

Carving up the Steppes: Borders, Territory and Nationalism in Mongolia, 1943-1949

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In August 2005 the Mongolian government resolved to take down the red-marble mausoleum in front of the Government Palace in Ulaanbaatar, which had since the 1950s housed the remains of the hero of Mongolia's revolution Sukhbaatar and its long-time ruler Choibalsan, rebury both at the Altan-Ulgii cemetery on the outskirts of town, and build a massive complex in honor of Chinggis Khaan in the mausoleum's place. The complex, complete with a larger-than-life statue of Chinggis Khaan upon a throne, was hastily built to coincide with the 800th anniversary of the Mongol Empire, becoming one of the most visible manifestations of the Chinggis craze, which has swept Mongolia in recent years. Marshal Khorloogiin Choibalsan, whose sour, determined appearance in a military tunic adorned with rows of medals, was once familiar to just about every man and woman within the borders of the Soviet-dominated Mongolian People's Republic, had now been crossed out of public memory, and blotted out by the long shadow of Chinggis Khaan. Yet Choibalsan shared a trait with Chinggis: both wanted to unite the Mongol peoples. Still, Choibalsan failed where Chinggis Khaan succeeded. So Chinggis was placed on the throne in the central square, while Choibalsan's remains were shelved away out of sight and, for most Mongols, out of mind.

Choibalsan's unrealized dream was to bring all the peoples of the Mongol stock under one roof. The tides of history had carried these peoples far, so that by the middle of the twentieth century most Mongols lived outside of what was properly Mongolia: hundreds of thousands dwelt in China, from Manchuria in the East to the Tibetan plateau and the arid deserts in the Southwest (as subjects of China), and fewer, but still thousands, in the Soviet Union. These various "Mongols" differed among themselves, and the idea of being "Mongol" was itself subject to various, more or less exclusive, interpretations, adopted by proponents of different versions of pan-Mongolian unity, of which Choibalsan's variety – a homeland for Mongols centered upon the Mongolian People's Republic – was one. Choibalsan not only wanted people but territory: his eyes turned to the steppes and deserts of northern China, which could one day form a part of the MPR's territory. Choibalsan dreamed in 1945 that one day independent Mongolia could extend far south, to the Great Wall of China, to the mountains of Tibet.

In 1945 the Mongolian People's Republic was not even an independent state. It was legally a part of China, although the Chinese had not been able to exercise effective control over what they still termed "Outer Mongolia" since 1921 when the Chinese military garrison had been chased out by Baron Ungern von Sternberg's Mounted Asian Division. For more than twenty years the MPR developed as a Soviet appendage, suffering socialist reforms, anti-religious campaigns and bloody purges, which intensified in the late 1930s as Mongolia descended into a bloodbath, whose gruesome tides brought Choibalsan to power over the corpses of his predecessors. Throughout its brief history

of *de facto* independence, Mongolia shed people: many chose to cross the porous border with China, fleeing to the relative safety of Inner Mongolia, where their ethnic brethren still lived under the disorganized rule of various warlords and, since the mid-1930s, the Japanese occupation. In 1945 Choibalsan wanted these people back – and many more.

In 1945, Choibalsan dreamed about Great Mongolia but it was not all just a dream. For the first time since 1911, when the collapse of the Chinese Empire briefly fed pan-Mongolian sentiments, which, because of the Mongols' own weakness and the disinterest of the outside powers did not materialize in the unification of the disparate Mongolian tribes, the frontiers of Inner Asia once again appeared fluid. As Japan's power in Asia collapsed, all bets were off as to how the postwar order would be constructed – who would be the winners, and who the losers of the great geopolitical shuffle. Choibalsan was not a great player in his own right but he had the backing of one: Joseph Stalin. As the Soviet dictator pondered the future of Asia, which in 1945 he had the power to shape through raw military might and great power diplomacy, Stalin could well have supported Choibalsan's pan-Mongolian aspirations. For a time, it seemed that he would.

Sino-Soviet Negotiations and the Mongolia Card

It is said, *Kremlin* is a word of Mongolian origins, a perversion of *kherem*, a tall wall, or a fortress. The days were long gone when the Mongols had stood at the gates of Moscow and decided the fate of the Russian rulers. Now the tables were turned and Stalin, behind the splendor of the ancient Kremlin walls, pondered the fate of Mongolia. Choibalsan was not privy to Stalin's intricate game. He did not know all the details. Yet, from the last days of June 1945, something was happening behind those ancient walls that would have far-reaching repercussions for Mongolia – whether for better or worse, Choibalsan could not have known. The Soviets and the Chinese were in parley.

The Sino-Soviet negotiations were an outcome of the Yalta agreement of the previous February when, shockingly unconcerned about Chiang Kai-shek's opinion, Stalin and Roosevelt reached a deal: Moscow would participate in the Pacific War in exchange for recognition of several key Soviet gains in the Far East, including access to the naval base at Port Arthur, ownership of the Chinese Eastern Railroad (built by the Russians but recently sold to the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo), and, confusingly, a "status quo" for Mongolia. Roosevelt approved these terms without giving second thought to terminology: whatever the meaning of "status quo," it was of no practical consequence for the United States: Mongolia was too far away and mattered too little in the great game Roosevelt was playing. To be fair to Roosevelt, "status quo" had a texture of stability, and what could be said against stability in a far-flung corner of the world like Mongolia, of which even the most informed Americans had only a faint idea? Roosevelt's only condition was that Stalin must reach agreement with Chiang Kai-shek on the terms of the Yalta agreement that affected China.

The Chairman of the Chinese Executive Yuan Song Ziwen arrived in the USSR on June 27, via Alma-Ata, the beautiful, serene town at the foothills of the Tianshan that in the 19th century had served as a crucial outpost for Russian inroads into Xinjiang. Even as Song flew past the magnificent peaks of Tianshan, Xinjiang was engulfed in the flames of an ethnic insurrection, which, Song knew,

had Stalin's support: the insurgents were fighting with Soviet weapons and even with the participation of Russian troops! Further to the southeast, Stalin channeled aid to the Chinese Communists, holed up in the caves of Yan'an in the expectation of the impending showdown with Chiang Kai-shek. Further east still, the Soviets were gathering strength to strike with massive force across the border, crushing Japan's resistance in Manchuria when the time came.¹ And the clock was ticking. Germany lay prostrate. The Japanese Empire was doomed. Given these realities, Song Ziwen had very few cards to play against Stalin in the negotiations which had been effectively imposed on China. Yet, under adverse circumstances, he put up quite a fight.

Song Ziwen refused obstinately to give up Mongolia. He offered the not unreasonable interpretation of the "status quo" provision of the Yalta agreement: Outer Mongolia, *de facto* independent for over two decades, yet still claimed by the Chinese, could stay as it was: neither independent from China, nor really a part of it. Stalin, however, insisted on formal independence, raising the subject in the second meeting with Song on July 2, and returning to it time and again, so that it became apparent very quickly that the question of Mongolia was the key obstacle to the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet treaty.² Stalin cited different reasons for his insistence on Mongolian independence, which ranged between appeals to Song to consider the Soviet strategic vulnerability in Asia in the absence of an independent Mongolia, to vague assurances that "cutting off" Mongolia would actually make China safer. He also raised the specter of Mongolian nationalism, telling Song that unless China recognized Mongolia's independence "Outer Mongolia will be the factor, which will unite all of the Mongols, and this will be unprofitable to China."³

