is inseparable from the life and deeds of Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal,\* a historic figure who towered over nearly all political heights of the country for almost half of a century. Specific to this regard is the issue of his stance on the nation's independence, puzzling to many scholars yet still lacking a conventional approach.

The very question of Mongolia's independence, undoubtedly, dates back to the early half of the 20th century, years before Tsedenbal assumed his role in politics. It was in the immediate aftermath of the 1921 revolution that the Mongolians declared their country's independence and established the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Russia, thus acquiring a *de facto* sovereignty. The Nationalist Government of the then-Republic of China refused to offer recognition to Mongolia and continued to claim the latter's territory as part of its own until January 1946. Nonetheless, during the Yalta summit of the "Big Three" in February 1945 the Allied Powers have agreed to recognize "the status quo of Outer Mongolia (the Mongolian People's Republic),"<sup>1</sup> which ultimately led to the end of Nationalist China's claim over Mongolia. Moreover, Joseph Stalin demanded from Franklin D. Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek that they accept the recognition of Mongolia's independence as the condition for dispatching the Soviet troops in a war against Japan. Left with no choice, the Nationalist Government officially recognized the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) on January 6, 1946 and the diplomatic

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<sup>1</sup> The designation "Mongolian People's Republic" was a conventional long name of the country between 1924



relations between the two countries were established shortly thereafter, on February 10 of the same year.

After a quarter of a century of *de facto* existence, the ambiguity of Mongolian independence was thus finalized. However, even after the nation has already acquired its *de jure* sovereignty, such doubts as whether Mongolia should maintain the independence intact or merge with other countries (meaning the USSR) circulated among the Mongolians. Furthermore, the top-ranking strata of Mongolian leadership occasionally considered this issue and preferred to "voluntarily join the Soviet Union."

These facts were unknown to the Mongolian public until 1989/1990, when the tides of emerging democratization, openness and pluralism exposed some of the previously classified documents, enabling the scholars to offer more critical interpretation of historic events. Accordingly, during that time the issue of Tsedenbal's stance on Mongolian independence obtained an unbelievably erroneous coverage in the publications of historians, politicians and columnists. While some charged Tsedenbal with "treason of attempting to make Mongolia a sixteenth constituent republic," others credited his predecessor, Marshal Khorloogiin Choibalsan\* for his reportedly "tough stance on Mongolia's independence," and for "saving the country from Stalin's leash at the expense of over 40,000 death toll of executions ordered from the Kremlin. "However, the recent research findings reveal that these statements were none other than deliberate fabrication of the historic events, motivated by extremely ideological viewpoints. Nowadays, though very few of the archival documents relevant to this issue are declassified, some interesting and insightful information is found in several recent publications, such as *Suulchiin Doloon Jil* (Mongolian, "The Seven Last Years") by Tsedenbal's son Zorig Tsedenbal (1993), *Tsedenbal: 1984 God* (Russian, "Tsedenbal: Year 1984") by a former Soviet diplomat and scholar-Mongolist, Dr. Sh.Nadirov (1995), and *Gerel Suuder: Yu. Tsedenbalyn Khuviin Temdeglelees* (Mongolian, "Bright and Dark: Tsedenbal's Personal Diaries"), published in 1992, to name a few. I had the opportunity to explore quite a wide range of documents in the process of completing a book titled-Yu Tsedenbal: *Tiiiikhen Unenii Tukhai Bodrol* (Mongolian, "Tsedenbal: Thoughts on Historic Truth") in 1994.

It is worth noting that Tsedenbal's personal diaries offer us the possibility to identify some of the previously classified information relevant to Mongolia's international position /

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\* See Reference at the end of the paper for people marked with asterisk



during the Cold War<sup>2</sup>. These and other sources shed some light on previously distorted views about Mongolia's leaders and their relation vis-a-vis their Soviet counterparts. In particular, those who glorify Choibalsan's role in retaining Mongolia's independence safe from Stalin's annexation plans are in reality failing to comprehend Stalin's geostrategic objectives. For that matter, Stalin never said a single word hinting at MPR joining the USSR, let alone pursuing the policy of the so-called "annexation;" in fact, several documents reveal that on several occasions the Mongolians themselves appealed to Stalin to accept their request for merger. One such case occurred when Choibalsan was still in power. In July 1944, when Choibalsan was still in power, the Tannu-Tuva People's Republic<sup>3</sup> led by Salchik Toka\* abruptly terminated their independence and joined the Soviet Union. Immediately following the event, the State Chief Procurator B. Jambaldorj,\* who concurrently was a member of the Politburo of the MPRP Central Committee, wrote in his letter to the Politburo:

I think that joining the great Soviet family would be a timely and extremely important issue in the future's accelerated development of our Mongolia. During this time of hardship for the Soviet people, caused by the Great Patriotic War, such an appellation from the people of Mongolia would be a factor of proof of how strong are the brotherly ties and friendship between our two countries. Joining the Soviet family is not only my idea, but is shared by masses. (Bat-Ochir, 1996: p. 68]

Several years later anew generation of politicians once again took on this idea of merger, first formulated during the Second World War. In August 1950, six prominent individuals in the Mongolian leadership, including (and led by) D. Tomor-Ochir\* and L. Tsend\* wrote a letter to Choibalsan, requesting his response on nine issues that they considered to be vital for Mongolia; in addition, they included the following clause:

"Completion of socialist construction demands a strong material and technological base. Only the Soviet industry shall install that base for us. [But] we can acquire such a base by joining the

<sup>2</sup> Another document, hopefully priceless in revealing Tsedenbal's thoughts on Mongolia's independence and developmental

path, yet to be found. On August 20, 1984, i.e. three days before the Plenum of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). It is imaginable that the letter contained some very sensitive and complicated issues in Mongolian-Soviet bilateral relations. However, some obvious and unimportant issues might also have appeared in the letter due to the deteriorating intellectual capability of an ailing elderly leader.

<sup>3</sup> Sandwiched between the Soviet Union and Mongolia, the small country of Tannu-Tuva was originally Mongolia's northwestern frontier and then a Soviet-orchestrated "independent" state from 1921 until 1944. Nowadays the (autonomous) Republic of Tyva within the Russian Federation.

Soviet Union. Since this is the case, it will become inevitable, sooner or later, for our country to join that Union, dictated by our [present] life and developmental demands. [Damba, 1991 ]

The responses of Choibalsan and Tsedenbal were different this time. Choibalsan thoroughly opposed this "initiative," and just like the first case with Jambaldorj, he was raging and condemned those who proposed it. Tsedenbal, on the other hand, supported the idea and also received a portion of Choibalsan's wrath. He tried to convince Choibalsan that joining the USSR was the most reliable and shortest path toward socialism and even touched the subject of nationhood and identity by saying:

By voluntarily joining the Soviet Union the Mongolian nation will not disappear, but instead, will flourish economically and culturally, as the examples of the Soviet constituent republics clearly demonstrate us. " [Damba, 1991 ]

"When the state disappears, so will the nation, eventually," Choibalsan reportedly replied with anger. [Damba, 1991] Nevertheless, there is a reason, a piece of information, to doubt whether Choibalsan has truly stood on such a tough position, or was he merely testing his proteges. In November 1942 Choibalsan made rather an extraordinary political move -he, the leader of an independent state, submitted a written application to Stalin to become a member of the All- Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party.<sup>4</sup> The letter, potential of revealing Choibalsan's intentions, also waits to be found.

When in late January 1944 Choibalsan met with Stalin in the Kremlin for a round of negotiations, the two men exchanged views on what should be Mongolia's position on the liberation movement of the Uighurs, Kazakhs and ethnic Mongols residing in Northwestern China just across Mongolia's southwestern borders. At the end, it was agreed to assist them in the struggle for liberation from the Kuomintang (KMT) regime and restoration of statehood traditions and to provide them with military weapons and machinery.

At that meeting Stalin said, "Choibalsan is the leader of not only Outer Mongolia, but of Inner Mongolia as well." [Bat-Ochir, 1996: p.168] In a historical perspective, it seems now that the above-mentioned words have had a clandestine meaning of recovering the vast

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<sup>4</sup> *Name of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1922 and 1952*



territories that both countries (Mongolia and the Soviet Union) lost to the Republic of China. I Connected to the time and place, it perhaps was Stalin's tactical move to detect Choibalsan's reaction to intensifying the struggle in the Altai region, where Ospan, an ethnic Kazakh fighting against the KMT, was to receive the Soviet support through Marshal Choibalsan. Motivated either by Stalin's compliment of being the leader of both Outer and Inner Mongolias, or by genuine desire to liberate the kindred Mongols from the oppression, in February 1944, immediately after his return, Choibalsan made a trip to Mongolia's southwestern provinces to meet the rebel leader, Ospan. Besides transferring the Soviet aid equipment over to the Kazakh rebels, the two men are said to have agreed on a number of issues. This encounter, however, turned out to be a brief one. A military skirmish between Ospan's men and the Mongolian military put an end to the efforts and long-term agenda of Stalin and Choibalsan.

