

The Nomonhan Incident and the Politics of Friendship on the Russia-Mongolia-China Border

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The summer of 2009 in Ulaanbaatar was unusually bustling for an otherwise sleepy city at a time when almost half of its one million strong population were out in summer camps drinking koumiss (Mo. *airag*) in the vast countryside. The whole nation was determined to enjoy the precious tranquillity after a peaceful presidential election, avoiding a repeat of last year’s violence in the wake of parliamentary elections. Amongst the few momentous events was the high-profile state-visit on August 25-26 by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. His main agenda was to promote cooperation in Mongolia’s strategic mining sector, a sector for which all the major powers in the world jostled to befriend Mongolia in anticipation of the long awaited passage of mineral extraction laws by Mongolia’s parliament. During this visit, Russia and Mongolia signed a Declaration on Developing a Strategic Partnership between Mongolia and the Russian Federation, raising the relationship from good neighbors to strategic partners. Medvedev also participated in a ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Khalkhyn Gol. It was not a happenstance, but a specific request initiated by the Russian side. At the end of his visit, the Russian president and the newly elected Mongolian president Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj shot arrows during a *naadam* festival, demonstrating what Medvedev called the

“military brotherhood” between the two nations.



Dmitry Medvedev in Mongolia with Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj



Medvedev and Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj try out Mongol bows

The Battle of Khalkhyn Gol, better known in the west through its Japanese-derived name the Nomonhan Incident, was a large scale military

confrontation in the summer of 1939 between the Soviet-Mongolian forces and the Japanese Kwantung army, fighting on the border separating the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) and Inner Mongolia which was then under the control of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. It is usually celebrated in Russia as a key moment in the illustrious career of General Georgy Zhukov, who went on to lead the defeat of Hitler's invading army. In Mongolia, touted as the signal Mongolian contribution to the war against fascism, it is recalled as a battle of national survival in the face of the most violent aggression that Mongolia has sustained from any foreign force since proclaiming itself a nation-state in 1924, nearly costing its sovereignty. However, over the last twenty years, the significance of the Battle has faded due to strained relations between the Russian Federation and Mongolia as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and to the transformation of Japan from Mongolia's most existential threat to one of Mongolia's closest neighbors, one toward whom the Mongols feel the greatest affinity in Asia today.

Before the arrival of the Russian president, the Zaisan Memorial, a gigantic monument at the foot of the Bogd Khan Mountains, blocking Ulaanbaatar in the south, was dusted and polished. Chronicling the socialist fraternal friendship between the Soviet Union and the MPR, the two oldest socialist states, the monument has survived the radical years of the 1990s.



Zaisan Memorial

However, the South Koreans built a 23 meter tall Golden Buddha statue by its side to dull its prowess.



Golden Buddha Statue

This year's high-level Russian-Mongolian marking the joint Soviet-Mongolian victory over Japan was thus particularly striking. The Russian president's celebration was a stern reminder to the Mongols of their debt to the Russians who helped defend Mongolia's sovereignty.

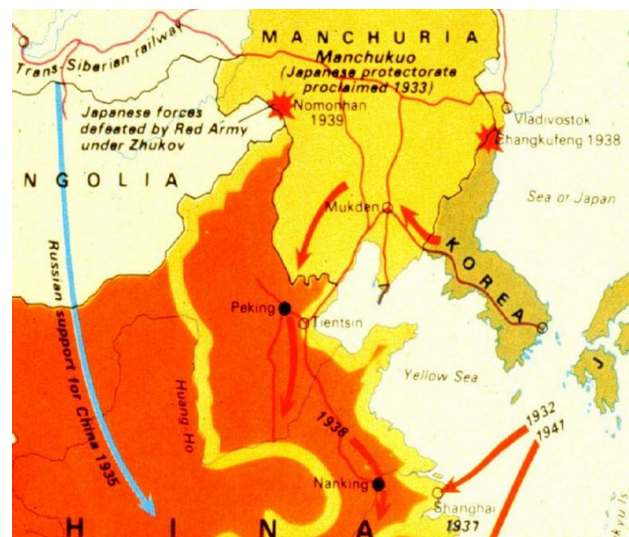


Medvedev, with Tsakhia looking on, presents Mongol World War II veterans with Russian awards in a ceremony commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Khalkyn Gol Battle, August 26, 2009.

