

Policy Forum 09-050: Mongolia and the International Community

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Mongolia and the International Community

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By Stephen Noerper

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I. Introduction

Stephen Noerper, Senior Fellow, Asia, at the EastWest Institute and Senior Associate of the Nautilus Institute, writes, "As a refreshing alternative to tussles with a bellicose North Korea, oft labeled a hermit, the United States should applaud Mongolia, the horseman of North Asia. Mongolia has listened to international requests, embraced its responsibilities and grown itself as one of the region's more vibrant locales."

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II. Article by Stephen Noerper

- "Mongolia and the International Community"
By Stephen Noerper

With this week's visit to Washington, DC by Mongolian Foreign Minister S. Batbold and swearing-in next week of President Ts. Elbegdorj, it is time for the United States to re-evaluate and up its relationship with this democratic stalwart bridging East and West. Mongolia has emerged in less than two decades as a vibrant, if not complicated, democracy, and stands worthy of enhanced United States and international attention and support. With its rich cultural and historical legacy, literate population and abundant natural resources, Mongolia has achieved steady economic growth and stands as a model of reform to North Korea to the east and the autocratic Stans to the west. Mongolia also is wedged strategically between a resurgent Russia and a rising China and borders a burgeoning Northeast Asia, the world's economic powerhouse, and an expanding and, post 9-11, strategically viable Central Asia.

In its own right, Mongolia offers the international community a view of how a successful, relatively young democracy should appear. Compared to many other nations, Mongolia has progressed remarkably well. Yet too, its fragility in consolidation, highlighted by a need for governmental capacity, institutional and media reinforcement, reminds us of the responsibility of the United States and international community to better assist Mongolia and advance it on a path it deserves high praise for pursuing.

Mongolia is an outstanding global citizen. It led the newly emerging and restored democracies effort early in the decade, hosted United Nations dialogue on human security, supported international peacekeeping efforts, sited a major regional peacekeeping initiative, and offered itself as a venue for talks on easing tensions on the Korean peninsula, notable given its good relations with both North and South Korea. Foreign Minister Batbold in Washington has emphasized this week opportunities aimed at energy and economic cooperation, as well as on Korea.

Aside from facilitating dialogue on Korea, Mongolia also has pushed its nuclear weapons-free zone approach, significant in prohibiting the transport of fissile materials across its vast territory, this with nuclear powers to the north and south, and as an exemplar for the Korean peninsula. The United States and international community should emphasize to nuclear proliferators Mongolia's path as it weighs sanctions and harsher measures in the light of recent events.

Politically, Mongolia has seen vibrant elections since transition in 1990. These have been notable for high voter turnout, remarkable for the vast distances that some travel to cast ballots. The system is not without flaws, as personality politics and accusations of corruption, influence peddling and undue influence on the judiciary have played out. For the United States and the international community, such controversy shines a spotlight on the need to support judicial reform and the effective emergence of a system of checks and balances and heightened institutional capacity. The international community also has been slow to realize the complexity within the two major parties and to play toward the reformers in both and beyond. The U.S. and international community also should consider the role of shock therapy measures introduced in the 1990s; those measures resulted in a lack of transparency in sell-offs and land reform, weak institutions and the emergence of a foundation for a system whereby a small elite controls disproportionate resources and a large population of poor are without basic services. The social implications of the growing rich-poor gap

are enormous.

Yet for all the fears of democratic rollback in Russia, Central Asia and elsewhere in post-socialist systems, Mongolians have embraced choice; an active, vocal, and sensible civil society has emerged, and Mongolians value choice.

Mongolia too is increasingly active in the regional and global economies and is increasingly interconnected. Internet cafes abound, and urban cable boasts connectivity to multiple channels in some dozen countries. With a young, literate and polyglot population, Mongolia sometimes feels less like a Northeast Asian outpost and more like the Netherlands, Belgium or a Chinese or Korean small city.

In spite of these pluses, Americans have been less than steady investors. Post-transition, Mongolians expected heady U.S. investment, but Russia, China, the European Union, Japan and Korea are more dominant investors in Mongolia. It is time to open necessary doors to stimulate the Mongolian-U.S. economic relationship.

This week, Foreign Minister Batbold had the unfortunate task in Washington of informing U.S. Secretary of State Clinton that Mongolia would need to re-direct \$188 million in U.S. infrastructure development aid aimed at rail improvement -- part of the \$285 million Millennium Challenge grant awarded in 2007 -- given Russian objections. Russia has a fifty percent stake in the railway.

This should concern Americans, as Mongolia finds itself more vulnerable to the influence associated with foreign moneys, especially from Russia and China, which jockey to secure preferential controls in vital extractive industries and within joint ventures. Mongolia struggles with these trade-offs, and to this end the United States and its foreign business community could do well by assisting Mongolia in its strategic diversification.

We should remember this as Mongolia continues on its democratic path and swears in President Ts. Elbegdorj, who studied at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. President Elbegdorj rides into office on an Obama-like pledge to provide Mongolians change they can believe in and grow their living standards. Remarkable too was the quick concession of his opponent, President N. Enkhbayar, who realized that not doing so might result in political violence like that that flared in July 2008. This week, Enkhbayar pardoned women and youth embroiled in last summer's unusual violence. Both sides deserve credit for this smooth transition of democratic power.

In congratulating Mongolia's new President, the Obama Administration should offer a frank but positive assessment of developments in Mongolia. In his addresses in Egypt and Turkey and having studied as a boy in Indonesia, President Obama shows an inclination toward understanding "straddle" countries and their roles in building bridges between East and West. As a refreshing alternative to tussles with a bellicose North Korea, oft labeled a hermit, the United States should applaud Mongolia, the horseman of North Asia. Mongolia has listened to international requests, embraced its responsibilities and grown itself as one of the region's more vibrant locales. Such a move by Washington would be a most fitting response to the forces of despotism, hostility and nuclear proliferation that have challenged the international arena of late.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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