

MONGOLIA

Mongols Fear Hordes

China seems too close for comfort

By Bertil Lintner in Ulan Bator

Mongolia has replaced the Soviet-era revolutionary hero Sukhbaatar featured on its banknotes with a portrait of the medieval conqueror Genghis Khan. And while a statue of Lenin still stands in the centre of the capital, Ulan Bator, the Mongolians are no longer focused on Russia, but on their neighbour to the south.

"Every step the Mongolians take is done with a nervous look over the shoulder towards China," says an Asian diplomat in Ulan Bator. Mongolia is a former border region of China that gained independence, with Russian protection, in 1921.

With its 2.2 million people spread over 1,556,000 square kilometres of desert, steppe and rugged mountains, landlocked Mongolia remains extremely vulnerable. Just as the Siberian forests give way to the sands of northern China on their territory, the Mongolians see the prospect of Chinese encroachment.

"The Mongolians have seen what's happened to Inner Mongolia and Tibet," non-Han autonomous regions of China that Beijing has tried to assimilate. "They know that there is precious little they can do to keep out the more powerful and much more numerous Chinese once the Russians are gone," the diplomat says.

Mongolian fear of Chinese migration onto their land comes up often in discussions in Ulan Bator. Although there are 3.5 million Mongolians in neighbouring Inner Mongolia, 18 million Chinese migrants have settled there as well.

It's not just migrants the Mongolians worry about. Following the 1992 departure of Soviet troops, the task of policing the 4,500-kilometre border with China has been the responsibility of the *Kyzgarin Tserig*, or the border security force, and the regular Mongolian army. Both are under-equipped and have been downgraded to a strength of about 20,000 men because of economic difficulties, according to military analysts.

Despite this weakness, Mongolia has been asserting its independence in foreign policy. Mongolia declared itself a "nuclear-free zone" in 1992 and last October Foreign Minister Tserenpiliyn Gombosuren, speaking before the United Na-

tions General Assembly, protested Chinese nuclear tests.

While border security and migration are for now potential worries rather than practical ones, another kind of Chinese invasion has taken place already. Official and unofficial trade between the two countries has increased dramatically. Cheap Chinese consumer goods are flooding the markets of Ulan Bator, and China appears eager to tap Mongolia's wealth of copper, timber and animal products.

Not everyone in Mongolia sees the country's modest export growth as a positive development, as a controversy over the country's well-known cashmere wool shows. Under the socialist system, the wool was processed in the country by state firms. But after Mongolia's democratic revolution in 1990 brought central planning to an end, then-Prime Minister Dashiyn Byambasuren told the local herdsmen that they could sell their wool directly to buyers across the southern border to save time and money.

According to a report by local journalist Namdagyn Sharav, Chinese merchants soon thereafter bought up more than 60% of Mongolia's cashmere. The government in Ulan Bator panicked, and banned all private exports of raw cashmere to protect the domestic processing industry.

"The overall effect of government's ban on export of raw cashmere appears to have been quite negative, as garment manufacturers do not seem to have been able to increase their production enough to make up for the lost earnings suffered by herdspeople," says a new report by

the UN Development Programme. The International Monetary Fund is also critical of what is seen as a step away from the government's pledge to loosen state control of the economy.

In March, Minister of Nature and Environment Z. Batjargal called for a similar ban on timber exports, "in particular to China." He said the sales "may result in a serious ecological imbalance in the country." And while the government has handed control of livestock over to individual herdsmen, the Asian diplomat says "a plan to privatize land has been modified—in effect stalled—because they fear the Chinese would grab it."

The Mongolian economy grew by 2% last year, its first expansion since 1989. To help Mongolia maintain its fledgling distinctness, international institutions and donor countries are pouring more aid per capita into Mongolia than into any other country in Asia.

"The main thing is to make sure this country doesn't fall into China's hands after having rid itself of Moscow's influence," says an official from the Asian Development Bank in Ulan Bator.

Japan-led donors have pledged \$765 million to Mongolia. And U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Winston Lord has pledged an additional \$10.8 million to strengthen "strategic interests and democracy."

Tibet's Dalai Lama last visited Mongolia in September 1994. "That made the Chinese really furious," says another foreign diplomat in Ulan Bator. "But for the Mongolians this was a clear gesture to emphasize their newborn, post-communist spiritualism as well as their national independence."

When Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Mongolia in April 1994, he said he "respected Mongolia's choice of their own development course." He denied asking the Mongolian government not to support a pro-democratic movement in Inner Mongolia. But frictions are evident and, one observer says, the Chinese view Mongolia as "a dagger in China's heart, before as a Soviet satellite, and now as a newly democratized country right on China's doorstep."

Ironically, the survival of a Mongolia outside the Russian and Chinese orbits may rest on the interests of third powers. As a foreign source in Ulan Bator says: "Countries like Afghanistan, Laos and Mongolia survive not because they are important per se, but because somebody thinks it's necessary to keep more powerful neighbours apart."



Traditionally dressed Mongolian soldiers: Looking south, fearfully.