The target of Russian animosity remains the Japanese, though it has expanded to include Canada, China, South Korea, the EU, the US and many others. The battleground, however, has now moved *underground*, involving competition to control Mongolia's rare metal minerals. However, unlike 70 years ago when Mongolia staunchly sided with the Soviet Union, today it tries to strike a delicate balance between the nation's northern neighbor (Russia), southern neighbor (China), and various "third neighbors," one of Mongolia's new diplomatic concepts referring to countries beside its two giant territorial neighbors.

For the Japanese, the Nomonhan Incident is an embarrassment if not a humiliation. Perhaps the Japanese government is too proud to admit defeat at the hands of a few half-wild nomads seventy years ago, just as the Mongols have

never comprehended why the world's most powerful army was twice repulsed by those isolated islanders seven hundred years ago. In the folklore of both nations, Japan was saved from Mongol conquest by the intervention of Kamikaze - the "Divine Wind." Similarly, seventy years ago, Mongolia was nearly overrun by Japan, save for Soviet military support. However, while the Japanese idolise and unflinchingly worship the Divine Wind, which seemed to bless only the Japanese, Mongol devotion to the Human Wind swerves as often as the wind changes direction. The unmistakable truth is that Japan and Mongolia have achieved today's friendly relations not due to a lack of historical conflict, but precisely because of contemporary symmetrical reciprocity.



The location of the Nomonhan Incident

At the initiative of a few peace-loving Japanese academics, a joint international symposium was held in Ulaanbaatar on July 3-4, 2009 to reassess the Incident organized by Japan's Sekiguchi Global Research Association together with the General Archival Authority of Mongolia and the Institute of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.



The choices of timing for this symposium and the above-mentioned Russian celebration are as fascinating as they are revealing of the different attitudes of the Russians and the Japanese: while the Russians chose dates highlighting a Soviet-Mongolian triumph, the Japanese opted for earlier dates, commemorating a time when the Japanese Kwantung army was at the height of its power. The symposium was international enough, with the participation of a sizable contingent of prominent Japanese and Russian scholars. Unlike previous ones, however, this symposium was attended by a few western scholars and perhaps more significantly a negligible number of expatriate Inner Mongolian scholars, including this author.

As with most academic conferences, this one was no exception in raising many new questions while solving few. Indeed, there is as yet no agreement on what meaning should be given to the event. It is still called an Incident (*jiken*) by the Japanese, named after a place called Nomonhan in Inner Mongolia, but this characterization is more than an attempt to disguise a major military defeat. We can measure the name's historical weight when we compare it to the Japanese atrocity committed in Nanjing. Japanese most often call it *Nankin Jiken* - Nanjing Incident, but it is generally referred to as *Nanjing Datushua* (Nanjing Massacre) and *Rape of Nanjing* in Chinese and

English renderings, which signify heavy moral incrimination. In recent years, on the Japanese side, there have been efforts to reassess both its name and its historical magnitude, especially its place in world military history, recognizing both the magnitude of the events and their impact on Japan's war making.

In Mongolia and Russia, it is still called a *Battle*, named after a river in Mongolia called Khalkhyn Gol, denoting the major military significance and placing it on a par with the Battle of Leningrad. On the Mongolian side, however, there seems to be a retreat from Battle (*dain*) in favor of accepting the Japanese nomenclature, calling it a *hiliin budlian* - border incident. Is this simply linguistic sloppiness, or is it a mental disorder, commensurate to another meaning of *budlian* - confusion, given the changing perception of Japan from an enemy to a friendly neighbor? As Mongols like to say, only history will tell.



The Khalkhyn Gol separating the MPR and Manchukuo during the battle

Many western writers, however, use a different terminology, referring to the the event as a conflict, which can be seen alternatively as maintaining neutrality or as showing insensitivity to the significance of the event. Whatever the name, there is an emerging consensus that it was the first major defeat for Japan in World War II, one which forced a

change in its military direction leading ultimately to the attack at Pearl Harbor and the Asia-Pacific War.

What all this suggests is that the exact meaning of the event will not be set any time soon, nor will international consensus emerge on how to name it “properly.” While such a state of affairs may be cause for despair, in fact it allows us to explore the Battle/Incident/War/Conflict from different angles. One approach, which is adopted here, is to attend to the powerful sense of enmity and friendship that is manifest today, perhaps no less strongly than it was seventy years ago. This means that we can move away from the military front to social and relational dimensions, which cannot be easily exorcized. Rather, the affect imbedded therein informs the relationship of each of the four parties concerned to one another; it is as easily invoked as was the case this year for emphasizing Russian interest in Mongolia to the exclusion of Japanese interest, thereby giving it renewed relevance.

