Mongolia has long been a bone of contention between Russia and China. Russia historically has seen Mongolia as a buffer state, whereas China historically has seen Mongolia as part of China. Although Mongolia has achieved varying levels of independence since 1911, subsequent political instability and war in both China and Russia—and Mongolia's current geopolitical position between both countries—complicates relations among all three.

When Russia pushed into the Far East and China pushed its domination north of the Great Wall in the early twentieth century, Mongolia became an arena of the “Great Game”—the struggle for empire between China and Russia. Mongolia's leader at the time, the Jebtsundamba (holy venerable lord) Khutukhtu (1874–1924), called Mongolia's geopolitical position a “critical condition, like piled up eggs, in the midst of neighboring nations.”

Russia historically has regarded Mongolia as a buffer state, whereas China historically has regarded Mongolia as part of China. But after the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912) fell, Mongolia asserted—and has since preserved—its independence as a nation in the midst of two great powers. Russia's policy initially strove to preserve Mongolian autonomy, but it did not support Mongolian independence in order to maintain China-Russia relations and not alarm Japan. After 1917 the Soviet Union eventually did support Mongolian independence but was not firm in that support. China, however, persistently tried to absorb Mongolia into the new Chinese nation.

1911 Revolution and Mongolian Independence

After the Chinese revolution in October 1911, Mongolia declared independence in December 1911 and proclaimed the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu leader of the independent Mongolian nation. Mongolia had enjoyed a special relationship with the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912) court, and Mongolians believed that Mongolia was not an integral part of China. China maintained that Mongolia was indeed an integral part of the country but did not have the military strength to force the integration of Mongolia into the new Chinese republic.

Russia's czarist government also was debating policy toward Mongolia. Russia had not recognized the independence of Mongolia but was providing Urga—as the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar, then was called—military, political, and financial support. In Japanese-Russian negotiations as early as 1907 Russia considered partitioning Mongolia into inner and outer zones, with Japanese and Russian spheres of influence, respectively. During the period from 1911 to 1915 Mongolia, Russia, and China held convoluted negotiations, including
secret bilateral talks, and did much military posturing, which in June 1915 resulted in a tripartite agreement that gave the broadest possible autonomy for outer Mongolia and would make possible its eventual total independence from China. The agreement included provisions on taxes, trade, and other matters but no boundary agreement, but a neutral zone was established between outer and inner Mongolia.

China rejected the agreement after the 1917 Russian revolution, and under pressure from China the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu in November 1919 petitioned for the abolition of Mongolia's autonomy, a petition with which China gladly complied. But the reassertion of Chinese control of Mongolia did not last long: Mongolia became a battlefield during the Russian civil war, and the White Russians (anti-Bolsheviks) drove the Chinese from Urga in 1921, only to be defeated themselves by the Bolsheviks.

**Mongolian People’s Republic**

With the blessings of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu and the Soviet Union, Mongolian revolutionaries established a Marxist regime in Urga in 1921. But the Soviet Union, like czarist Russia, continued to view Mongolia as a bargaining chip in its dealings with China. The Soviet Union in May 1924 recognized China’s “full sovereignty” over outer Mongolia. A month later, however, after the death of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, Mongolia declared
its independence as the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR). China’s own internal problems kept it from reasserting control over Mongolia; the most that China could do was protest the Soviet-Mongolian agreements.

At the Yalta Conference two decades later Mongolian independence was bolstered when the Allied powers agreed that the status quo in Mongolia should be preserved after the war. After a plebiscite (a vote by which the people of a country express an opinion for or against a proposal especially on a choice of government or ruler) in Mongolia overwhelmingly favored independence, the Chinese Nationalist government grudgingly recognized Mongolia’s independence in 1946.

