

Mongolia's Regional 'Affiliation' : An Out-Dated Question (?)

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The traveller or visitor to Mongolia is inevitably confronted by the question of the country's infra-regional setting. He or she may be tempted, in the morning, to be convinced that the answer is, with the rising sun, that Mongolia belongs to eastern Asia. 'Affiliation', a word that stems from the same (latin) root as 'son' or daughter' (*filius*) would then suggest that the country of the Khans is the offspring of the land that looks towards the Pacific Ocean.

However, come the *post-meridiem* hours, the same traveller, having listened to the legends of nomadic life and having blended them with the tales of other nomadic Eurasian peoples, might as easily be convinced that Mongolia lies in Central Asia.

While the question lingers on, the continent is changing ...

And thus the issue is probably less that of the 'locating' of Mongolia than the understanding of changes affecting the continent.

East Asia exists, indeed, but as a neo-dynamic that brings together southeast Asia (ASEAN) and northeast Asia (ASEAN '+') into an East Asia Summit since 2005. Central Asia also exists but as a post-soviet dynamic which, together with China, makes up "the SCO sino-postsoviet (new) Asia" since 1996/2001.

Having become aware of this innovative fact, our dear traveller, still, cannot rest. For the 'new Asia' is now an entity with two additional southern-Asian SCO-partners -India and Pakistan, hence a total of 19 SCO-affiliates, and ... a shore of additional innovations, ranging from a conference on trust-

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building in the continent (CICA), a military cooperation (CSTO) having stemmed out of the CIS, a cultural cooperation around Muslim nations (OIC), as well as many better-known (in the west) attempts at bringing some infra-regional nations together as in south Asia, such as SAARC, ...

Mongolia, eternally, is Mongolia and will be located where she is, by geography, culture and history. But the *perception* and also the *meaning* of that location are changing.

From a centralizing and tantalizing *Pax Mongolica* to a sovietised and marginalized fate, then to a re-localised and liberated northeast Asia in the late 20th century, Mongolia is now a fully-fledged continental actor, topically this year (2016) by hosting the ASEM Summit. Mongolia is an actor whose ‘meaning’ takes over her ‘essence’.

This will be analysed from the viewpoints of modernity (I) and of humanity (II).

I - Mongolia, a resolutely modern actor in a position to influence the new Asia

There probably cannot be an understanding of Mongolia without the acceptance of the simple fact that both continental and national issues are fast changing. Without negating the relevance of the past, one should accept that the ‘meaning’ of Mongolia today is a topic of the future, not a ‘reminiscence’ of the past. Simplistic as it may sound, this is a reality that differs from China and Russia, possible also from Korea; but not from central Asia.

Mongolia *and central Asia* are changing faster. Whether this is an intuitive or a reasoned statement will become clear in the course of this contribution to the conference.

1) a link-territory part of a (logistical) chain

VERIFICATION Discussion of Mongolia’s affiliation often focuses on the sub-region to which the country would ascribe. There exists, however, another possible way to tackle the issue, perhaps a more innovative way. Mongolia’s status as land-locked is also evolving, not just its geographical and political affiliation. To be sure, the land-locked position of Mongolia

is not likely to change (!) but the 'qualitative' meaning of that situation is evolving from its 'objective' perception. In short, the evolution is one that takes the 'locked-in' status into a status as a 'link-territory'.