Central to my perspective are Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political and Mao Zedong’s United Front strategy [2]. Formulated in 1927, Schmitt’s concept involves binary opposition, with the self-exercising agency to distinguish between friend and foe, or more precisely whether a friend is a real friend or actually a hidden enemy. Mao’s strategy, developed in 1925, was not simple binary opposition but a triangular structure, wherein the self allies with a friend to neutralize the threat from a foe. Their subtle differences aside, both the concept and the strategy are ontologically predicated, demanding that the self be conscious of one’s existential identity in a web of social relationships, never losing sight of the material consequence that a failure of judgment might have for one’s fate.

Mao’s and Schmitt’s relational approaches are thus a useful tool for understanding the multiplicity of the Battle/Incident/War/Conflict,

allowing us to go beyond the standard dualism as exemplified by Alvin D. Coox’s monumental but flawed book, *Nomonhan: Japan Against Russia, 1939* [3]. Coox provides a skewed picture of Nomonhan by presenting it exclusively as a battle between Japan and Russia, neglecting the Mongolian dimension. All Russian and Japanese writings on the subject focus on their own forces and those of their nemesis, downplaying or sometimes conveniently forgetting the involvement of their respective Mongolian allies. The preponderance of the Mongolian literature, on the other hand, magnifies the contribution of Mongols associated with the MPR against Japanese fascism.



MPR cavalry charge during the Battle of Khalkhyn Gol

The purpose of this essay is to bring to the fore the role of a long neglected party to the Incident, namely the Inner Mongols, who fought on the Japanese side. The point is not to highlight Inner Mongolian contributions to the Incident, thereby gaining a perverse sense of satisfaction, however significant their role might have been. What needs unraveling are the entangled relationships involving the Soviet Union, the MPR, Japan and Inner Mongolia that a simple picture of a Japanese-Soviet duality disguises. Clearly, in this relational approach, we can neither simply dismiss the MPR as a

minor “puppet” power fighting alongside the Soviet army, nor the Inner Mongols on the Japanese side as playing an auxiliary role of little significance.



Mongol cavalrymen in the Hingan Army at Nomonhan

Here I limit myself to exploring the counterpart of the Soviet-Mongolian friendship pact, that is, the alliance between Japan and the Inner Mongols. Unbeknownst to, downplayed or dismissed by many historians, was the participation of about ten thousand Inner Mongolian troops, who outnumbered the MPR troops. Known as the Hingan [Ch. Xing’an] Army in Manchukuo, their Mongolian identity immediately challenges the usual representation of the nemesis of the Mongolia-USSR Allied Forces by recognizing the Japan-

Manchukuo Allied Forces. The ephemeral existence of Manchukuo (1932 - 1945) cannot provide an excuse to ignore what “the Incident” entailed for the native Inner Mongols who would be left to pick up the pieces, far more than a few unexploded bombs, left behind by the departure of the Japanese from the scene with their defeat in 1945. Furthermore, it is important to examine what the Incident meant for the Inner Mongols who were fighting on the Japanese side against their co-ethnics, the Mongols of the MPR.



An unexploded cannon shell found in Inner Mongolia

It needs no reminder that Mongolia was divided into two parts, Inner and Outer, by the Qing dynasty. What needs to be emphasized is that in the first half of the twentieth century, the two Mongolias became spheres of interest of two newly rising empires, Russia and Japan, respectively. The acrimonious conflicts between the two empires had direct bearing on the permanent separation between the two Mongolias, and the Incident, to a great extent, institutionalized that separation by settling the border disputes between the MPR and Manchukuo, of which eastern Inner Mongolia was a prominent part. With the departure of Japan from the scene in 1945, China inherited that borderline between Mongolia and China. Thus, bringing in the Inner Mongolian

dimension is not simply to add color to an already complex war, but makes it possible to understand the larger repercussions for the formation of both Mongolia and China: the former minus the largest part and population of historical Mongolia, and the latter with the addition of the world's largest Mongolian population.