The implication of Stalin's threat to stoke the fires of Mongolian nationalism was that, in case China agreed to an independent Mongolia, he would refrain from doing just this, so that China could keep Inner Mongolia, even as it relinquished claims to Outer Mongolia, where the Chinese in any case exercised no control. Stalin knew that such a scenario would not be to Choibalsan's taste. In fact, he had earlier encouraged Mongolian nationalism, and in effect gave a green light to Choibalsan to work towards pan-Mongolian unity. The last time Stalin had seen Choibalsan – on January 22, 1944 – Stalin seemed to convey agreement to an expanded Mongolia (naturally, at China's expense – he was completely deaf to Choibalsan's pleas for border adjustments in the North).⁴

On that earlier occasion, pouring spicy *pertsovka* (pepper-infused vodka) for his coughing

¹ For the best account see Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

² Conversation between Joseph Stalin and Song Ziwen, July 2, 1945. Reprinted in Andrei Ledovskii, Raisa Mirovitskaia and Vladimir Miasnikov, *Sovetsko-Kitaiskie Otnosheniia* (hereafter SKO), Vol. 4, Book 2 (Moscow: Pamiatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 2000), p. 73.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴ Lhamsurengiin Bat-Ochir, *Choibalsan* (Ulaanbaatar, 1996), p. 168. The late Bat-Ochir, a Mongolian historian, had access to the Inner Party Archive in Ulaanbaatar from which he, presumably, cites in this work. He did not provide exact archival locations. Unfortunately, since then, the Inner Party Archive burned down, and the original Mongolian records of Stalin's meetings with Choibalsan were destroyed. This author has so far been unable to find out whether Bat-Ochir kept photocopies of these documents, but the probability of this appears quite low.

Mongolian visitor as they met over a long dinner, Stalin announced that Choibalsan was “not only the leader of Outer Mongolia but also of Inner Mongolia.” Stalin’s associate Anastas Mikoyan added that if the Inner Mongols were liberated, “your Mongolia will expand considerably.” To this Choibalsan replied humbly that the expansion of the Mongolian territory was not at all what he had on his mind, that he only wanted for the Mongols in China to be liberated. “Once they find freedom, they will know what to do next.” Stalin retorted: “That’s right. This is correct.” When Choibalsan requested Stalin’s permission to conduct “intensive work” among the Mongols of Gansu, Ningxia, Khukhnuur (Qinghai) and the Qaidam basin (west of Qinghai), the Soviet ruler gave his blessing: “That’s correct. Completely right. Do your best to carry out work there. We could be late [*khojindoj medne*].” Through Beria, Stalin agreed to extend practical, if modest, support to Choibalsan in “agitating” for pan-Mongolian unity: to provide 1.5 million in the local currency for use in Inner Mongolia, and send three specially trained agents to carry out work among the Mongols south of the border.⁵

Soviet support for the secessionist movement in Inner Mongolia never amounted to anything comparable to what Stalin did for the Uighur and Kazakh rebels. It appears that even as he encouraged Choibalsan to be the “leader of Inner Mongolia,” he was not truly committed to a course of action, which, if Choibalsan’s wildest dreams were realized, could see Mongolia’s border extend almost to the Great Wall of China. There are two probable explanations for this. Either Stalin thought he could never get away with such an outrageous geopolitical concept as Great Mongolia (parallels with Japan’s meddling in China would be too obvious, and the costs to Soviet standing among the Great Powers would be too great), or he was averse to the idea of strengthening Mongolia, or maybe a bit of both. Yet clearly, between January 1944 and July 1945 – an eternity at a time of sweeping historical change – Stalin made up his mind not to support Choibalsan’s pan-Mongolian aspirations. But he could use them to put pressure on the Chinese, as he did during his talks with Song Ziwen. Choibalsan did not know that Stalin had already made up his mind.

Stalin and Song Ziwen continued to spar over the question of Mongolia, their meeting on July 2, ending at 10:35pm without any agreement. Song promised to cable Chiang Kai-shek for instructions. In the meantime, possibly after this meeting with Song, or even earlier, Stalin ordered Choibalsan to Moscow. A cable to this effect was passed on to the Mongolian leader through the head of the Soviet mission I.A. Ivanov, and on July 3 at 5am Choibalsan departed Ulaanbaatar following his unexpected summons, arriving in Moscow in a Soviet-supplied Douglas DC-3 aircraft on the following night.⁶ Christopher Atwood argues that Stalin’s invitation to Choibalsan indicates that he was certain that the Chinese would cave in on the question of Mongolia’s independence, and wanted to bring Choibalsan up to date on the latest developments in the Sino-Soviet talks. On the other hand, Stalin may well have hoped to use Choibalsan’s presence in Moscow in order to bring more pressure

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9.

⁶ This information is largely taken from Lhamsurengiin Bat-Ochir, *Choibalsan*, p. 173 and Christopher Atwood, “Sino-Soviet Diplomacy and the Second Partition of Mongolia, 1945-46,” in Stephen Kotkin and Bruce Elleman (eds.), *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 141. Atwood’s chapter cites Bat-Ochir (which does not provide the time of Choibalsan’s departure) and the newspaper *Unen*.

to bear on Song Ziwen at a crucial time in the negotiations.

Choibalsan's treatment in Moscow was carefully staged to convey the impression that he represented an independent country. The Mongolian leader was clearly taken aback by all the pomp, hitherto unseen in Soviet-Mongolian relations. At the airfield, decorated with Soviet and Mongolian flags, Choibalsan met the uniform-clad Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and other Soviet officials. He walked by the honor guard and stood for the performance of the Soviet and Mongolian anthems.⁷ The next day Choibalsan shared his impressions with Ivanov: "It was never like this before. I have never been as nervous. At the airfield I recognized comrade Molotov only when he came up to me. I could not control my hands, and my fingers were shaking as we passed by the honor guard."⁸ On July 5 the Moscow press featured a front-page story on Choibalsan's arrival, with a photo. This did not go unnoticed by the US Ambassador in the Soviet Union Averell Harriman who reported to Washington on July 6: "Choi-Balsan has visited Moscow on several previous occasions but has never before been met by such high ranking Soviet personages. Composition of welcoming delegation was in rank equal to or higher than those greeting Stettinius, Benes, Poles and Soong [Song Ziwen]."⁹

On the following night, July 5, at 10:35pm Choibalsan was brought to Stalin's Kremlin office for a short meeting lasting only thirty-five minutes. For Choibalsan, it was like a heavenly encounter, for although he had seen Stalin before on several occasions, he had never seen *this* Stalin, the triumphant demigod of the postwar. "In the Kremlin," Choibalsan recounted later that night, "I saw a completely different Stalin. He is all shining, I could not take my eyes off the face of comrade Stalin and was once again nervous and, probably, [my] answer[s] were completely off."¹⁰ During the meeting, Stalin brought Choibalsan up to date concerning his talks with the Chinese: "China still came here unwilling to recognize you. While this time our side is discussing China's approval of Mongolia as a fully sovereign independent state, they don't like that. In my opinion, the Chinese representatives will approve this question in the end. If our discussions reach results, I think China will issue a statement about recognizing Mongolian independence. It is appropriate to hear your opinions on this score."¹¹

Choibalsan was then read a draft Sino-Soviet declaration about Mongolia's independence, a draft the Chinese would see two days later, and would eventually reject.¹² The declaration was both

⁷ "Plan vstrechi, prebyvani'ia i provodov Prem'er-Ministra MNR Marshala Choibalsana," July 3, 1945. Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow, Russia (AVPRF): fond 06 (referentura Molotova), opis 7, papka 38, delo 560, ll. 1-2.

⁸ Memorandum of conversation between Ivan Ivanov and Khorloogiin Choibalsan, July 5, 1945, AVPRF: fond 06, opis 7, papka 38, delo 560, l. 7.

⁹ "The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Secretary of State," July 6, 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1945 (The Far East, China)* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 917.

¹⁰ Memorandum of conversation between Ivan Ivanov and Khorloogiin Choibalsan, July 5, 1945. AVPRF: fond 06, opis 7, papka 38, delo 560, l. 7.