- a. As to the 'land-locked' status, some evolution has taken place but only seemingly marginal. Before 1992, Mongolia was thousands of kilometres away (beyond the USSR and the PRC) from any third neighbour : Afghanistan and south Asia were four thousand kilometres away; Korea was and still is two thousand kilometres away. After 1992, still land-locked, Mongolia is now only forty kilometres away from Kazakhstan. These forty kilometres of Sino-Russian border separate the western tip of Mongolia from the north-eastern tip of Kazakhstan, and Mongolia is still land-locked. However, the logistical east-west corridors are developing, not least between China and her 'new west' (central Asia) as well as potentially from the Caspian Sea area to the 'far' east, *via* Mongolia (in addition to *via* China and Russia). So, things are changing from a time when, apart from the Irkutsk-Beijing rail-link, Mongolia was little 'connected' even to the continental transport grid.
- b. As a 'link-territory', Mongolia is becoming more and more intricately connected to the continental transport :
 - b1). logistics matters first and foremost. Concretely, Mongolia still has to develop her transport grid, especially along latitudes, i.e. east to west and west to east. This need is hurdled by difficult climatic and geomorphological givens but it remains a need to fulfil. This will become easier as rail- and road transport (as well as pipelines) is developed on the scale of the broad region, linking east Asia to central Asia and western Asia. This means that, as the existing trans-siberian rail-way system is being modernised, decision-makers would be well-advised to build a subsidiary rail-link through Mongolia east to west that will diversify rail links through Russia and China and facilitate exports/imports from/to Mongolia.
 - b2). diplomacy plays also its full part. Diplomatically, as will be detailed in part II, Mongolia has been impressively active through the post-cold war periods. Rapid perfecting of relations with China has

coincided in time with the opening of air links, first from Ulaanbaatar to Moscow and Europe, then to Beijing, Seoul, etc. Today, the new silk roads are boosted from China and Inner Mongolia to Mongolia and Eurasia. Additionally - and as a free academic, I may venture to say this - Mongolia is an ideal credibility to help mediate and solve the Korean peninsula's search for stability (see *infra* II).

Thus, to be a link-territory has two meanings, one concrete and physical, one political and diplomatic. What is at stake is the transformation of a characteristic long-considered as a handicap (to be landlocked) into an asset (to be a transit partner). What is true of Mongolia is also true of a number of other countries, for instance Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan ... This is the reason why this article focuses on change and investment for the future and does not dwell on the past and inherited legacies of geographical constraints. Historical determinants as well as geographical determinants play a part but, in a world of fast-changing agreements and commercial diplomacy, a part that is no longer geared to making exchanges difficult.

Mongolia, in this sense, illustrates, among a number of thriving examples, how change in history and politics can affect geographical situations that remain unchanged. Nomadism also applies to space, a space where movements matter as *essential* movements : a 'moving territory' of sorts, where these characteristics become assets. A lowly populated territory, with about one inhabitant per kilometre squared, a comparatively level geomorphology, except in the west and north-west, are conducive to Mongolia, as a link-territory, to serve indeed as an exchange space between east-Asia and west-Asia, for the benefit also of China and Russia.

Geography can only serve diplomacy (2)

2) an active diplomacy able to 'solve' east Asia

Mongolia, as a territory and a nation, is crucial in yet another manner. Located near zones of tension, namely the Korean peninsula, she plays a tremendously important role. Mongolia's main asset here is legitimacy. What is legitimacy ? The complex answer to this question is found in Max Weber's *Economy and Society* and declined in three types of legitimacy-authority (traditional, legal-rational, charismatic). A more simple answer is that legitimacy points to acceptability and credibility. Mongolia's diplomats

are credible in the continental balance of power as a middle-nation, and Mongolia's foreign policy is well accepted by her neighbours.

For better or worse (mainly worse), the Asian continent has been marred and maimed, for decades now, by a series of 'great' games. Past the cold war and its Soviet-Chinese-US triangle, Asia has been caught up in the new competition between China and the US, the innovated Sino-Russian 'rivalry without tension', the on-going China-India uneasy acceptance (resolved now in the SCO ?), in a context where Japan and then Korea (south) made their way up to economic pretence as an on-par level with the largest countries neighbouring them. In all these dynamics, Mongolia has remained a middle-power, much vaster than East Asia's Korea or Japan, much less populated than China, and much less militarised than Russia.

These characteristics have conferred upon Mongolia a dual advantage. First, the country has been able to develop, in the post-soviet years, a stable, independent, well-constructed foreign policy, notably but not exclusively, around the concept of third-neighbours. Second, Mongolia has avoided giving the immediate neighbours any impression of ambitioning to acquire a challenging capacity to 'balance power' on the continent. On the contrary, Ulaanbaatar has focused on stabilising the domestic, democratic transition as well as on rebuilding its economic sectors (mining, tourism, etc.). Yet, to be sure, the first decade following the Soviet-Russian transition was difficult for Mongolia, additionally because of several severe *Dzugs* (or natural hardships due to the climate - exceptionally cold winters).

