

Soni, Sharad K. 2006. *Mongolia-China Relations. Modern and Contemporary Times*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, 328 pages, ISBN 81 8274 196 3

Mongolian foreign policy: the Chinese dimension

IRINA MOROZOVA

All of official Beijing's talk of China's 'peaceful rise to power' and 'Asian harmony' is of particular concern to Mongolia. Although the Great Wall that once separated the ancient and medieval Chinese dynasties from the 'northern barbarians' has become a historic relic, geopolitics, of course, still matters. What security arrangements should Mongolia pursue in the face of its growing great neighbour? What might be the long-term effects on the Mongolian economy and society of China becoming a regional and even global superpower? Could China's huge, migrating population overwhelm Mongolia's smaller one? These and other intriguing questions are the subject of Sharad Soni's ambitious book.

In the Introduction the author correctly observes that the history of Sino-Mongolian relations embodies much more than 'border raids and tribute missions' and calls for a *longue durée* approach. He does so, however, without providing an overview of pre-Mongol polities in the Eurasian steppes. Soni defines historical-cultural features that, in his perception, always distinguished the world of the Mongol – nomadic way of life, 'horse culture', mobility of the army and integral system of administration – from the world of the Chinese. But historians would dispute that the ethno-genesis of the northern Chinese was complex; they would argue that no distinct border between the sedentary and nomadic worlds existed and that the 'northern barbarians' were familiar with agriculture and even irrigation. Meanwhile, Soni's support of the popular idea that Genghis and Kublai brought centrality and despotism into Chinese imperial structures would be criticised by medievalists for his lack of sources and of concrete analysis of imperial administrative structures.

Modern Mongolia: did the Manchu provoke pan-Mongolism?

Soni explains the modern 'decadence' of the Mongols through the late Middle Ages' fratricidal wars between various Mongol tribes that were played off against one another by the Chinese, which finally disintegrated the Great Mongol State and forced its remnants under the jurisdiction of the Manchu Emperor. The author is at his strongest when he describes Manchu influence in separating the Chinese from the Mongols. He rightfully mentions the special role of Inner Mongols in developing 'national' identity and the idea of pan-Mongolism. Inner Mongols were the southern Mongolian tribes first subdued by the Manchu. Today Inner Mongolia is a part of the People's Republic of China, while Outer Mongolia, known in the 20th century as the Mongolian Peoples's Republic (MPR), is independent Mongolia. Christopher Atwood, in his fundamental work, showed that the Inner Mongolian revolutionary movement emerged out of opposition to

the Qing system, while Inner Mongolia's new intelligentsia grew out of a 'calling, quasi-religious cause' and desire for an alternative career path.¹

However, Soni, following Mongolian and Soviet historiographies but without himself providing sufficient evidence, holds that a 'national liberation movement' existed among the low strata of Mongolian society. By 1920 this nationalism spread to higher circles of the Khalkha, the central and politically dominant ethnic group in Outer Mongolia, and manifested itself, the author believes, as loyalty to the Buddhist hierarch Bogdo-Gegen, the theocratic ruler and symbol of Mongolian autonomy proclaimed in 1911, and as hostility toward Chinese oppression imposed in 1919 by General Hsu in the Outer Mongolian capital Urga.



Mongolia in the Cold War: a lucrative position?

Using various secondary sources, Soni presents a well-balanced and rational analysis of Chinese, Russian and Japanese interests in Mongolia in the early 20th century. Historiography on later periods, particularly the Second World War, still reveals serious gaps. He describes the Yalta Conference, at which the Soviet delegation made Mongolia's independence a condition for the USSR's participation in the war against Japan, as 'humiliating' to China, and Chiang Kai-shek's 1946 recognition of the Mongolian People's Republic as a 'liberal step': made under Soviet diplomatic pressure, it finally granted the MPR *de jure* independence from China. In his chapter on the Cold War era, Soni addresses Sino-Mongolian

rapprochement in the 1950s and the easing of tensions during Détente. Benefiting from the Sino-Soviet 'great friendship', Mongolia pursued closer ties with both the USSR and China (although the Chinese provided far less aid than the Soviets). Internationally, however, as the author correctly states, Mongolia remained 'in the shadow' of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s.