¹¹ Lhamsurengiin Bat-Ochir, *Choibalsan*, pp. 173-174.

¹² Memorandum of conversation between Ivan Ivanov and Khorloogiin Choibalsan, July 5, 1945. AVPRF: fond

good news and bad news to Choibalsan. On the upside, it opened up the prospect of genuine independence and international recognition for Mongolia. On the downside, agreements like what Stalin had in mind effectively undercut Choibalsan's pan-Mongolian aspirations, which rested precisely on the absence of agreements, and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, which thrived in the void of postwar uncertainties. But unlike Song who dared to challenge Stalin, Choibalsan had limited options: he had to approve. "Yes, this is what we want," Choibalsan confirmed to Ivanov later this evening – "but we will not have friendship and friendly cooperation with the Chinese. These are very, very bad people. They oppressed us, cheated [us], burned and raided yurts, killed the *arats* [nomadic herders]. They continue to do this with the Mongols in Inner Mongolia, Alashan and Ordos... I understand well the meaning of the declaration. We, as an independent state, will present our bill to the Chinese. We will tell the entire world how they tormented us [*izdevalis' nad nami*], how they continue to torment the Mongols, who remained with them."¹³

On the day that Choibalsan arrived in Moscow, Stalin was meant to have another meeting with Song Ziwen but in the afternoon the Chinese asked to cancel the meeting, because Song had not yet obtained instructions from Jiang Jieshi about the Mongolia question.¹⁴ In the meantime, Song attempted to enlist the Americans in support of China's position on Mongolia's "status quo," requesting Averell Harriman to clarify with Washington what the US position was on this point of the Yalta Agreement. On July 4 Harriman received detailed instructions from the Secretary of State James Byrnes, stating that although the US would under no circumstances take an official position on interpreting the meaning of the "status quo," he and President Truman thought that it meant that Mongolia would remain *de facto* independent and *de jure* a part of China. This was exactly Song's position; on the other hand, Byrnes' qualification that this interpretation was "for his [Song's] information only and not for use in his discussion with Soviet officials" signaled to the Chinese that they could not count on US support in taking on the Soviets.¹⁵

Song kept on waiting for Chiang's instructions, missing an opportunity to meet with Stalin on July 5, when Choibalsan did. Chiang agonized. He received Song's summary of his talks with Stalin on July 3: Song of course mentioned Stalin's "threat" concerning "certain people" in Mongolia who could try to "establish a Mongolian area" in Northern China.¹⁶ But this was not what worried Chiang the most. He was concerned about losing Xinjiang and Manchuria to Soviet occupation. Then, there were the communists who enjoyed Moscow's support. In the effort to retain Mongolia, where he in any case exercised no control, Chiang could well lose China. On July 5, even as Stalin told Choibalsan that the Chinese would eventually cave in, Chiang made the crucial decision, which he

06, opis 7, papka 38, delo 560, l. 7.

¹³ Memorandum of conversation between Ivan Ivanov and Khorloogiin Choibalsan (July 5, 1945), AVPRF: fond 06, opis 7, papka 38, delo 560, l. 7.

¹⁴ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 84.

¹⁵ "The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in the Soviet Union," July 4, 1945. *FRUS, 1945 (The Far East, China)*, p. 914.

¹⁶ Jitian Fengzi, "Minguo Zhengfu dui Ya'erta 'Miyue' zhi Yingdui yu Menggu Wenti" in Wu Jingping (ed.), *Song Ziwen Shengping yu Ziliao Wenxian Yanjiu* (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 2010), p. 366.

committed to his diary: “If [I] do not satisfy this demand of his [Stalin’s], it will be completely impossible to negotiate about any [Chinese] administration in Manchuria and Xinjiang; the question of the Communist Party is even more difficult to resolve. Moreover, Outer Mongolia has already been occupied by the Russians; courting true misfortunes for the sake of undeserved glory is not at all the way of statesmanship.”¹⁷

So, Chiang resolved to agree to an independent Mongolia if it voted for independence after the war *and* if Stalin agreed to Chiang’s conditions pertaining to Manchuria, Xinjiang and the Chinese Communist Party. The same night, July 5, Chiang Kai-shek held high council with his associates. Not all were happy with Chiang’s take on the matter, with Chen Li-fu and Chen Cheng, among others, wondering whether recognition of Mongolia would not actually encourage the Soviet takeover of Manchuria and Xinjiang, the very scenario Chiang hoped to prevent. In the end, the Generalissimo had his way.¹⁸ On July 6 he informed the US Ambassador in China Patrick Hurley about the decision to give up Outer Mongolia. The same day Chiang cabled Song Ziwen with the same message, except that he advised Song to keep in mind the local circumstances (that is, bargain for more advantageous terms with Stalin, if possible).¹⁹

At this point, at 11pm on July 7, Moscow time, Song went to see Stalin, and, in a tense, 50 minute-long, exchange – perhaps because he had not yet received Chiang’s telegram – Song declared that China could not recognize the independence of Mongolia under any circumstances.²⁰ Stalin tried very hard to convince Song of the inevitability of Mongolia’s independence and counter his insistence that no Chinese government could ever survive renunciation of Mongolia. He even cited the Soviet experience of giving up Finland after the revolution but Song would not budge. The meeting ended in disarray:

Com. Stalin says that under these circumstances, we will not be able to come to an agreement.

Song refers to the fact that he has certain instructions from Chiang Kai-shek.

Com. Stalin proposes to end the conversation at this.

Song expresses regret that com. Stalin cannot understand the Chinese point of view.

Com. Stalin, in his turn, expresses regret that the Chinese cannot understand the Soviet point of view.²¹

Song left at around midnight, but the conversation in Stalin’s office continued for another

¹⁷ The elegant prose of Jiang Jieshi’s diary (with its classical Chinese grammar) is sometimes difficult to translate. This is my rendering of “如为虚名而受实祸，绝非谋国之道。” Ibid., p. 366.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Ambassador in China (Hurley) to the Secretary of State, July 6, 1945. *FRUS, 1945 (The Far East, China)*, p. 917. See Chiang’s telegram and subsequent instructions of July 6, 1945 in Qin Xiaoyi (ed.), *Zhonghua Minguo Zhongyao Shiliao Chubian – Duiqi Kangzhan Shiqi*, Vol. 3/2 (Taipei: Zhongyang Dangshihui, 1981), pp. 595-595.

²⁰ John Garver argues that Song disagreed with his instructions. See John Garver, *Chinese-Soviet Relations, 1937-1945: The Diplomacy of Chinese Nationalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 219.

²¹ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 90.

two hours.²² We do not know what Stalin had to say to his trusted associates about the nasty exchange they had just witnessed. Was Stalin premature in his early assumptions about the inevitable Chinese concession? Or could it be that Stalin was already aware (through intelligence sources) of Chiang's decision to abandon Mongolia?²³ In this case, one wonders what he made of Song's tough performance. There was in any case as yet no cause to celebrate. Actually, Stalin had already celebrated.