Despite these difficulties, Mongolia has been playing a role noteworthy of relevance, in a number of aspects affecting directly the region (and Chinese and Russian advantages). Ulaanbaatar negotiated and obtained from the UN a status as nuclear-weapons-free-zone (a one-country zone !), bypassing very skilfully its extreme land-locked situation. Further, Mongolia negotiated the reopening of a north Korean embassy (closed in 1992 in protest by north Korea of the Mongolian normalisation of relations with south Korea). Further still, Mongolia not only negotiated the opening up of air links, after Moscow, with two more Asian capitals - Beijing and Seoul - but also a number of trade agreements with European, Asian, Pacific and American countries.

All in all, Mongolia built, through all these steps, a capacity to act or at least to be consulted and approached for mediation purposes, as a middle-power. Located perhaps far from the Afghan tragedy to play a role there (but foreign contingents there included Mongolian soldiers - 114, sent in 2009), Mongolia is ideally placed to play a part in the Korean reconciliation. As one of the very few countries to host nowadays two Korean embassies (North again since 2007; South since 1992 - only China has two, among regional nations), Mongolia can (and probably has for some time) welcome inter-Korean talks, secret or not, as the only means to make progress in the reconciliation and one day unification of the peninsula (**한반도통일**). Mongolian diplomats are well-versed in difficult direct negotiations for Mongolia. They can only do well in indirect negotiations around Mongolia.

For that to happen, of course, for tangible progress to be made towards reconciliation on the peninsula, the major step must come from the two Koreas. The South could tilt its foreign policy one degree or more *from* alignment on the Pacific (American) dimension. The North could consider options to *benefit* from reconciliation and unification more than from tensions. The Chinese factor is subtle : if a unified peninsula would be in China's interest, it is to be naturally a des-aligned peninsula, which goes back to all of the above-points. There is no room, here, to demonstrate how unification would be more logical than division (a division caused less by the cold war than by the longer-dating 'instrumentalisation' of Korea).

However, what is clear is that not only progress towards unification of Korea would serve the whole continent of Asia (notably for logistical purposes - *Cf* above I-1) but it would be a progress towards which Mongolian diplomacy's help would seem so natural. A diplomacy obviously capable to help 'solve' tensions in the east of the continent.

Diplomats are able individuals (II).

II - Mongols, a dynamising human key to the 'asianisation' of solutions

Historians have long endeavoured to uncover the essence or the "motor" of humanity and its developments and evolutions : for instance, F. Braudel around a region (the Mediterranean) or K. Marx and M. Weber

around a concept (the economic 'motor' of societal evolutions). As to Mongolia, that 'motor' is Mongols. The human factor strikes any visitor or traveller to Mongolia as the key one. This is due not mainly - nowadays - to the charisma of Genkis Khan; it relates to the extraordinary, communicative warmth of Mongols, among themselves, with foreign visitors and as professionals.

Mongols are the main factor of change of the country and this can have a bearing on the region. Again, both intuitively and reasonably, this is a postulate well worthy of exploration in this paper.

1) the likely shift to central Eurasia

Indeed, the question of the location/affiliation of Mongolia in Asia (Cf. I) is not all. Another question exists, even more delicate. Are Mongols and (other) central Asians 'cousins'? This is a delicate question not because of history or geography : Mongols have substantially peopled Asia (from Korea to Turkey) and that is accepted as a fact. Turkik languages with a similar syntax and grammar attest this, and even so within the broader family of Uralo-Altai languages.

It is delicate for reasons to do with contemporary perceptions of cultures and identities. Travelling to Korea, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, etc., one knows how close in attitudes, mentalities and humour these 'cousins' are. Yet, the mutual acknowledgement of this fact by these 'cousins' themselves is difficult.