Nevertheless, Choibalsan did not give up his dreams of unifying the Outer and Inner Mongolias; Stalin, too, continued to support Choibalsan on this issue. In particular, when Choibalsan met with Stalin for the last time on September 30, 1949 in Sochi, he asked: "If Inner Mongolia reunites with our country, could [the unified state] eventually become a Soviet constituent republic?" and consulted about the 1944 Jambaldorj letter. [Bat-Ochir, 1996: p.168] Knowing that the two issues are far apart from one another in nature, Stalin replied:

You don't need to become our constituent republic. When we support the reunification of Outer and Inner Mongolias, we contemplate an independent unified state, not part of Russia or China. [Bat-Ochir, 1996:p.187]

In reality, those words had no relevance at that time, as Mao Zedong was declaring the creation of the People's Republic of China to the world.

There were a variety of rumors and semi-official statements circulated in the 1950s that Choibalsan himself was behind the idea of merger. One episode involves Vyacheslav Molotov, a man once a close companion of Stalin and his collaborator in formulating and implementing the foreign policy of a superpower, who was demoted under Nikita Khrushchev and sent to Mongolia as the Soviet Ambassador. It was during the border demarcation negotiations that Molotov, in the heat of intense confrontation with Mongolian Foreign Minister Sodnomyn Avarzed on disputed territory of Mt. Davst, said:

You make such a big deal on a tiny piece of land. If that is the case, know that your Marshal Choibalsan appealed three times to bring Mongolia into the Soviet Union. [Gurbadam, 1994: p. 211]

When I was a student in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, the Russians, as I recall, often approached me with the question, "Your Marshal Choibalsan is said to have applied to join the USSR. So when are you going to become our sixteenth republic?" Perhaps it would not be much of a generalization to say that many other Mongolians at that time confronted the same question addressed to them.

These facts show that Stalin had no intentions of annexing Mongolia, yet on more than one occasion the Mongolian political leadership requested such a merger. Furthermore, many evidences point at the absence of Stalin's real intentions of assisting the incorporation of Inner Mongolia to the MPR. After all, it was Stalin that made the Allied leaders agree to recognize the status quo of Outer Mongolia (MPR) in 1945 and pushed Chiang Kai-shek to accept Mongolia's independence in 1946, thus securing the existing boundaries of the MPR as a legitimate international border. Being well aware of Choibalsan's agenda of "securing the unification of all Mongols into a free, independent, sovereign, single, fraternal nation" after the war against Japan declared on August 10, 1945, nonetheless the first post-war move by Stalin was stopping such course of action on Mao Zedong's request.

It is puzzling that despite reaching this grand political and diplomatic agreement with the Chinese Communists, why in 1949 did Stalin compliment Choibalsan as "the leader of Outer and Inner Mongolias," at the exact moment when the People's Republic of China was being declared? It is even sadder to acknowledge that our national leader did not see through those idle words, absolutely irrelevant and unrealistic given the real-world situation of the time.

Choibalsan and Stalin departed a year apart, first the Mongolian leader in 1952 and then his Soviet counterpart in 1953. A logical question is what were the stances of the new Soviet and Mongolian leaders on this delicate and sensitive issue. Analysis of the existing facts show that it acquired several turns, each different in nature.

A group of intellectuals led by D. Tomor-Ochir and L. Tsend, who wrote a letter in 1950 to both Choibalsan and Tsedenbal proposing to join the USSR, once again approached Tsedenbal with same ideas, this time, after Choibalsan was dead. The proposal was put /through hearings at the Politburo of the MPRP Central Committee, and was reportedly *it* supported and a decision was made to issue a Politburo resolution. Though the resolution, it



nonetheless reached the top-ranking Soviet leadership.