Japan was the major source of inspiration for Inner Mongolian modernity and nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, some Mongolian princes such as the Kharachin prince Gongsangnorbu, impressed by the Meiji Revolution, set out to modernize Mongolian society. They were pro-Japan, supporting the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese war. Conversely, burgeoning Chinese nationalism directed against the ruling Manchu and increasing Mongol discontents in the wake of massive land loss to the Chinese led Japan to see the Mongols as a potential force to cultivate in its continental ambition, specifically in its two-pronged struggle against Russia and China. In 1916, the Japanese supported the military campaign of Babujab, an Inner Mongolian pan-Mongolist who was rejected by Outer Mongolia after the tripartite treaty that reduced Mongolian independence to an autonomous state recognizing Chinese suzerainty [4]. His untimely death in 1916 did not stop the Japanese from supporting other Inner Mongolian leaders, but Japan's indecision or its internal factional division over China and Mongolia resulted in repeated blunders in Inner Mongolia, thereby both inciting Chinese hostility toward the Inner Mongols and diminishing Japan's moral authority in Mongol eyes.

With the declaration of independence of Outer Mongolia in 1911 supported by Tsarist Russia, and especially following the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924 under the aegis of the Soviet Union, Inner Mongolian nationalism was directed towards unification of

two Mongolias. Many Mongols saw Outer Mongolia as the moral and sacred centre - *Golomt* or the Hearth. Eastern (Inner) Mongolia, especially the Hulunbuir region, was the hotbed of the Mongolian unification movement, or failing that, autonomy from the new Chinese government. The demise of the Inner Mongolian nationalist movement, which was led by the Inner Mongolia People's Revolutionary Party in 1927-8 [5], and subsequent Chinese warlord-turned-Nationalist control of Inner Mongolia, compelled many Inner Mongolian nationalists, especially the aristocratic princes, to welcome the Japanese as a third sympathetic force, not least because Japan openly supported Inner Mongolian autonomy from China. In the first half of the twentieth century, Inner Mongolia was caught among four countries: Russia, Mongolia, China and Japan. Each of the four states had a pan-Mongolist ambition of one kind or another, but each also was paranoid about pan-Mongolism espoused by the others.

Japanese support for Inner Mongolian nationalism against China has often been touted as the foundation for friendship between the Mongols and the Japanese; but I suggest that it is also the source of tension between the two, which had had serious consequence for the Incident. Alliance may be forged against a common enemy, but in a triadic relationship, friendship between two allies needs as much management as the care and effort taken to defeat the enemy. Indeed alliance or friendship does not necessarily forfeit conflict, but may lead to it. And enmity that results from a mismanaged friendship is qualitatively different and may as well be more deadly than a pure enmity between two known enemies. Let me clarify what I mean by using the example of Inner Mongolian autonomy, which Japan supported.

Autonomy, in its original western understanding, is a political concept denoting limited sovereignty, and a possible step

towards independence. However, in the Asian context, it has relational features, forming the basis for political alliance. Specifically, Inner Mongols demanded autonomy in relation to the Chinese state and society, which was deemed the enemy Other. It was an autonomy supported by the Japanese who did so as friends of the Mongols and foes of the Chinese government headed by Chiang Kai-shek. Thus, Inner Mongolian autonomy was predicated on the distinction between friend and enemy. However, Japan made Inner Mongolia autonomous or even independent of the Chinese enemy, but it was not autonomous of the friend, Japan. Thus, when the enemy was defeated, what was left were two friends in alliance, but friends who did not draw a clear boundary between themselves. Since Inner Mongolian autonomy was not a fight to get into the Japanese fold, while Japanese imperialism sought to encompass Inner Mongolia, we now see a new source of conflict between the two friends. The property of affect involved in such enmity was fundamentally different from the enmity with China, for it now involved a sense of betrayal, betrayal by a friend. Specifically, after the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, with the collapse of Chinese administration in the area, the triad was reduced to a dyad, that is, to a relationship between Mongols and Japanese. My contention is that one cannot be independent or autonomous of a friend without challenging the friendship itself. In other words, insistence on autonomy in a regime predicated on relationality rather than constitutional rule to regulate group relationships would call that “friendship” into question, turning friends into foes. Following this logic, tensions developed between the Inner Mongols and the Japanese immediately after the founding of Manchukuo. Indeed, the subsequent history of Manchukuo was not one of Mongols enjoying autonomy, but in fact, one of demanding or fighting for autonomy from the Japanese, the very agent that helped create Mongolian autonomy in Manchukuo in the first place. Two cases illustrate this point.