Soni's analysis of the competition among socialist states, communist parties and their leaders in the world communist movement leaves the reader wondering about the accessibility of archival materials on the inter-party struggle and changes in power in the USSR and the MPR. The book's use of archival sources does not provide much new insight compared to the main published monographs.² Recent research on politics within the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party has uncovered evidence that Mongolia's role in Cold War geopolitics was not solely passive;³ in fact, the Cold War in East Asia placed Mongolia in a lucrative position: it received international recognition and membership in international organisations via Soviet diplomatic support; gained Chinese economic assistance; and traded on a larger scale with the USSR and European socialist states.

In search of a regional identity

In the last chapter Soni discusses Sino-Mongolian relations in the post-Cold War era, starting with the power vacuum left by the USSR's dissolution. While the economic vacuum was filled by Chinese business, the political arena in Mongolia was and still is not dominated by any single player. Mongolia's foreign policy of neutrality – mandatory for a small state clenched between two great powers – is reflected in Mongolia's willingness to achieve membership in various regional organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Nevertheless, Soni argues that Mongolia

identifies itself predominantly with North-east Asia, 'which is the only sub-region having no organisational structure of its own' (p. 217).

The author doesn't rule out the possibility of Mongolia falling prey to a security threat at the hands of its direct neighbours. Referring to other scholars, such as Guudain Tumurchuluun, Soni expresses concern about the possible growth of China's geopolitical interests in Mongolia against the background of a retreating Russia. At the same time, he mentions the improvement of Russia-Mongolia cooperation after 2000 and China's preference for a stable northern neighbour able to contribute to its 'peaceful rise'. However, he does not comment on the implications of Mongolia's small population in the face of increasing numbers of Chinese migrants, an issue made more urgent in light of new legislation regulating the possession of lands by foreigners.⁴

Soni's book is free of Cold War bias (in favour of one block or the other) and politicisation, and, despite its shortcomings, should be appreciated by Mongolists, especially as it represents the new generation of energetic researchers in Asia relative to the general decline of Mongol studies in Europe. As the author is very adept at presenting data from various sources to expound upon the vast theme of Sino-Mongolian relations, his most welcome volume can also be recommended as basic literature on the topic for a wide audience.

Irina Morozova has been an IIAS Fellow since 2003. Currently, she is working on the project 'Transformation of Political Elites in Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, 1924-2007: a comparative historical analysis', sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies in Hamburg. She is a researcher and lecturer at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Institute of Asian and African Studies.

imoroz@xs4all.nl

Notes

- i Atwood, Christopher P. 2002. *Young Mongols and Vigilantes in Inner Mongolia's Interregnum Decades, 1911-1931*. Vol. 1, 2. Leiden: Brill.
- ii Luzianin, Sergey G. 2000. *Rossiya – Mongoliya – Kitai v pervoi polovine XX veka. Politicheskie vzaimootnosheniya v 1911-1946 gg.* Moscow: IDV RAN; Barkmann, Udo B. 2001. *Die Beziehungen zwischen der Mongolei und der VR China (1952-1996)*. Hamburg: Mittelungen des Instituts für Asienkunde.
- iii Radchenko, Sergey. 2006. 'Mongolian Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War: The 1964 Coup Attempt and the Sino-Soviet Split'. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8-1:95-119.
- iv Rossabi, Morris. 2004. 'Communist and Post-Communist Mongolian Law and Pasture Land'. Johnson, Wallace and Irina Popova, eds. *Central Asian Law: An Historical Overview*. Topeka, Kansas: Society for Asian Legal History, University of Kansas.