I should connote that on the existence of such a resolution the opinions of Mongolian and Russian scholars differ. On the one hand, according to Dr. L. Bat-Ochir,

Some of the politburo members refused to make a positive decision; others demanded that it should be introduced to the Party's Central Committee plenum and the People's Great Khural<sup>5</sup> session. But the efforts of key people prevailed; so that the resolution was hastily drafted and sent to the CPCU Central Committee. [Bat-Ochir, 1996: p.72]

On the other hand, Dr. M. Kapitsa, a professor of Chinese studies and former Deputy Foreign Minister of the USSR, wrote in his diaries that "just before his departure for Moscow Tsedenbal gave orders not to issue such a resolution." [Kapitsa Diaries]. In a same spirit, Dr. Sh. Nadirov, a former Soviet diplomat and scholar-Mongolist, writes:

At that time Tsedenbal, who was not only the General Secretary of the MPRP Central Committee, but who also had become the MPR Prime Minister, i.e. the head of government, was actively supporting the idea of that resolution; he edited the final draft and delegated to several members of the leadership the task of adopting the document. But on the next day, before his departure for Moscow to attend Stalin's funeral, he said that the resolution should not be passed. It is possible to stipulate that he had consulted Moscow and received an advice not to make such a decision. [Nadirov, 1995: pp. 43-44]

The question whether such a resolution was actually adopted may remain unknown, but clearly in either form (a resolution or its draft) this initiative managed to reach the Soviet leadership. In his conversations with Tsedenbal on March 8, 1953, Molotov made a statement:

I was instructed to talk to you about your question on joining the USSR. Now is not the time. [They] will again start talking about the

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<sup>5</sup> *A legislative assembly of the Mongolian People's Republic*

Soviet imperialism. [You ] need to repeal that decision. What to do, [you] have to repeal it. This decision of yours smell with inconsistency. Should have consulted from the beginning Actually, YOU have one leaning more to the left than another. [Tsedenbal Diaries, 1992]

The interesting part of this conversation is the phrase "Now is not the time," which, as the events to come have shown us, turned out to be a well-planned, nuanced policy.

The end of the Second World War brought about some new shifts in global affairs. The world political map underwent dramatic changes with many nations liberated and new states created. The Cold War emerged to replace the "hot" one. These and other evolutions in the international arena caused Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal to radically revoke his earlier thoughts of supporting Mongolia's merger with the Soviet Union and to acquire a firm and uncompromising stance on Mongolia's independence. Again, historical events and relevant documents thereof prove this evolution of a statesman's stance.

Two decades after the notorious conversation with Molotov, Tsedenbal met with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in Crimea in 1973. Brezhnev told Tsedenbal that recently Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov had informed him of the decision to join the USSR, trying to detect his reaction. Tsedenbal, however, said no word on that matter. Three years later, Brezhnev again tried to raise the subject. As Tsedenbal writes in his diaries,

While [I was] vacationing in Varna, on August 21, 1978 the Soviet Ambassador Vlaminir Erkul'yevich Pazovsky told me the following things at the beach, namely: Comrade Zhivkov brings up an issue of Bulgaria's joining the Soviet Union. Comrade Brezhnev, when he came here in 1973, responded that the Yugoslavians and the Romanians might get the wrong impression. You do not need to hurry .Before your country , there is Mongolia, which obtained its freedom earlier. ..They are not in a hurry .(I just listened to it and made no comment). [Tsedenbal Diaries, 1992: p. 100]



Based on the aforementioned facts, one can say that Brezhnev most probably was thinking in terms of "annexing" Mongolia, not abruptly, but gradually, in due process. Hence, both Molotov and Brezhnev had ambitions to bring Mongolia into the Soviet Union.

Tsedenbal did not concede to the emotional moves by Bulgarian and Soviet leaders to merge the two countries. His stance was that a country should not be simply merged with another, but in the first place their economies should be integrated closely. As Soviet diplomat Sh. Nadirov notes,

When I introduced the joint resolution of the CPSU Central Committee and USSR Council of Ministers on comprehensive integration of the socialist countries, [he] gave several ideas and wrote in the corner of resolution draft "While maintaining the independence and sovereignty of the Mongolian People's Republic." [Nadirov, 1995: p. 45]

Perhaps this is fine evidence that although Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal admired the Soviet Union and sought to develop Mongolia by enlisting the Soviet assistance and support, he did not always accept Moscow's advices and sometimes even could find his clandestine ways to escape them.

Another important direction of Tsedenbal's foreign policy was protecting the nation's independence from Chinese ambitions via the political and diplomatic means during the tense period of the Cold War and Sino-Soviet confrontation. In the 1960s and 1970s when the relations between the USSR and the PRC rapidly deteriorated, leading even to military standoff, Tsedenbal welcomed the Soviet troops to be stationed in Mongolia. Thus, Tsedenbal saw it as a strong-willed policy to counter the arrogance of the Chinese leadership.