Four hours before Stalin's meeting with Song Ziwen, at 7pm on July 7, Choibalsan was greeted at the Kremlin by Soviet Foreign Ministry officials. Treading a red carpet, Choibalsan passed through the brightly-lit Kremlin passageways and entered the majestic St. Catherine's Hall. Inside, he was welcomed by the deputy foreign ministers Andrei Vyshinskii and Solomon Lozovskii, with whom Choibalsan chatted for a few moments until Stalin and Molotov walked in. Stalin shook hands with Choibalsan and his company, and jokingly asked him whether he should have invited Song Ziwen to the reception. "No need, no need," Choibalsan answered apparently taking Stalin's joke seriously. Stalin asked the Mongolian leader to be seated at the head of the table next to him.²⁴ Then toasts followed toasts until Stalin stood up and said:

At one time the Mongols had disagreement on the question of which country they should be friends with, Japan or the USSR. Many Mongols, for example De Wang [of Inner Mongolia], spoke up for friendship with Japan. I raise my glass to those leaders of Mongolia who understood and correctly decided that Mongolia should maintain friendship with the USSR. These people now stand at the head of the independent Mongolian People's Republic, and those who spoke up for an alliance with Japan are now under the heel of the Manchurians and the Japanese. To the health of the leaders of Mongolia, to its independence!²⁵

Choibalsan, easily given to drink, drank and drank and drank. Somehow he still managed to muddle through the reception, and, together with Stalin, even watched a film, "The Victory Parade," in the Kremlin's movie screening room. The party dispersed at around 10pm, as Stalin went to meet with Song, but Choibalsan continued to celebrate with the Mongolian delegation at his residence late into the night. The next morning he could barely stand, asking his secretary: "Hold me up when we greet the people who see us off, let me do the duty in front of the guard of honor. I will try for my part." Molotov, who saw Choibalsan off, was sympathetic. He shook hands with Choibalsan, telling him to "sleep well" on the plane. When the plane landed in Ulaanbaatar on the morning of July 10, Choibalsan was already "completely sober," prepared to make the next move in a game, which he had

²² A.A. Chernobaev (ed.), *Na Prieme u Stalina: tetrad (zhurnaly) zapisei lits, priniatykh I.V. Stalinym* (1924-1953) (Moscow: Novyi Khronograf, 2008), p. 459.

²³ Christopher Atwood, "Sino-Soviet Diplomacy and the Second Partition of Mongolia, 1945-46," p. 141.

²⁴ Archive of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party: Fond 17, dans 1, kh/n 49, khuu. 114-116.

²⁵ AVPRF: fond 7, opis 38, delo 560, l. 10.

played on Stalin's behalf but also, in a way, in spite of Stalin.²⁶

After his tumultuous meeting with Stalin on July 7, Song Ziwen cabled Chiang Kai-shek for further instructions. His telegram crossed with Chiang's own telegram to Song, which, all resolve to seek more advantageous terms cast aside, said:

Mindful that the Outer Mongolia question forms the outstanding stumbling block in the relations between China and the Soviet Union and solicitous for the common interests and lasting peace between the two countries, the Chinese government, when victory had been won over Japan and the objectives mentioned in the three propositions [Chinese control over Manchuria and Xinjiang, and Soviet support for China's central government] have been attained, agrees that the problem of the independence of Outer Mongolia could be raised. Moreover, with the view of preventing possible complications that may arise in future, such an important problem should be settled by a plebiscite of the people of Outer Mongolia. If the result of the plebiscite should be in favor of the independence of Outer Mongolia, the Chinese government will raise no objection to its independence. The territory of Outer Mongolia shall be determined by the original boundary in accordance with Chinese maps.²⁷

With this proposal in his hand, Song went to see Stalin on the night of July 9. In principle, the content of Chiang's telegram was a major concession but Chiang miscalculated if he thought that the sweet taste of victory would blind the old fox that Stalin was to the loop-hole buried in the rhetoric of China's great sacrifice. "What old borders of Mongolia did Song talk about," Stalin asked. Song replied that the Chinese had "old maps." Stalin asked whether he could see them. Song retorted that he did not bring the maps with him. The matter was left unresolved at that meeting, and soon Stalin left for the meeting at Potsdam.²⁸ In the meantime, Song had an opportunity to research the question of maps, and when he next came to Moscow, he showed these maps to Stalin, together with a Russian map that corresponded to where the Chinese claimed the border with Mongolia lay.²⁹

The problem was that the actual line of control did not correspond to these old maps, and the difference was not in China's favor. Therefore, at the meeting with Song and the new Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Shijie on August 10, Stalin announced that he could not agree to using old Chinese maps. He then played the pan-Mongolian card: "Com. Stalin ... points out that Song's proposal is not suitable, and that the Mongols will decisively protest against the change of borders of their state and that it is better not to raise this question at all. Com. Stalin stresses that the Mongolian people are striving towards unification, and here we want to cut back even the existing border of the Mongolian state. Com. Stalin says that we have to recognize independence of the MPR now. As for the existing aspiration of the Mongols to unite Inner Mongolia with themselves, they should be

²⁶ Puntsagiin Shagdarsuren, *Minii Medekh Marshal Kh. Choibalsan* (Ulaanbaatar: Sogoo Nuur, 2000), pp. 27-28.

²⁷ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, pp. 103-4.

²⁸ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 108.

²⁹ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 165.

seriously warned, and not allowed to go beyond the existing border.”³⁰

Elastic Borders in a State of War

Stalin's statement was no joke, especially not in the circumstances of August 10, 1945. By then, the Soviet war against Japan was almost two days old. The Soviet forces began their offensive in Manchuria shortly after midnight local time on August 9. It was a three-pronged offensive, aimed at enveloping the Japanese army from the East and the West, with a separate force striking also from the North. The western strike took the Soviets across Inner Mongolia. The Mongol forces participated in the operation, striking together with the Soviets on the morning of August 9 in the direction of Dolon-Nuur and Rehe in Inner Mongolia. By the end of that day, the joint force was already 55 km inside Inner Mongolia proper. The Mongolian forces – mostly poorly-equipped cavalry – demonstrated remarkable resilience in covering virtually impassable terrain.³¹ On August 10, Mongolia declared war against Japan.

That declaration contained some interesting statements, in light of Stalin's promise to “seriously warn” the Mongols about extending their borders southward. Thus, it referred to the “eternal hopes of the Mongolian people towards freedom, independence and full sovereignty” and to the “aspirations of the Mongol tribes to live as one family.” All of this was published by the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* on August 11. But there was a part that *Pravda* did not publish. It went as follows:

Declaring a holy war against Japan, the Small Khural and the government of the Mongolian People's Republic are full of confidence that all Mongolian tribes – Khalkhas and Duvuds, Torgouts and Slots, Buriats and Barguts, Inner Mongols, Chahars and the Ordos [Mongols], Kharchins and the Dariganga, the Alashan and the Dud-Mongols, as well as the Kazakhs and the Uriankhai [Tuvans] who live both in territory of the Mongolian People's Republic, as well as in the regions occupied by Japan, and in other places – will rise up in this holy war, in order to end forever the oppression and the humiliation, suffered by the Mongolian tribes from the foreign invaders, from the Japanese enslavers, so that the Mongol people, like all the freedom-loving peoples of the world, could build their life upon the principles of freedom and independence, keeping and improving their language, their national culture, looking after their national traditions and religion, and strengthening and perfecting their state sovereignty.³²

Many of the tribes mentioned in this declaration were not living anywhere near the areas occupied by the Japanese – certainly there were no Japanese in Xinjiang or on the Tibetan plateau; there, the term “foreign invaders” could only refer to the Chinese, which was perhaps the reason why

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 168-9.

³¹ Sh. Jadambaa et al., *Mongol Tsergiin Tuukhiin Tovchoo*, Vol. 2 (Ulaanbaatar: Mongol Ulsyn Batlakh Khamgalakh Yaamny Erdem Shilgilgeenii Khureelen, 1996), p. 368.

³² “Doklad Missii SSSR v Mongolii,” January 12, 1946. AVPRF: fond 0111, opis 28, delo 3, ll. 36-37 (hereafter, Ivanov's report).

Pravda omitted this detailed list when reprinting the Mongolian declaration of war. But there is no doubt that Stalin could have prevented such a declaration from being issued in Mongolia, if he only desired. But he did not, as he continued to use the specter of Mongolian nationalism to press the Chinese into compliance with his demands.

