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**TESTIMONY FOR THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

**Mongolia's current political
situation and implications for the
OSCE**

**Testimony before
the Commission on Security and Cooperation
in Europe**

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Introduction

The term “Outer Mongolia” in recent English usage signifies someplace so remote as to be utterly beyond the concern of civilization, as in the following sentence: “If John McCain is elected President, former senator Phil Gramm will likely be named ambassador to Outer Mongolia.”¹

And indeed, I recall a joke my Russian diplomatic colleagues in Beijing used to tell thirty years ago: “John,” they asked me, “What is most neutral country in world?” The answer they said was “Mongolia, because it doesn’t even interfere in its own internal affairs.”

But in the 21st Century, Mongolia has become a geographic and political locus of surpassing strategic importance – to the United States, to the Russian Federation and to China – and by reviewing the dynamic of interests that these three nations have in Mongolia, we can understand its importance to NATO and the broader global community of democracies and, of course, to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

First, let me say that I count Mongolia as one of the Soviet Socialist Republics that gained independence with the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Unlike the other SSR’s in Central Asia which all chose post-Soviet governing structures that were heavily Presidential and hence easily twisted into authoritarian despotisms and dictatorships, Mongolia alone chose a parliament-centric government. This was because Mongolia was the first republic to become de facto independent from Moscow in 1986 when Gorbachev sought to minimize the USSR’s frictions with China by granting Ulaan Baatar diplomatic autonomy from Moscow. One of the first things that took place was Mongolia’s establishment of diplomatic ties with the United States.

In the 1980s, China’s leader, Deng Xiaoping, set three prerequisites for normalized relations with the USSR: the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Vietnam and from Mongolia, and by May 1989 when Gorbachev made his historic visit to Beijing, Gorbachev had met all of China’s demands.

This meant that by 1990, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the Romanian revolution, Mongolia was desperate to define its new geostrategic role in Eurasia – one that would keep it from being marginalized. As the patronage of the USSR receded, Mongolia felt it was left hung out to dry in China’s back deserts. Wedged between its new imperial overlord Russia, and its ancient imperial overlord China, Mongolia’s political leaders sought a “Third Neighbor.”

¹ See John Bentley, “McCain Response To Gramm Flap: Exile Him To Belarus,” *CBS News*, July 10, 2008, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2008/07/10/politics/fromtheroad/entry4248947.shtml>. When asked about Senator Gramm’s observation that the U.S. had become “a nation of whiners,” John McCain said “I strongly disagree,” and added, “I think Sen. Gramm would be in serious consideration for ambassador to Belarus . . .” My apologies to Mongolia for equating it to Belarus.

In 1990 and again in 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker made visits to Ulaan Baatar where he made a point of meeting with young leaders of the anti-communist student democratic movement. So impressed was Mongolia's ruling "Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party" with this new American concern for Mongolia, that the MPRP unilaterally divested itself of its monopoly on power and reorganized the country's constitution into a truly democratic document, complete with new political parties, free parliamentary and presidential elections, a free press and media journalism, all before the Soviet SSRs became autonomous.

Since 1990, Mongolians have voted in five general parliamentary elections for Mongolia's Great *Hural* with power flowing back and forth between the old communist MPRP and the new coalition of Democrats (in the Democratic Party) and other independents. Some political parties are wholly based on personalities, others on ideas, but it is certainly one of the most vibrant new democracies in all Asia.

This is not to say Mongolia is now a Jeffersonian republic. The MPRP still maintains a powerful and well organized political machine left over from Soviet times, and the MPRP is still the champion of strong central government control of the economy and welfare. While the Democrats are in favor of lower taxes, easier foreign investment and a truly independent judiciary necessary for the rule-of-law to take firm root.

The June 29 Hural election and aftermath

Which brings us to the June 29, 2008, election: I have communicated with a number of people who say their independent surveys had led them to believe that the Democrats were headed for a victory, especially in the urban voting precincts of Ulaan Baatar. One e-mailed me saying that as of 3 am on the morning of June 30, the vote count showed "By the result, 64 out of 76 seats at the Parliament were coming to Democratic Party candidates."

Yet, by 3:30 am, the MPRP secretary general Yo. Otgonbayar had announced that the MPRP had won the vote, and that the MPRP Party Headquarters had issued similar press releases every two or three hours until 6 pm June 30, that the MPRP had, in fact, won. Allegedly, election commission units around Mongolia that were controlled by MPRP commissioners, fiddled the election results so that fewer than 28 DP candidates were successful.

In the end, the General Election Commission, which has 8 MPRP members and one DP member, certified a major MPRP victory – 45 seats in the 76-seat Great *Hural*. There seems to have been quite a bit of questionable involvement by MPRP local office holders in the oversight of polling places. Then there were allegations that MPRP office holders denied polling registration to DP voters. And allegations of improper MPRP busses transporting voters to the polls, and vote buying, of multiple voting, missing ballots, lax security for ballot boxes, etc. How many of these allegations are based on firm evidence

rather than partisan suspicions I cannot say, but international election observers did not report any problems.