In late summer 1931, Khorchin Mongols organized an Inner Mongolian Autonomy Army to fight for Inner Mongolian autonomy from China. This armed movement was organized by Tomorbagan, a Khorchin Mongol and a Comintern agent who returned from the Soviet Union in 1930. He was also a member of the failed Inner Mongolia People’s Revolutionary Party, which went underground after 1928. Two cavalry corps were organized, commanded by military leaders of the two Khorchin banners, and they attracted the surviving soldiers of Gada Meiren, a martyred Khorchin banner army commander who opposed the Khorchin prince’s selling of Mongol land to Zhang Zuolin, a Chinese warlord in Manchuria. The army was also joined by students of the Northeastern Mongolian Banner Teacher’s College established in 1929 by the famous Daur-Mongolian revolutionary Merse, a co-founder of the Inner Mongolia People’s Revolutionary Party in 1925. Two years earlier, he had tried to storm his hometown, Hailar in Hulunbuir, but having miserably failed, he surrendered to Zhang Xueliang, who succeeded his father, Zhang Zuolin, in controlling Manchuria and eastern Inner Mongolia. Soon after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria on September 18th, 1931, the Japanese decided to support the Inner Mongolian autonomy movement. They aided Ganjuurjav, the eldest son of Babujab, the legendary Inner Mongol hero fighting for Mongolian unification, building the third cavalry corps of the Inner Mongolian Autonomy Army, and equipping it with 3,000 rifles and 600,000 bullets, as well as cannons and machine guns. However, in February 1932, when the army refused to accept Japanese advisors, Han Sewang, commander of the second corps, and Xiao Lama, who was Gada Meiren’s protégé and commander of the second brigade, were killed by the Japanese. Most of Xiao Lama’s soldiers, on hearing of his murder, left the army and became “Mongol bandits”, or ‘horse-thieves’ as the Japanese would say, taking up arms against the Japanese until 1936 when they were wiped

out. The remaining two armies were reorganized into the Hingan Army, part of the Manchukuo army. Although almost all the soldiers were Mongols and the original commander was a former Mongolian prince, Badmarabtan, over the years, most of the top commanders were replaced with Japanese, thereby losing its autonomy [6].

As the case shows, the conflict between the two allies raged over nothing but the issue of the boundary between themselves. While the Japanese insisted on Japanese control and leadership of the Mongolian army, Mongols insisted on their internal sovereignty. Loss of organisational capacity was tantamount to losing the *raison d'être* for being an autonomous nation, and this was the least a friend in the alliance had expected, but it was often the case. Failure to resolve this thorny issue especially on the part of the stronger party, for reasons of benevolence or malice, was bound to produce acrimonious response, defeating the very purpose of the alliance, producing benefit to neither party.

Perhaps the most dramatic clash between the Mongol vision of autonomy and the Japanese imperial vision was the execution of Lingsheng, a prominent politician from the Hulunbuir region, later the governor of Hingan North Province under Manchukuo. Lingsheng was a Daur Mongol, having extensive connections with the Soviet Union and the MPR, and he was related to Merse, the Inner Mongolian revolutionary. Lingsheng was initially friendly to the Japanese, persuaded as he was by Japanese support for Inner Mongolian autonomy from Chinese warlords. He was one of the 'founding fathers' of Manchukuo, having personally joined a delegation to invite the last Manchu emperor Pu Yi to become the head of the Manchukuo state. However, he soon became disillusioned with the Japanese when the latter began to tighten control of the four Hingan provinces by sending Japanese as deputies or advisors at all levels of

administration. In the 1935 Manzhouli Conference negotiating with the MPR over a border dispute between the MPR and Manchukuo, Lingsheng, the chief representative of the Manchukuo delegation, refused to support the Japanese claim as had been expected. In several border clashes between Japanese and MPR armies, the Japanese were repeatedly defeated, leading them to suspect that Lingsheng had sent intelligence to the MPR side. In a meeting of the four Hingan governors in Mukden at the end of March 1936, he was sharply critical of the Japanese policy of settling Japanese peasant immigrants in the Hingan north, south, and east provinces, a policy he saw as indistinguishable from that of the Chinese warlords. He also denounced Kwantung army interference with the local administration, a denunciation that cost him his life on April 24, 1936 [7].