The joint meeting of the Presidium of the Small Khural and the MPR Council of Ministers, which adopted the declaration, took place in the middle of the night of August 10. At 12:45am Choibalsan took the floor to explain his reasons (post facto, as it happened) for declaring war against Japan. He said:

The Japanese samurai-imperialists had long conducted a hostile policy in relation to the Mongolian tribes in general, and to our Mongolian People's Republic in particular. They have tried on many occasions to play dirty tricks on our people, and to this day they continue a bloody war, being the focus of vile fascism in the entire world. Japanese fascism is the meanest and the most treacherous enemy. Our blood brothers – Inner Mongols and Barguts are now groaning under the impossible yoke of the Japanese samurai. ... [Declaring a war against Japan] will have great positive consequences for our country. Here is why. Many centuries of hope and primordial aspirations of our Mongols have been to win for ourselves freedom and independence as a sovereign state. The Japanese imperialists obstructed and continue to obstruct the road towards this [goal]. Our declaration of war will be a revenge of our peoples. On the other hand, it is quite important to liberate our blood brothers, groaning under the yoke of the Japanese samurai.³³

In the days prior to, and in the wake of the declaration of war, the Mongolian press advertised the theme of reunification of all Mongol tribes. The main party newspaper, *Unen*, published in Cyrillic since mid-July, reverted to the old Mongolian script in the August 11 issue, presumably to reach a greater readership, not only inside the MPR, but also in the liberated areas of Inner Mongolia.³⁴ Thousands of leaflets calling for unification were reportedly printed and distributed in Inner Mongolia as the Mongol forces advanced.³⁵ The young Soviet-educated Party Secretary Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal (who was in effect person No. 2 in the Mongolian leadership after Choibalsan) called a special meeting of political workers, where, talking about the aims of the war, he announced that “as a result of the victorious march [of the Mongol army], the Mongolian People's Republic will become a great power, which will have access to the sea, to the Pacific Ocean; that Khalkh Mongolia [Outer Mongolia] has a noble task: the mission of liberation of the Mongolian tribes from the Japanese colonizers and from the Chinese conquerors.”³⁶

Ivanov, who reported to Moscow in detail on the rise of the pan-Mongolian sentiment in the wake of the war, noted that views of this nature were common not only among the leaders, but among

³³ “Rech Prem'er Ministra, geroia i marshala MNR tov. Choibalsana,” August 10, 1945. AVPRF: fond 0111, opis 28, papka 29, delo 2, ll. 36-37.

³⁴ Christopher Atwood, “Sino-Soviet Diplomacy and the Second Partition of Mongolia, 1945-46,” p. 148.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁶ Ivanov's report, l. 54.

ordinary citizens of the unrecognized republic. The rationale for Great Mongolia (the term used in the report) – at least as Ivanov perceived it – was economic, if nothing else.

Independence of the Mongolian People's Republic within its existing borders is incomplete. The republic has a large territory but exceedingly small population. The country has no ability to defend this territory or to develop it economically with the available forces under the existing economic order.

The natural solution was to expand the territory all the way to the Great Wall. Even though as a result, Mongols would come to control areas predominantly populated by the Chinese, this need not necessarily be an obstacle. Indeed, wrote Ivanov, Mongolia will “obtain cheap work force, which it will use in the interests of the Mongolian people for the work at construction, at factories and in agriculture, while keeping the leading role for the Mongols.” The bottom line in all of this – and here Ivanov's report took on sinister shades – was for Mongolia to emerge upon the international stage, and to be recognized by America. Then, Ivanov wrote, citing unidentified views, “it will escape complete dependence on the Soviet Union and will be able to make use of the rich warehouses of the first-rate goods, available on the American market.”³⁷ Ivanov did not say where he encountered such interesting views but it should be said that the specter of Mongolian nationalism – a weapon in Stalin's hands as we have seen – was a double-edged sword, and it was not uncommon for the Soviet advisors and representatives in Ulaanbaatar to send alarming reports back to Moscow about nationalist views inside the Mongolian leadership, all the way to the top.

Except for Choibalsan. Marshal Choibalsan, although he was certainly not immune to nationalist sentiment, inevitably received positive characterizations in the Soviet reporting, and his nationalism was recognized as a benign variety. Of course, Choibalsan's good standing with Stalin was well known among Soviet officials who worked with him in Mongolia, so criticizing the old Marshal was an inherently perilous business even for highly placed functionaries like Ivanov. The head of the Soviet mission knew that Choibalsan was against Mongolia's accession to the USSR. This idea circulated in the leadership ranks of the MPR, and it was of course the ultimate expression of loyalty to the Soviet Union. Choibalsan refused to go along with any such scheme, saying on one occasion in late 1944 that the talk of accession to the USSR “is useless banter.” “Raising of this question is untimely, and even harmful,” Choibalsan warned. Ivanov put a positive spin on these comments, suggesting in a report that at a fundamental level Choibalsan was not averse to joining the USSR – just that he wanted to do it under a different set of circumstances, when Mongolia was strengthened by unification with neighboring tribes, so that it could become a Soviet republic on equal terms with other republics.

It is difficult to know how much of this was Choibalsan's thinking, and how much wishful thinking on Ivanov's part. In any case, whether Great Mongolia would become a Soviet republic or an American client, the road to greatness passed through the Gobi, which, as of August 9, 1945, lay open

³⁷ Ivanov's report, l. 53.

before the Mongolian troops. As the offensive continued, Choibalsan travelled to China three times: the first time, just to the border with Inner Mongolia, then to Dolon-Nuur and Rehe (present-day Chengde), further southeast, and lastly, to Zhangbei, just north of Kalgan (now Zhangjiakou).³⁸ Ivanov reported that Choibalsan returned from these trips with “mixed feelings.” The problem apparently was that the Marshal did not find what he had expected to find; it turned out that Inner Mongolia was much more settled and agricultural – and, worse – much more Chinese than it had earlier appeared from Ulaanbaatar. “Significant territories,” wrote Ivanov, “in particular in the Rehe province and in the direction of the sea, have long been lost by the Mongols, and have been colonized and occupied by Chinese farmers. As a result, dreams of Great Mongolia, which would even have a maritime border, began to fade away on their own, as unrealizable.”³⁹

Ethnic Mongols of Inner Mongolia held different views about the desirability of unification with the MPR. Ideas of pan-Mongolian unity and independence had gained wide currency in Inner Mongolia, and this was something that the Japanese used very effectively in the 1930s, encouraging secessionism and anti-Chinese sentiments among the Mongol banners. Administratively, these banners were divided up between the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo – these bordered the MPR in the East, and were known collectively after 1943 as the Consolidated Xing’an Province, roughly corresponding to the present-day Hulunbuir of Inner Mongolia – and the Japanese puppet state of Mengjiang further to the southwest. It was the latter that was the logical center of the pro-Japanese Mongolian statehood idea; it was here that the Japanese co-opted the Mongolian prince Demchugdongrub to serve as the local variant of Pu Yi, the Manchurian “Emperor.”