One thing seems to have been cause for puzzlement, however. The MPRP candidate for the Hural seat representing the city of Darkhan, Khayankhyarvaa, a local governor who was blamed for a major environmental disaster in the city – a mercury spill – was elected to the seat with the highest number of votes. Clearly something fishy was going on.

On July 1st, DP activists began collecting petition signatures in Ulaan Baatar's main square, Sukhbaatar Square, demanding an investigation of the election oversight. A large crowd gathered, both sympathizers and onlookers. At 6 pm that evening, when a group of the DP coalition attempted to present the petition to MPRP Headquarters building on Sukhbaatar Square, security guards blocked their approach, and apparently two television news stations broadcast live footage of the security guards beating the petitioners on the steps of the MPRP building.

At which point, rocks were thrown, and police fired rubber bullets, and more rocks, followed by Molotov cocktails, and outright rioting broke out. Five people were killed, and apparently 300 or so were injured including 30 police. Several hundred were arrested (the Democratic Party now calls for the release of 200 of the arrestees who are apparently still in custody). It was the only such incidence of mass political violence in Mongolia's modern history and apparently it shook up not just the government, but the rioters themselves. By midnight, Mongolia's President (formerly an MPRP leader) declared a four-day "state of emergency", an unprecedented move, and closed all TV stations except for the state-run national TV outlet.

There was some indication that the MPRP intended to blame the riot on the instigation of top Democratic coalition leaders, specifically Tsakhia Elbegdorj – a former prime minister -- and have them arrested as well. But so far, cooler heads have prevailed.

Implications for Eurasia

The survival and success of Mongolia's infant democracy is no trivial matter for the democracies of Eurasia. It alone of the former Central Asian soviet states has a parliamentary system and therefore has the most promising hopes for continued political pluralism. The MPRP are generally honorable men, but no well-organized former authoritarian party in a new Asian democracy should be given the impression that the world is not watching what's going on in their land.

Mongolia has been a valued contributor to the community of Eurasia's free states in a number of ways, most notably its strong support of the West in the war against terrorism, but there is a danger in permitting that kind of support turn into a get-out-of-jail-free card (or a put-dissidents-into-jail-free card) as it has for some of our other Central Asian partners.

The success of Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy also has a broader implication for Eurasia's geopolitics. Mongolia is wedged tightly between Russia and China. In 2007, China accounted for over half of all Mongolia's foreign trade – over 70 percent of Mongolia's exports go to China, and 30% of imports. China accounts for almost half of all Mongolia's foreign direct investment.²

Which brings up another problem. While official figures for unemployment are only around 3.2%, the general consensus in Ulaan Baatar is that the numbers are way up near the twenties – for the simple reason that traditional Mongolian men don't think working for a wage is manly. Most construction work in Mongolia's capital (and on all Chinese-invested projects) is done by Chinese crews. One report has over 15,000 Chinese legal construction workers in Mongolia, with "several thousand more working illegally; many employers prefer to hire Chinese, who cost less and are believed to work harder."³

A cynical joke goes like this: *Q: Why are there so many Chinese people constructing new buildings in Ulaan Baatar? A: So they will have some place to stay after the invasion.*⁴

One simply cannot take for granted Mongolia's continued independence from China. Although rarely recognized, Mongolia is of critical geopolitical importance. Its 1.5 million square kilometers of real estate is a stabilizing element in Eurasia that keeps border frictions between its two giant neighbors, Russia and China, from reaching a critical mass of conflict. In 1969, the specter of a Soviet nuclear strike on China was the immediate threat that galvanized President Richard Nixon into exploring a strategic alignment with China. In 2005, the U.S. sees an independent Mongolia as a stabilizing buffer between Russia and China. But how long Mongolia can remain economically independent from China is problematic. Once its economy is absorbed by China's, how much political independence it retains may simply be a matter of opinion.

No one expects China to be happy with an independent Mongolia, but it is the best way to help keep China and Russia apart. The best way to ensure that Mongolia's two neighbors respect her independent identity is to integrate that isolated land into regional and global security structures like APEC, Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, NATO's Partnership for Peace, and of course, the OSCE's Asian Partner for Development program. And it is up to American diplomats to shame their counterparts from other European and Asian democracies into supporting those efforts. After all, it's for their own good.⁵

² 47.4% between 1990 and 2006 according to Mongolia's Ministry of Industry and Trade. See <http://mit.mit.pmis.gov.mn/images1/invest200604.gif>

³ Ola Wong, "Mongolia's China Syndrome," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 20, 2008.

⁴ See Ulaan Baator Eagle TV managing director Tom Terry's blog at <http://thomasterry.com/blog/index.php?page=2>

⁵ On rereading my 2005 essay, I find a great deal of satisfaction in how prescient it was. See John J. Tkacik, Jr., "Mongolia's Democratic Identity," *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 21, 2005, a version of which is available at <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed062205a.cfm>.

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