Why this is the case is for Mongols and (other) central Asians to sort out. In Europe, fundamental dimensions are also sometimes difficult to acknowledge, such as the southern or (better said) Mediterranean culture that brings together Romanic nations, Greeks and Turks as well as 'Orientals' from Alep to Fez. But, however difficult, this modern identity-'proximisation' is necessary. Mongols and 'cousins' form the human arch (east to west) reaching between Sinic nations, Slavic nations and south-eastern Asian nations. That is a fact too. A cultural fact and, of course, but this is easier to acknowledge, a geopolitical fact (the "new Asia" is sino-postsoviet : fully integrative of central Asia and, recently, of south Asia). This fact will feed, sooner or later, into the final construction of the post-cold war Asia.

What this entails needs time to clarify, given the slow nature of human constructs when it comes to mutual identity-building or rebuilding. Institutions can be ‘created’ - by ‘decree’ almost. Cultures and identities need time. However, the timescale involved is probably the lifespan of a generation at least. The author of this text, when first travelling to central Asia was surprised to hear two manners, then, for locals to refer to their identity : middle-aged generations presented their identity as ‘post-soviet’ [sic]; younger generations spoke of a ‘European’ identity. Today, way beyond these two perceptions, what is definitely mentioned as identity is ‘kazakh’, ‘uzbek’, ‘kirghiz’, etc. This shift took place over about one generation.

Similarly, the innocent and naive traveller, meaning well, can suggest to central Asians and Mongols that, precisely, they share so much by way of a (nomadic) culture, that they ought to share more, build a region, and develop a common identity. The spontaneous answer, often, is ‘we are not interested’, ‘we are too different’. Yet, when brought together, for example in academic conferences, central Asians (Kazakhs, and Mongols !, Kirghizs, ...) discover, every time, so much in common that they spontaneously develop cooperation. They seem intrigued ! but the European (distant) cousin is not surprised at all. Mentalities and cultures and identities are what brings people together.

The European example, furthermore, shows that religion does not dominate identity issues regionally. Whatever form a ‘shift’ of Mongolia towards central Asia would take, without renouncing the east-Asian connections (Mongolia is a link; Koreans too are cousins), religion would not be a hurdle. Predominantly bouddhist Mongols (but a number of muslim Kazakhs live in Mongolia) and predominantly muslim central Asians (but a number of christians, jews and others live in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, ...) would not let religion come in the way of strategic region-building. Europeans, west-Africans, southern Asians have not. Geo-strategy is about political interests, not religion. But, above strategy, there is the feeling of ‘belonging together’ which predominates. This feeling brings England closer to America as maritime powers than to continental Europe (even before the “Brexit”...).

The suggestion - always 'impossible' ! - by a non-Asian that such a tilt of Mongolia towards central Asia is 'likely' would be rejected immediately as both preposterous and arrogant if it weren't for Asians' tolerance towards foreigners ... Thank you for allowing me to speak freely. I have felt the possibility of speaking freely since my first professional travels to the region : in Mongolia since 2003, in Kazakhstan since 2004, etc. Suggestions are only that : suggestions, based on intuitive perceptions. They may be wrong. Time will prove them founded or senseless. However, so much more has brought Mongols and central Asians together in their common cultural and intellectual history than could at present keep them apart as *east-Asia Vs central-Asia*, as a continent.

2) the possible continentalisation of the sea

As a link-territory (*Cf. I-1*) served by diplomacy (*Cf. I-2*) and by its congenial people (*Cf. II-1*), Mongolia is in a unique position in the continent. Land-locked nations can actually 'inspire' a continent more deeply than nations with access to the sea. Of course, to suggest that a land-locked country can participate in the continentalisation *of the sea* might seem far-fetched to some colleagues. The point is that the two countries land-locking Mongolia (China and Russia) are two continental countries with a longing to dominate also the sea. Russia started in the 16th-19th centuries and is today keeping a firm grasp on the Baltic, Black and Okhotsk seas. China, after a stammering attempt in the 13th century, confirmed this in the 20th century and is not only developing a grasp on the 'asian Mediterranean' (Y. Lacoste) -the southern China sea - but also contributing to the mapping-out of the Indian ocean with deep-sea harbours being built, with the help of China, on the coasts of Pakistan and Sri Lanka ...