The domestic situation in the USSR began to face severe challenges in the mid-1980s. For Mikhail Gorbachev and his team, who set a goal to introduce reforms in both foreign and domestic policies, Tsedenbal's firm anti-Chinese stance was no longer an asset but rather an impediment. My personal opinion as a person who have served in the capacity of Mongolian Ambassador to the Soviet Union during those days, that for the sake of rapprochement with China, the Soviet leaders were forced to remove Tsedenbal and a number of their leading scholars in Sinology.

The years Tsedenbal led his country overlapped not to the tense period of the Cold War, dividing the globe into two antagonistic military and ideology blocs, but also to the years of a bloody "hot" war, unrivaled in human history by its atrocities. Moreover, these were the years of ultimate challenge for Mongolia, when the nations' two giant neighbors confronted each other as enemies, with the standoff occasionally escalating into fighting, and when Mongolia had to closely follow the Soviet Union until the nation saw itself controlled by the Kremlin. Despite all these challenges, Tsedenbal led his country to become a member of the United Nations, through an active foreign policy steadily defending the vital strategic interests of a small power caught in the midst of a USSR-PRC-MPR triangle. All these make Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal truly a great statesman of the 20th century, a passionate patriot and a politician of a global scale.

#### **A BRIEF REFERENCE ON SOME PEOPLE NOTED IN THE PAPER**

1. Yu. Tsedenbal held various party and state posts between 1940 and 1984, serving as the ruling party's general secretary, the premier and the head of state. In August 1984 he was removed from all of his positions allegedly "due to poor health and in accordance with his own request," and went for retirement in Moscow. In March 1990 he was expelled from the MPRP membership, taken away his decoration of the Hero of Mongolia and (highest) military rank of the marshal of Mongolia. He died in Moscow in 1991, and several years later the Mongolian state has revoked the earlier decision, thus restoring all his awards and ranks.
2. Kh. Choibalsan was the Prime Minister of Mongolia from 1939 to 1952. In addition, from the mid-1930s he concurrently held various posts, namely the Minister of war, the Minister of Internal Affairs (the secret police), the Foreign Minister, Commander-in-Chief of the People's Army etc. He is primarily responsible for mass executions of the 1930s, sentencing tens of thousands of people to death as "Japanese spies." In addition, he facilitated the arrest, deportation to the Soviet Union, trial and execution of many high-ranking officials of Mongolian party and government, including two of his predecessors as Prime Ministers. Twice decorated with the honorific title of the Hero of Mongolia, he had the military rank of the Marshal of Mongolia. He frequently met and got advices from Stalin, thus becoming one of his "little deputies." In late September



1949, the two leaders met for the last time in Moscow. He died in Moscow in 1952, a year before Stalin.

3. D. Tomor-Ochir was a Soviet-educated scholar with a doctorate degree in Philosophy and a politician. As a member of the Politburo and secretary of the ruling party's Central Committee, he was outspoken in criticizing Choibalsan's cult of personality and mass executions of the 1930s. This, coupled with his efforts to celebrate Genghis Khan's 800th anniversary in 1962 and his initiative to erect the first statue to the Khan, ultimately led to his own removal as "nationalist." He lived in an exile in Darkhan city, where he was murdered at his home in October 1985. The murder case remains unsolved.
4. L. Tsend was also a Soviet-educated cadre with a doctorate degree in Economics and a politician. In his capacity of the member of the Politburo and second secretary of the ruling party's Central Committee, he was seen by many as his apparent and potential rival of Tsedenbal. In criticizing Choibalsan's cult of personality, he tried to accuse Tsedenbal of sharing some of the guilt; he also made an attempt to report to the Soviet party leadership on Tsedenbal's incompetence and backwardness in leading the country, trying to get the Soviet support for himself. These led to his downfall and in 1963 he was ousted and appointed the manager of a wood-processing factory.
5. B. Jambaldorj was a Politburo member and the State Chief Procurator. He was notorious for his draft of extremely tough laws. He was the first to appeal to join the USSR. Molotov's remark on Jambaldorj deserves interest: "...As a politician, he seems not the best person. You are under some influence by him"
6. Salchik Toka was the Communist leader of Tannu- Tuva, a northwestern region of Mongolia that was separated and made "independent" in 1921. Under his direct initiative and leadership Tannu- Tuva joined the USSR in 1944 first as an autonomous area, then in 1971 elevated to the autonomous republic within the Russian Federation; thus, Toka is responsible for his country's disappearing from the world map.