The Japanese purge of Lingsheng, the most prominent pro-Manchukuo Mongolian leader, exposed, inter alia, the fundamental structural problem of demanding autonomy from a friend. As a friend supporting Mongolian autonomy from the Chinese "enemy," the Japanese never thought of guaranteeing Mongolian autonomy from the Japanese "friend" themselves; indeed, such a demand was deemed heinous, showing ingratitude to the Japanese and meriting capital punishment. From the Mongolian perspective, they had never expected that they would lose autonomy at the hands of their friend and ally. Thus, Japanese disrespect for Mongolian autonomy, and the murder of Lingsheng, shocked all Mongols, including Japan's most loyal supporters.

This tension was dramatically manifested in the Nomonhan Incident. The Kwantung army mobilized almost all Hingan Army forces in the Tenth Military Zone, which had incorporated the former Hingan North and Hingan East Garrison Armies, and a newly established Hingan Division from within the Ninth Military

Zone. Altogether, there were eight cavalry regiments, totaling about ten thousand Mongol soldiers. Whereas the four divisions in the Tenth Military Zone were commanded by Mongols with Japanese deputies, most of the commanders at all levels in the Hingan Division were Japanese.



Hingan Mongol soldiers race into battle at Nomonhan

The Hingan Division was of the highest caliber in the Manchukuo army. Prior to the Nomonhan Incident, Mongol soldiers had fought successfully along with the Japanese army in suppressing Chinese anti-Japanese guerilla forces and winning all the battles against Chinese Nationalist armies in southern Manchuria and north China. However, on the Nomonhan battlefield, by August 3, only a month after entering the battle, just 31 people remained in the Division. Of these, only one was Mongol, the others being Japanese officers. Many Inner Mongol soldiers died in the battle, but the majority fled, deserting the army [8]. This behavior of the Inner Mongol soldiers in the Hingan Division and its ignominious end begs explanation.

One might wish to explain it in terms of the overwhelming superiority of the joint Soviet-Mongolian forces. Indeed, the Japanese who usually had the upper hand in battles against the Chinese, proved no match, and they also suffered a devastating defeat. But we

cannot dismiss the so-called puppet army from the vantage point of the victors. What needs to be explained is why the majority of Inner Mongol soldiers deserted, failing to die a glorious death, having been ordered, like all the Japanese soldiers, to fight to the death.

The answer must be sought in Japanese deployment of Inner Mongolian troops against the MPR. Fighting or invading the MPR posed for the Inner Mongols a moral dilemma of the highest order, contravening their nationalist sentiment, which was directed toward unification with the MPR. Japanese anti-Communist propaganda and that of saving the MPR from racial and ideological enemies - the Soviet Russians - was not convincing, particularly because the Inner Mongols had become disillusioned about the prospect of their own autonomy within Japanese-controlled Manchukuo. In fact, for all its problems, of which the Inner Mongols were partly aware, the MPR was an independent nation. In other words, Japanese suppression of Mongolian autonomy within Manchukuo and the murder of the most prominent Mongol leader, Lingsheng, destroyed any moral high ground Japan could have when propagating their own superiority over the Soviet Russians in terms of treating the Mongols.



Japan's 72nd Infantry Regiment, 23rd Infantry Division approaches Nomonhan

Jinjuurjab's behavior during the Incident was emblematic of Mongol sentiment. He was the younger brother of Ganjuurjab, and a son of Babujab. Upon Babujab's death in 1916, all of his children were taken to Japan for education. By 1939, Jinjuurjab was a highly Japanised Mongol, and was seen by the Japanese as loyal to Japan. Even he, however, was disillusioned, and sometimes openly defiant. For instance, when Lingsheng was killed by the Japanese, he married his younger sister to Lingsheng's son Sebjingtai [9]. In the 1936 Manzhouli conference, as the liaison officer between the Manchukuo and MPR delegations, he was suspected of leaking information to the MPR and was kicked out of the Manchukuo delegation. A highly educated Mongol with a passion for Inner Mongolian autonomy as he was, Jinjuurjab was deeply concerned about the danger that the Japanese invasion posed for MPR sovereignty. Yet, as a high-ranking officer, and a son of Babujab, who was deemed an enemy of the MPR, he knew what awaited him if the Soviet-Mongolian forces won the war. Faced with this dilemma, when the Hingan Division was ordered to march to Nomonhan, he requested a ten day leave to look after his sick wife, utilizing his connection with the high command of the Kwantung army [10]. This was an astonishing move.