But in August 1945, Demchugdongrub – or, as he was more popularly known, De Wang – was by no means in a position to lead the pan-Mongolian movement; in fact, as a Japanese ally, he was an enemy combatant from the Soviet and Mongolian perspectives, so he fled to the relative safety of Chongqing, abandoning the officials of the disgraced Mengjiang, and, indeed, his own son. The situation in Mengjiang was a mess, as different factions vied for recognition as legitimate representatives of the local populace. Even before the arrival of Soviet-Mongolian forces, the local nobles attempted to form a government; the authority was claimed by De Wang’s former associate Buyin-Dalai, characterized by the Soviets as “a Japanese running-dog, brought up by them from the Harchin tribe, a careerist and a drug-addict.” However, the powers of this “provisional government of the republic of Inner Mongolia” did not go far beyond the walls of De Wang’s old palace, and in any case these powers did not outlast the Soviet-Mongolian army’s arrival: “The government of Buyin-Dalai, having received no support from our forces,” reported Ivanov, “returned to their homes and went into hiding.”⁴⁰

The other major contender for authority in the same banner was the Youth Party, composed mainly of students and supposedly headed by a young teacher named Delgerchogtu. The party, which existed since at least 1941 underground, now emerged in the public with what appeared like a radical

³⁸ Ibid, l. 56.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., ll. 93-94.

leftist agenda. The party declared war on the nobility, bureaucrats and religious functionaries, put up red flags in the banners, ravaged monasteries and terrorized the population. The MPR authorities were not happy with these activities, because, Ivanov reported (without irony!):

This compromised the social system of the MPR and the MPRP [Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party], because the [local] population saw the insane provocative actions of the party created by Delgerchogtu as the precursor to the practices, which await them with the establishment of the rule of Outer Mongolia.

In any case, the Youth Party sent a delegation of nine to Zamyn Uud, the border with Outer Mongolia, for a meeting with the MPR Interior Minister Shagdarjav and his Soviet advisor Viacheslav Gridnev.⁴¹ Shagdarjav and Gridnev sent six of the nine back, but three were instructed to continue on to Ulaanbaatar. These included Delgerchogtu himself, as well as De Wang's son Dugersuren, and a certain old lama named Tsewangdamba. In Ulaanbaatar the three delegates of the Youth Party joined up with other self-appointed representatives of Inner Mongolia, including De Wang's former minister Magdebu who posited himself as the leader of the colorful Inner Mongolian delegation, and even one of De Wang's top generals Damdin-Suren who, in the Soviet reporting, was portrayed as a hardened feudal lord, whose chief concern was about preserving his own standing in Inner Mongolia after the liberation and evading, under all circumstances, China's control.

Here is what Ivanov had to say about Damdin-Suren's views:

No matter what regime there is, it must be Mongol. He [Damdin-Suren], as a matter of principle, is vigorously opposed to both the Guomindang forces and the Guomindang administration, and to the 8th People's Revolutionary army and the regime of the special district. All the Chinese – irrespective of their political orientation and social status – are bandits, enemies of the Mongols, and are subject to ruthless extermination.⁴²

Another delegation that arrived in Ulaanbaatar for consultations in the wake of the Japanese collapse was that from the Consolidated Xing'an Province. Unlike the situation in former Mengjiang, where De Wang's disappearance created a power vacuum filled by a colorful set of competing characters, Xing'an emerged from the war with considerable internal coherence. In the early post-war months the area seethed with nationalist activity, becoming the focal point for the pan-Mongolian movement, and shaming the Right Sunid Banner into insignificance. Liu Xiaoyuan argues that such activism was largely a result of Japanese colonial policies, which educated a generation of Manchurian Mongols in the nationalist and distinctly anti-Chinese spirit.⁴³ The movement was

⁴¹ Christopher Atwood, "Sino-Soviet Diplomacy and the Second Partition of Mongolia, 1945-46," p. 150.

⁴² Ivanov's report, l. 95.

⁴³ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Reins of Liberation: An Entangled History of Mongolian Independence, Chinese Territoriality,*

centered upon Wangyemiao (later Ulan Hot) in Xing'an. When the Chinese communists, who had their own Inner Mongolian cadre (Wulanfu) first met with representatives of Wangyemiao in November 1945, they learned that the goal of the movement was none the other than unification with Outer Mongolia.⁴⁴ This was a disturbing possibility for the CCP, and one that encouraged the communists to intensify their work in Wangyemiao, so as to keep pan-Mongolian nationalism under tabs.

In the meantime, the leaders of the self-proclaimed Inner Mongolian People's Liberation Committee (Eastern Branch) – Bayanmandakh, Tumurbagana and Khafengga – had already been informed by Choibalsan that they had to scale back their ambitions of unification. Their mission to Ulaanbaatar in October-November 1945 met with Choibalsan's advice to seek autonomy under the auspices of the CCP. The same advice was proffered to other delegations from Inner Mongolia as well. It was undoubtedly difficult for Choibalsan who had ardently hoped for liberation of Inner Mongolia, to argue against unification, overlooking the obvious interest in this scenario across many social strata in Inner Mongolia. But his options were limited. Immediately after the ratification of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance was announced in China (in late August 1945), all pro-unification propaganda ceased in Ulaanbaatar. The various delegates from Inner Mongolia were hardly aware of that (for instance, Buyanmandakh et al. did not learn of the treaty until their arrival in Ulaanbaatar)⁴⁵, and continued to come to the MPR for instructions regarding unification. Many – like the Wangyemiao trio – were sent back after a while. Others – like Delgerchogtu – were arrested and eventually executed (in his particular case, as a Japanese provocateur). Others just stayed in the MPR, as for example, De Wang's son, whose livestock and family were moved from Inner Mongolia across the border with the help of the MPR's Interior Ministry.⁴⁶

It is not clear when Choibalsan was told by the Soviets to stop "agitation" for unification in Inner Mongolia – this could well have occurred shortly after August 14, or after the ratification of the Sino-Soviet treaty some days later. Choibalsan evidently took his time, which was one reason why movement of people between Ulaanbaatar and the Inner Mongolian banners – to submit petitions, seek guidance and so on – continued until at least early 1946, when the Chinese Communists moved in to assert control over the Mongolian nationalists in Wangyemiao, disbanding their short-lived government, and when Choibalsan personally received Stalin's clear instructions to refrain from meddling in Inner Mongolia and Xing'an. If the former development has received extensive coverage in the existing literature (e.g. in Liu Xiaoyuan's work), little is known about Stalin's discussion of the subject with Choibalsan.

and Great Power Hegemony, 1911-1950 (Washington DC. & Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁵ Ivanov report, l. 92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 107.

After the War, But Still in Flux

Marshal Choibalsan was in Moscow again in February 1946, seeing Stalin on the 22nd of that month. Stalin was aware that Choibalsan still harbored hopes of unification with the ethnic Mongols south of the border but he was equally aware that the Chinese (the Guomindang) were very unhappy with this situation. In fact, throughout the fall of 1945 – even after Japan's capitulation – Moscow received complaints from the Guomindang authorities in Chongqing about the movement of the MPR troops inside Inner Mongolia, and demands for a pull-back. These complaints were regularly rebuffed on the unconvincing pretext that the Soviet military command had no say over the Mongols' movements in China since it was independent. Even so, as deputy Foreign Minister Solomon Lozovskii indicated in a report to Stalin in December 1945, the question of pan-Mongolian unification "greatly worried" the Guomindang, and they would likely insist that the MPR refrain from encouraging such sentiments across the border.⁴⁷

In the event, when Chiang Kai-shek's representative, his son Jiang Jingguo, turned up in Moscow in December 1945 for consultations with Stalin, he appeared a lot more concerned about the activities of the Chinese Communists in Inner Mongolia than about Choibalsan. Jiang told Stalin that the CCP, encouraged by the independence of Outer Mongolia, now wanted to proclaim independence in Inner Mongolia, under their control. Stalin dismissed this way of thinking as "silly" and said that the Soviet government could not be held accountable for the activities of the CCP.⁴⁸ Outer Mongolia was brought up only in passing, and that when Jiang Jingguo asked for Stalin's advice whether the Guomindang should look to the MPR as an example of what one could accomplish in the transition from feudalism. Stalin responded that China should not look for a model in Mongolia, for while China had all the potential to become "a first-rate power," the Mongols were "backward," although perhaps "not as savage" as they used to be.⁴⁹

In his conversations with Jiang, Stalin tried hard to convey the impression that he was true to the spirit of the Sino-Soviet Treaty, and that he supported the Guomindang's bid to reunify the country. For this reason, he could not endorse the petition of his formerly savage client Choibalsan, when the latter asked him to support his pan-Mongolian plans in Inner Mongolia and Xing'an. "Creation of an independent state in Xing'an and Inner Mongolia will require a new war with China," Stalin responded – "Do we need it now?" Choibalsan asked whether he could "quietly conduct propaganda work there." "Quietly, you may," was Stalin's response.⁵⁰ Herein lay the problem, for precisely such statements left Choibalsan in a state of uncertainty. Ever the opportunist, Stalin was not yet willing to discard the ethno-nationalist card, which he had played with such skill in China during the war. So while not quite encouraging Choibalsan, he did not quite discourage him either, leaving plenty of ground for interpretation in that murky gem of a phrase "quietly, you may."