**Quest for Influence**

China’s Communists also were reluctant to recognize Mongolia’s independence and harbored irredentist sentiments. (Irredentism is political or state policy directed toward reincorporating a territory that was historically or ethnically related to that state but which has fallen under the control of another.) Even before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in a January–February 1949 meeting with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s personal liaison to the Chinese Communists, Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) raised the question of the Soviet Union’s attitude concerning the unification of outer and inner Mongolia.

Mao again raised the question with Stalin directly while in Moscow in February 1950. Mao expressed his desire for the eventual “reunion” of Mongolia with China, but he did not let his irredentist dreams prevent the conclusion of a Sino-Soviet treaty. The Soviet Union and MPR were uneasy about China’s ambitions in Mongolia and demanded that China acknowledge Mongolia’s independence.

In spite of that declaration, in October 1954 China raised the question again during the first visit Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchov (1894–1971) made to China after the death of Stalin. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (1868–1976), under great pressure from Mao, reluctantly raised the issue with Khrushchov. According to Khrushchov’s memoirs, he declined to speak for Mongolia but did not voice strong opposition. Although the Soviet Union may have refused to reconsider the status of the MPR, it did acquiesce to China’s assuming a more dominant role in Mongolia.

Soviet complacency over China’s ambitions in Mongolia soon turned to alarm as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s. The Soviet Union responded to the Chinese challenge, and Mongolia was caught in the middle of the Soviet-Chinese dispute. Mongolia’s initial wish was to remain neutral, and one official said the Soviet-Chinese dispute would not affect Mongolia’s relations with China or the Soviet Union. But Mongolia’s precarious geopolitical situation made it impossible to remain neutral for long. Mongolia took a pro-Soviet position after the open split between China and the Soviet Union occurred at the Twenty-second Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Congress in October 1961. In June 1962 Mongolia became the first Asian state to become a full member of the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). This move was a clear indication that Mongolia would closely cooperate with the Soviet Union to the exclusion of China.

China, in its attempt to gain influence in Ulaanbaatar, appealed to Mongolian nationalism. In 1962, during the commemoration of the eight hundredth anniversary of Mongolian conqueror Chinggis (also spelled Genghis) Khan’s birth, Mongolia dedicated a statue at a location believed to have been his birthplace. China also celebrated the birthday and supported Mongolia’s festivities. China, with both racist and nationalistic overtones, characterized Chinggis Khan as a positive “cultural force.” The Soviets, not surprisingly, criticized the celebrations, characterizing Chinggis Khan as a reactionary “who had overrun, looted, and burned most of what was then Russia” and saying that his “bloody invasions” were a “great historical tragedy” (Hersch 1963, 1).

**Current Situation**

On 16 December 1962 China announced that Mongolian leader Tsedenbal (1916–1991) would come to Beijing to sign a treaty to settle the boundary. After demarcating the boundary, a treaty was signed in Ulaanbaatar on 2 July 1964. The agreement closed a long chapter in Mongolian-Chinese relations. But in spite of the treaty China and Mongolia remain sensitive about their historical relationship.
Mongolia-China-Russia relations entered a new period in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mongolia conducted a peaceful transition to democracy and a multiparty political system. This newfound independence re-invigorated Mongolian nationalism. China and Russia still control parts of historical Mongolia, and pan-Mongolian sentiments are somewhat alarming. China is sensitive to the growing popular influence of Mongolia on its Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and represses any expression of Mongolian nationalism among Chinese Mongols.

Geopolitics remains a concern. Russia needs Mongolia to act as a buffer to shield it from China as China becomes an economic and military power. And the legacy of the Chinese empire apparently lingers in the minds of some Chinese: China’s State Security Ministry in 1992 revived the specter of Chinese irredentism when it said: “As of now, the Mongolian region comprises three parts that belong to three countries”—the Russian regions of Tuva and Buryatia, Mongolia, and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region—but “the Mongolian region has from ancient times been Chinese territory” (China stakes a claim to all of the Mongolias, 1992).

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Further Reading


China stakes a claim to all of the Mongolias. (1992, April 30). *International Herald Tribune*.