All these new developments need time to clarify. There is also a need to clarify Mongolia's role. The easiest manner to illustrate these trends, at least the shortest manner, is to highlight that China is *concomitantly* pressing for a (main) continental new silk-road (NSR) *and* for a maritime one-belt road (OBR) to contain it all. The continental NSR will necessarily include passage via Mongolia (to diversify Chinese routes without giving too much leeway to Russia) and via Kazakhstan, and 'prolonging' countries towards western Eurasia : Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey ... This is a novel situation, itself the consequence of a preceding new situation :

- 2a) the preceding new situation is the sino-russian construction of the new Asia, that is to say China and Russia together for the first time in history, and also with central Asia, as a territorial *continuum* from east-Asia to Europe. This is changing the Eurasian continental dynamic completely for, before this sino-russian construction, Eurasia was split between two competing spheres of influence - Chinese, Russian - with even high tensions for thirty-five years 1956-1991. The de-freezing of the tensions is changing the panorama quite thoroughly.
- 2b) the novel situation is the emphasis laid upon logistics and transport beyond a mere modernisation of the trans-siberian rail network in *complement* to the maritime routes. Vast Eurasian corridors of transport from the Chinese shores to the European *hinterland*, along two networks (the northern one via Russia and north of the Caspian; the southern one via Kazakhstan and south of the Caspian) are becoming a means to secure transcontinental transport *away from* US/Japan control of the security of the sea lanes.

Again, sceptics will point out that land transport can never compete against sea-transport. And this is true from shore to shore : from east-Asia to west-Europe. However, with western China, middle Russia and the chain of delivery hubs along the way to eastern Europe (deliveries in all central Asia, in northern Iran, in the south Caucasus, the Gulf even, and certainly to the eastern and southern Mediterranean nations), such a vast reorganisation of Eurasian transport by land is opening up new dynamics whereby a 'junction' is realised between east Asia and Europe *bypassing* a number of sea options. Even if this continental network will take up years to be built/ finalised and even though on-going tensions (north Korean Ukraine, even Syria) cast a shadow upon the stability necessary to reorganisations of that magnitude, at least one can and must say that the land/sea balance is being thought-up anew.

The time has come, in this brief paper, to draw our reflexion to a close. The starting point was Mongolia but with an out-dated question - where does Mongolia belong ? - with an explicit but also out-dated answer - Mongolia belongs either/or to east Asia *or* to central Asia. The concluding point will be that Mongolia is a central actor to new dynamics; that its

land-locked situation is turning into a 'linking-territorial' *advantage*. In the past, both China's and Russia's domination were a risk for Mongolia's margin of manoeuvre - and a sino-russian alliance would have tolled the end of Mongolia's independence. Today, the sino-russian-*centralasian* construction of the new Asia is, by necessity, placing Mongolia (and Kazakhstan,...) at the heart of it. And that is new. Middle powers are part of an arc of reinforcement (from Mongolia to Iran and Turkey) : reinforcement of the new Asia (reinforcement, not competition with/against russo-chinese entente of sorts).

Conclusion - It takes a little imagination (and bold postulating) to reach such a conclusion but analysis must integrate novelty if it is *not* to become stale. Why analyse (tentatively) the continental fate of Mongolia (or that of any nation) *as if history could stop repeating itself*, as if history *was also a question of innovation* ? The question of the 'affiliation' of Mongolia is ill-asked. Affiliation to what ? To a (sub)-continent that is changing so characteristically that it is not really the continent that was, for so long, perceived by the rest of the world (Europe) as 'far'. The euro-centric concept of the 'far-east' is today one that brings smiles on faces and that is no longer taken seriously. Indeed, the Middle-East and Europe have become "west Asia", quite a striking change in perspective and perception. (written up on 27 June 2016, revised on 31 July 2016) - © P. Chabal & IAMS.