⁴⁷ SKO, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 324.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 560-1.

⁵⁰ Conversation between Joseph Stalin and Khorloogiin Choibalsan, February 22, 1946. RGASPI: fond 558, opis 11, delo 352, l. 88.

There were other indications that would have told Choibalsan that, whatever the apparent impact of the Sino-Soviet treaty, there was scope for eventual accession of the Inner Mongolian banners in the MPR. For example, even though, as Ivanov reported, “the published documents of the Sino-Soviet treaty and the exchange of notes between the Foreign Minister of the Republic of China Wang Shijie and the People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs V.M. Molotov on the question of independence of the Mongolian People’s Republic within the existing borders of Outer Mongolia, broke off for a time the flight of [Choibalsan’s] dream about Great Mongolia and caused disappointment,”⁵¹ the Mongolian leader evidently read between the lines of these published documents, and actually sought Ivanov’s advice about the difference between the Soviet and the Chinese notes, which (to Choibalsan at least) seemed to indicate that the Soviets left the question of the borders open. Indeed, the Chinese text indicated that China would recognize MPR “within its existing borders,” while the Soviet response suggested that the Soviet Union would respect the “territorial integrity” of the MPR.⁵² Choibalsan evidently had no idea that the formulation concerning the “existing borders” was actually imposed by the Soviets on the reluctant Chinese. This was an example of how reading between the lines may sometimes result in getting the wrong message.

Choibalsan continued to read between the lines. Even though it increasingly appeared in 1946 that the Soviets were encouraging the Inner Mongolians to cooperate with the CCP, Choibalsan evidently thought that that too could be turned to advantage, presumably because the CCP, as a Soviet client (much as Choibalsan himself was a Soviet client) would go along with whatever Stalin said, and Stalin could perhaps ultimately support pan-Mongolian unity. He was probably encouraged by the apparently friendly attitude towards the MPR on the part of the CCP cadres in Inner Mongolia, especially Wulanfu. One wonders what Choibalsan read into Wulanfu’s statements like one from his congratulatory telegram to the MPR on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Mongolian revolution: “We promise you that we will conduct an untiring struggle ... for the reunification of our people with the great people of Outer Mongolia in one united family.” Admittedly, one could interpret such assurances in any number of ways.⁵³

New Sino-Soviet Negotiations and the Fate of Greater Mongolia

Interestingly, Ivanov’s replacement in the MPR Iurii Prikhodov argued as late as August 1949 that the experience of dealing with Wulanfu and the CCP authorities in Inner Mongolia encouraged (rather than otherwise) Choibalsan’s pan-Mongolian aspirations. “The existing democratic government of Inner Mongolia represented by its prime-minister Ulan-Dalai [Wulanfu] ... repeatedly turned unofficially to the MPR government and personally to Choibalsan with requests to strengthen friendly relations between Inner Mongolia and the MPR. ... Because Ulan-Dalai is a member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and serves as its

⁵¹ Ivanov’s report, ll. 58-59.

⁵² Sergei Luzianin, *Rossi’ia, Mongoli’ia, Kitai v pervoi polovine XX veka* (Moscow: IDV RAN, 2000), p. 217.

⁵³ “Predsedateliu Soveta Ministrov SSSR,” July 7, 1946. RGASPI: fond 82, opis 2, delo 1279, l. 21.

representative in Inner Mongolia, Choibalsan is inclined to look at these requests as having been approved by the Chinese Communists, treats them with great attention, and strives to fulfill them.” This sort of attitude on Choibalsan’s part, Prikhodov predicted, could have “negative consequences” in view of the CCP’s sensitivity towards questions pertaining to China’s territorial integrity.⁵⁴

Thus, as late as August 1949, Prikhodov wrote that Choibalsan, far from having abandoned his pan-Mongolian aspirations, still “live[d] this idea,” that is – the idea of eventual unification of Outer and Inner Mongolia. This unification, Choibalsan explained to Prikhodov in one of their conversations in March 1949, would take place step by step, by means of gradual accession of neighboring Inner Mongolian banners to the MPR:

I am looking ahead... [In the future] the MPR’s borders, I think, will change. I cannot say exactly when and how this will happen but I think that with the passage of 3-4 years, certain regions, populated by the Mongol tribes, will gradually obtain autonomy, and, with the development of the MPR and the growth of its prestige among overseas (*zarubezhnykh*) Mongols, these regions will gradually gravitate towards the MPR and reunify with it. This is how, gradually, the Mongolian People’s Federal Republic will be formed. The course of historic events in China is inevitably leading towards this. Perhaps, I am mistaken about the ways and the timeline of these events, but one must not underestimate this.⁵⁵

What Choibalsan presumably referred to when he spoke about the “historic events” in China was the progress of the Chinese Civil War, which, by March 1949, had been practically won by the Communists. Mao Zedong – whether he acted on the basis of internationalist motives, or under pressure from Stalin – would have to fulfill the aspirations of the Mongol people towards self-determination. This was not an unreasonable position to take, especially for someone who indulged in wishful thinking, as Choibalsan did. Perhaps – indeed, likely – the Marshal did not know that just weeks before he shared his views with Prikhodov about the historic events in China, Mao Zedong and Stalin’s close associate Anastas Mikoyan discussed the future of Outer Mongolia, when Mikoyan secretly visited Mao at his base in Xibaipo.

Mikoyan broached this question on February 4, 1949, advising Mao not to “go overboard” with the national question, and not to give independence to the national minorities, just autonomy. The following exchange then took place:

Mao Zedong was glad to hear this advice but you could tell by his face that he had no intention to give independence to anybody whatsoever. Mao Zedong on his initiative asked how we feel about the unification of Outer and Inner Mongolia. I said that we do not support this proposition. Then he asked for which motives do we not support this unification.

I replied that we do not support it because this unification would lead to the loss of substantial territory

⁵⁴ “Tovarishchu Stalinu,” August 31, 1949. RGASPI: fond 82, opis 2, delo 1280, ll. 16-19.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

for China. Mao Zedong said that he considers that Outer and Inner Mongolia could unite and join the Chinese republic. Of course, this would be possible if the leaders of Outer and Inner Mongolia stood for this. He admits such a possibility in two years' time, when the power of communists in China strengthens sufficiently and everything achieves the desired normality, then Outer Mongolia will declare that she seceded from the Chinese state because the Guomindang ruled the state. Now, however, when the communists have power, Outer Mongolia desires to accede to the Chinese state, by joining Inner Mongolia.

I replied that this is impossible because Outer Mongolia has long enjoyed independence. After the victory over Japan, the Chinese state, like the Soviet state, recognized the independence of Outer Mongolia. Outer Mongolia has its own army, its own culture, quickly follows the road of cultural and economic prosperity, she has long understood the taste of independence and will hardly ever voluntarily renounce independence. If it ever unites with Inner Mongolia it will surely be independent Mongolia.

