Policy Forum 11-27: Biden Time in Mongolia

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Biden Time in Mongolia

By Stephen Noerper

August 25, 2011

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction

Stephen Noerper, a former professor of international relations at New York University and the National University of Mongolia, provides an overview of Joe Biden's recent visit to Mongolia. He writes, “Surprisingly the great lessons of the U.S. Vice President’s journey lie more with Mongolia than larger China or Japan—at least this time around.”

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II. Article by Stephen Noerper

- Biden Time in Mongolia

By Stephen Noerper

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's stop in Mongolia is more than simply that. Though the pictures of the mini-*nadam*, replete with archery and wrestling, provide a cheery and exotic backdrop, the message conveyed by the Vice Presidential visit is significant. Aside from thanking Mongolian President Elebegdorj and Prime Minister Batbold for troop support in Iraq and Afghanistan, Biden applauded Mongolia for its twenty years of transition to democracy and leadership among young democracies in a region woefully in need of them. Biden arrived from China, the world's largest *non*-democracy, and in saluting China's neighbor to the north, the U.S. Vice President took a bold stand on this, the day when Tripoli appeared to rid itself of a forty-year dictator, part of the broader Jasmine Revolution. The Arab Spring is the descendent of the earlier wave that saw democracy embraced by nations like Mongolia, whose current President was a leader of the peaceful democratic movement, and Korea. To that end, it is no small matter that South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak is in the Mongolian capitol the same day as Biden, a reminder of the benefits of democracies reinforcing democracies, politically and economically.

Biden's visit highlighted the growing economic investment in Mongolia, which saw U.S. firm Peabody Energy among bidders selected to develop the Tavan Tolgoi coal deposit. And with Mongolia on course to have the world's highest GDP growth given its wealth of mineral and other resources, U.S. investment need grow—an option altogether attractive to a Mongolia seeking to diversify its contracts beyond its large and often stifling neighbors Russia and China.

Mongolia is young; it is dynamic. And it is politically significant as a harbinger of democracy to an autocratic Central Asia to its west, a less-than-liberal democracy in Russia to the North, and a self-isolated, totalitarian North Korea to its east. Interestingly and uniquely, Mongolia maintains relations with both North Korea and South Korea, and to that end, it is a far more appropriate transitional model for North Korea than China, which North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il has visited three times in two years or Russia, where the North Korean leader finds himself this week. That Kim Jong-Il will likely sit down with Russian President Medvedev in Ulan Ude is interesting; that area, just north of Mongolia, is of *buryat* (Russian Mongolian) culture. Perhaps both leaders might do well to stop and reflect on Mongolia's transitional experience.

Mongolia has enjoyed a long-line of senior U.S. visits, to include prior to Biden's, that of U.S. President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Albright, First Lady Clinton, and Secretary of State Baker. Supreme Court Justice O'Connor visited my class during my tenure at the National University of Mongolia, charming an enthralled audience with her tales of riding horses from a young age and having to travel great distances to school in the American Southwest. As with Biden, her pleasantries accompanied a significant message of the need for a strong judiciary and other democratic institutions.

Before his departure, Biden was presented a horse to name, a traditional honorific. He granted it the name *Celtic* in honor of his lineage; it is also a heritage sometimes compared to Mongolians and Koreans, who like the Irish, are known for their tenacity, as well as rich musical and literary traditions. And most importantly for the international community and for international investors, Mongolia offers the richness of its democratic consolidation, institutions and opportunity, alongside a need for continued development and growth.

Surprisingly the great lessons of the U.S. Vice President's journey lie more with Mongolia than larger China or Japan—at least this time around.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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