In the battle, Hingan Mongol soldiers and commanders agreed among themselves not to fight hard against MPR soldiers, "not to forget that we are all descendants of Chinggis Khan" [11]. But they had to deceive their Japanese superiors who were closely monitoring them. Soon after joining the battle, two Hingan Mongolian officers defected to the MPR side, and Soviet aircraft dropped pamphlets with their photographs urging the Hingan Mongol soldiers that "Mongolians do not fight Mongolians," and calling on them to turn their guns against the Japanese. Adding to the discontent of the Inner Mongol soldiers was Japanese abuse. Japanese officers physically punished Mongol soldiers for the slightest

offence. Having lost their fighting morale, the Inner Mongol soldiers sought to find a way out of the battle: one way was to get wounded or killed - this would result in permanent departure from the battlefield; another option was to surrender to the Soviet-Mongolian army, but it was not easy given the distance between the two camps and tight Japanese control; the third, which all agreed to be the most feasible option, was self-mutilation by shooting oneself; wounded, they would have legitimate reason to leave the battlefield [12]. Soon, the majority deserted the battlefield, many having shot themselves.

Note the interesting idea that Mongols do not fight Mongols. This is arguably the first time in history that a major Mongol group refused to fight another Mongolian group. As is well known, the Manchus conquered the Mongols by pitting one group against another. This tactic has caused enormous repercussions for inter-Mongol relations down to today; for instance, there remains lingering tension between Khorchin and other Inner Mongolian groups, between the Eastern Mongols and Oirats, and between Khalkhas and Chahars. Certainly the Manchus were enormously successful in persuading Mongols to align with the Manchus rather than sticking with other Mongolian groups. The Oirat-Khalkha alliance in the face of the Manchu conquest proved short-lived and imploded. Thus, the litmus test of nationalism, I suggest, is whether the sense of brotherhood would be extended across different Mongolian groups. In this regard, the Inner Mongolian soldiers' refusal to fight the MPR army, and their decisions to self-mutilate rather than fight to kill their co-ethnics, was unprecedented in Mongolian history.

The implications of this nationalism were profound. For one thing, modern Inner Mongols were never unconscionable collaborators with the Japanese against their co-ethnics, though such denunciations were rampant in Mongolia, and Inner Mongols have paid a high price as a

result. Almost all adult males among the Barga Mongols who had settled in Mongolia in the 1910s were accused of being Japanese spies because of links with their kinsmen in Inner Mongolia and were liquidated, as were nearly all adult male Buryat Mongols in the Great Purge. Secondly, by refusing to fight the MPR and by risking being killed by the Japanese, Inner Mongols rendered Inner Mongolia a buffer to Mongolia, protecting its sovereignty. However ineffective such a defense was, I suggest that the Nomonhan Incident proved to be the first instance when the Qing practice was reversed whereby Inner Mongolia was no longer a stepping stone to conquer far-flung Mongolian groups. To be sure, these two statements may need to be qualified, attending to the historical nitty gritty. But this much is clear: Inner Mongols have been accused of treason as often by Mongolia as by Japan and China, just as their support was equally and eagerly sought by these states. What needs to be appreciated is a general Inner Mongolian identity that is acutely aware of its interstitial situation.

On December 15, 1939, a conference was held for seven days by senior Japanese officers of the Hingan Army, together with Kwantung army officers, to review the Hingan Army. At the end of the conference, the Japanese senior advisor to the Manchukuo Ministry of Security summed up the reasons for the defeat of the Hingan Army. Two points stood out:

1. The strategic mistake: [we] should not have used Mongols to fight Mongols. Later, the Mongols should be sent south to fight the Eighth Route Army, in order to avoid nationality conflict [between Mongols and Japanese].
2. The number of deserters was greater in all regiments with Japanese commanders. In regiments with Mongolian

commanders, deserters were relatively few, and such regiments had better fighting capacity. Therefore, the policy of using Japanese as regiment and company commanders was in the “Hingan Army” wrong [13].

The first point was obvious, but the second one needs clarification. It referred to the contrast between the Hingan Division and the Tenth Military Zone, which was based in Hulunbuir. The majority of the soldiers of the Tenth Military Zone were local Barga Mongols who had longstanding disputes with the Khalkha Mongols over pasture around the Nomonhan area. They were fighting spiritedly not because they were defending Manchukuo, but their own tribal border.