Then Ren Bishi made a remark that the population of Inner Mongolia is 3 million, and Outer Mongolia – 1 million. The end result was that Mao Zedong laughed and stopped defending his opinion.

Mikoyan then informed Stalin of this exchange, and received a telegram, which he read out to Mao during their meeting two days later, on February 6:

The leaders of Outer Mongolia stand for the unification of all Mongolian regions of China with Outer Mongolia under the banner of independence of a unified Mongolian state. The Soviet government speaks out against this plan, as it means cutting away from China a number of regions, though this plan does not threaten the interests of the USSR. We do not think that Outer Mongolia would go for renunciation of its independence in favor of autonomy as a part of the Chinese state, even if all Mongolian regions were united in an autonomous unit. It is understandable that Outer Mongolia itself has the decisive word on this question.

Mao Zedong reportedly said to this that “they [the Chinese] respect the wish of Outer Mongolia to remain a sovereign state, and if it does not want to unite with Inner Mongolia, then one must take this into account, and we are not against this. We, of course, do not defend the Chinese great power policy.”⁵⁶

Clearly, Choibalsan's dreams did not coincide with Stalin's harsh realpolitik. The Soviet leader continued to handle Choibalsan with kid gloves, never quite telling him outright to bury all hopes of pan-Mongolian unity. This was again evident when Choibalsan met with Stalin in the early

⁵⁶ All translations come from Sergey Radchenko and David Wolff, “To the Summit via Proxy-Summits: New Evidence from Soviet and Chinese Archives on Mao's Long March to Moscow, 1949,” *Cold War International History Project*, Issue 16, pp. 105-182.

hours of October 1, the day Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Choibalsan brought to what was probably his last meeting with Stalin a newspaper account of Zhou Enlai's speech at the Political Consultative Conference on September 25. In that speech, discussing New China's nationalities policy, Zhou announced that the "spirit" of this policy was to make all nationalities of the PRC "become a loving [you'ai] and cooperative big family," and voiced the CCP's intention to oppose "tendencies of jaundiced nationalism."⁵⁷

Choibalsan said he could not approve of that point, calling it "suspicious." Stalin recounted exchanges which the Soviets had had with Mao concerning the Mongolian question, and asked whether Mao had approached the Mongolians with a unification proposal.⁵⁸ Answered Choibalsan:

Mao Zedong has not asked us about this. Mongolia is an independent country. As a matter of principle, as Inner and Outer Mongols are equally Mongols, it is good to unite. Our language, habits and religion are the same, and moreover, the Inner Mongols want to unite with us, and are coming to us in great numbers. The border is the only thing that separates us. It is appropriate for Inner Mongolia to unite with our state, becoming an independent country separate from China.

Stalin responded to that:

In this case, it seems that independence is better than autonomy. We also think this way. This question depends on you yourselves. But one need not hurry now in the matter of what will unite with what. One needs to conduct a smart policy of not causing a conflict with the Chinese. As Mao Zedong et al. are now directing all their attention towards liberating Canton, they have no time to think about internal nationalities, nor do they have experience. But one can talk about it after they take Canton. But there is also a matter to consider. If you raise the question of uniting with Inner Mongolia to Mao, he will probably reject it. He has a difficult side to him. When Chiang Kai-shek held power, he broke up the country and gave it away to the imperialists [sic, Stalin was the only "imperialist" who received any territory from Chiang]. He also approved the independence of Outer Mongolia. But Mao Zedong aims to bring together the state broken up by the Guomindang. Therefore, there is a true difficulty in the [prospects of] uniting Inner Mongolia with a foreign state. After the October Revolution, [places] like Finland and Poland were separated from Russia and made independent. Only Lenin could do that. Mao Zedong is no Lenin, and cannot do that.⁵⁹

With the bottom line thus being fairly definitively drawn, Choibalsan resorted to his last card, one that Ivanov alluded to years earlier, when he first reported on Choibalsan's pan-Mongolian aspirations. What if, Choibalsan asked, a reunified Mongolia became a Soviet republic? Stalin,

⁵⁷ "Zhongguo Renmin Zhengxie Dier Huiyi shang Zhou Enlai Baogao Gongtong Gangling Cao'an Qicao de Jingguo he Gangling de Tedian," *Renmin Ribao*, September 26, 1949.

⁵⁸ B. Sumya, *Gerel Suuder: Iu. Tsedenbalyn Khuviin Temdeglelees* (Ulaanbaatar: MAKHN-yn Tuv Khoroonu dergedekh Erdem Shinzhilgeenii Tuv, 1992), pp. 88-89.

⁵⁹ Lhamsurengiin Bat-Ochir, *Choibalsan*, p. 186.

however, brushed off this idea in no uncertain terms, leaving the Marshal to nurse the sorrows of his unrealized dreams.⁶⁰ Two and a half months after this meeting, triumphant Mao Zedong travelled to Moscow, making the journey by train across Siberia. Mao did not stop over in Ulaanbaatar on the way (the Trans-Mongolian would not be built until some years later), nor did he ever have a chance to meet with Choibalsan. The Chinese, however, returned to the question of “reuniting” with Outer Mongolia after 1953, when Stalin died. In doing so, they cited Mongolia’s independence as one of Stalin’s “mistakes.”⁶¹ Nothing ever came of these Chinese probes. The new Soviet leadership, as enthusiastic as Nikita Khrushchev may have felt for the Sino-Soviet alliance, would not surrender Mongolia’s independence, which Stalin had wrestled away from the Chinese with blood, sweat and tears.

Conclusion

Mongolia’s independence was thus effectively a by-product of Stalin’s geopolitical game. Perhaps in recognition of this, the Mongols kept Stalin’s statue in front of the national library when Stalin’s statues came down all over the USSR. The statue was ultimately removed after Mongolia’s democratic transition, having now been replaced with the statue of the Mongolian scholar B. Rinchin who by the way was a great advocate of pan-Mongolism. Rinchin spent those hopeful days of August 1945 in search of historical materials and folklore on Chinggis Khaan and his empire.⁶² Like Rinchin, Choibalsan was aware of Mongolia’s past, and it haunted him as he surveyed the uncertain postwar landscape of Asia. The ancient empire could not be restored but unification (if partial) of the Mongol peoples was within grasp. That was the first thing that Chinggis had accomplished in his time, a feat Choibalsan certainly hoped to repeat.

On one occasion, when, in August 1947, Choibalsan met with Stalin at the latter’s residence in Ritsa, about 125 miles from Sochi, the Mongolian leader brought along his family, including his son Nergui. Taking Nergui’s hand, Stalin asked the boy: “You would like to be like Chinggis Khan, wouldn’t you?” “Yes,” answered the boy. “Correct. That’s good,” said Stalin.⁶³ He could have asked the same of Choibalsan, and he would have received the same answer. But Stalin was engaged in a difficult game with China. The Mongolian question was an important trump card in that game. Stalin could encourage Choibalsan when he needed to put pressure on China (as in 1944-45), and he could hold him back, as he did in the subsequent years. He never said no to Choibalsan, and this was partly because Stalin did not want to discard the Inner Mongolian card, even as Mao was moving to claim power in New China. Stalin was an opportunist, and as such, he was not averse to playing the same card twice, and perhaps he could not yet say, even during his last meeting with Choibalsan on October 1, 1949, whether he might or might not play the card again. So, perhaps it was not in vain that Choibalsan lived and died the Great Mongolia dream. The glimmer of hope was always there.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 186-7.

⁶¹ Sergey Radchenko, “New Documents on Mongolia and the Cold War”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 16 (Woodrow Wilson Center: Washington D.C.: Fall 2007/Winter 2008), pp. 341-366.

⁶² Ivanov’s report, ll. 54-55.

⁶³ Lhamsurengiin Bat-Ochir, *Choibalsan*, p. 182.