This Japanese assessment was a candid acknowledgement of their failure to handle the relationship properly. But the damage was already done. In fact, the Japanese failed to learn the bitter lesson, but repeated the same mistake in 1945. As the Soviet Union and the MPR declared war against Japan, the Kwantung army ordered the Hingan army to halt invading joint Soviet-Mongolian armies. As in the Nomonhan battle, the Hingan army was once again at the forefront of the confrontation. Would they fight to the death to defend Manchukuo and the Greater Japanese Empire against their co-ethnics? It was a moment calling for the most important decision of one’s life; it was one that would also test the friendship between Japanese and Inner Mongols.

On August 9, 1945, the day after the Soviet-Mongolian declaration of war against Japan, Guo Wenlin, the Daur Mongolian commander of the Manchukuo Tenth Military Zone, and Jinjuurjab, his chief of staff, defected to the Soviet-Mongolian side. On the 11th, with their support, Mongol soldiers killed more than thirty Japanese officers within the zone. Two

days later, on August 13, a Soviet aircraft dropped an open letter from Guo Wenlin and Jinjuurjab, entitled: "A letter from Guo Wenlin and Jinjuurjab asking puppet army soldiers to surrender." The following point is eye-catching: "No soldier should forget the history of misery caused to the borderland people and the puppet army officers and soldiers by the Khalkhyn Gol Battle and the Nomonhan Incident incited by the Japanese warmongers." Influenced by the letter, all the Mongol soldiers in other Hingan army units surrendered, but not without killing their Japanese superiors. This was the most radical betrayal of the Japanese by any of the puppet armies under the Japanese control, and it was all the more significant because it was done by arguably Japan's most trustworthy ally [14].

It is not too far-fetched to suggest that precisely because they refused to fight the Soviet-Mongolian forces and instead defected from Japan, Inner Mongolia suffered little devastation during the Soviet-Mongolian occupation of 1945. This political capital would also prove useful when Mongols struggled for Inner Mongolian autonomy within China in 1946-47, avoiding the fate of being ransacked as Taiwan had been by the Chinese Nationalists in 1948. However, the kind of autonomy established in Inner Mongolia turned out to be relational as Inner Mongols once again relied on one Chinese group as friend against another group as enemy. Does History ever forgive those who fail to learn Minerva's lessons?

Decades after the Nomonhan Incident Japan has become Mongolia's best friend, and Japanese friendship with the Inner Mongols has also resumed. This is not to suggest that they should not be friends. If there is any fundamental lesson to be learned from this tragic saga of friendship, it is to be mindful of both its positive ideal and its potential for intensified animosity if the relationship is not managed well. It is also imperative that the Mongols decide with whom and how to make

friends by themselves rather than being dictated by others, more so now than at any time since the end of the war. Today, Russians seem determined to keep Mongolia on their side, as do the Chinese who try to keep Inner Mongols loyal to themselves. The Nomonhan Incident, or what the Chinese call the Nomonhan War - *Nuomenhan Zhanzheng* - now figure prominently in China's anti-Japanese hype. The Hailar Memorial Garden for the World Anti-Fascist Wars - a large theme park which opened in September 2008 - features a live reenactment of the Nomonhan War for tourists.



Performing the Nomonhan War in Inner Mongolia

One hopes that Mongols and Japanese, Mongols and Russians, and indeed Mongols and Chinese, can review the historical lessons of animosity and friendship and chart a road ahead in a new and interdependent but challenging world.

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Notes

[1] This is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally delivered at "The Battle of Khalkhyn Gol (Nomonhan Incident) in the World History: Knowing the Past and Talking of the Future," an international symposium held on July 3-4, 2009, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. The proceedings of the symposium are due to be published under the same title by Fukuyoshi in Tokyo. I thank Tanaka Katsuhiko, Imanishi Junko and Husel Borjigin, the editors, for permission to reproduce the paper here in advance. I am grateful to Mark Selden for his comments on an earlier version of the paper.

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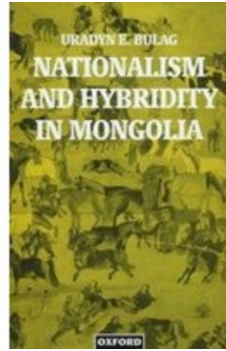
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[11] *ibid.* p. 128.

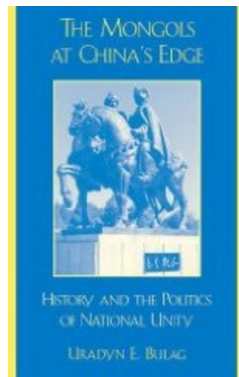
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