

Who could be 'Taiwan's Russia'?

Written by Jerome Keating
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Two current democracies, Mongolia and Taiwan, opposites in size and population, have a strange, intertwined past. Mongolia is now the world's 19th largest state in area, but ranks 140th in population. Diminutive Taiwan barely makes 137th by area, yet it ranks 51st in population. However, their polar fate runs deeper and involves a shifting relationship vis-a-vis the nebulous character of what is or can be defined as "one China."

The current twist in this relationship started in 1911. At that time, the island of Taiwan was part of Japan, but on the Asian continent, a developing Republic of China (ROC) — one which would ironically later be forced to seek refuge in Taiwan — declared a rebellious independence from the Manchu Qing Empire.

As the Qing Empire broke apart, Mongolia followed suit and declared independence from China. Unfortunately, it soon found that the formative ROC claimed Mongolia as part of its territory. ROC forces invaded Mongolia. Russia, which would have its own revolution in 1917, stepped in and ironically became responsible for making Mongolia the independent nation it is today. Aided first by White Russians against the Chinese and then by Red Russians, Mongolia broke free and declared a second independence in 1921.

Another player, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921, would soon enter and have a part in this developing scenario. The CCP became involved in an on-again, off-again civil war with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) for control of China. They won that civil war and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. While the KMT's ROC retreated to Taiwan, the PRC ruled China and, despite its 1921 origin, would still trace its roots to the 1911 uprising.

To complicate matters for Mongolia and Taiwan, a cliched canard of Han hegemony developed and has been used against each at different times by PRC and/or ROC proponents. That cliché would claim that Mongolia and Taiwan are "inalienable parts of China," parts of the "motherland from time immemorial."

If one would pursue this twisted form of logic, Mongolia might have the "greater claim" to be a "time immemorial part of China." For after Genghis Khan unified the Mongols in 1206, he and his successors went on to conquer China and numerous other lands, creating an empire that stretched from the Korean Peninsula to the area now known as Budapest in Hungary.

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When that empire was split into four Khanates, Kublai Khan eventually rose to take over the Khanate over eastern Asia. It included China, where it became known as the Yuan Dynasty. So was that Mongolia or China?

The Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644) rose within that Mongol Khanate and chased the Mongols back to their steppes. Mongolia and Ming China then continued in separate existence and at war with each other. However, in 1644, the Manchus entered the picture. They conquered China, as well as Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia, and founded the Manchu Empire and its Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1911).

And what about Taiwan? This island, which had been appearing on the maps of many different nations for some time, had been a haven for fishermen, pirates and those who traded with its Aborigines. After a battle between the Dutch and Ming China over Penghu, Taiwan's subsequent colonization began in 1624. It would suffer the Dutch, the Spanish and finally Zheng Chenggong's (鄭成功) — better known as Koxinga (鄭經) — Ming loyalists as they fled the Manchus.

When the Manchus followed and defeated them, they repatriated the Ming loyalists and as a preemptive matter, also brought the western half of Taiwan into their fold in 1682.

The western half of Taiwan would remain in that fold until the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, when the Manchus gave it and the eastern part of the island, which they did not control, to Japan.

That brings this dual narrative back to 1911, when the ROC and Mongolia both declared independence from the Manchus. Over the decades, despite the ROC's protest, Mongolia continued in its independence with Russian assistance. Using its 1947 constitution, the one-party-state KMT still claimed that Mongolia was a part of the ROC.

In 1955, that ROC, a founding member of the UN and a member of the UN Security Council, used its veto to block Mongolia's membership in the UN. Russia was not done; it again forced a tradeoff for Mauritania's membership in 1961 to allow Mongolia to also join the UN. The ROC

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later lost its seat in the UN and its place on the Security Council to the PRC in 1971.

The 1990s proved memorable for Mongolia and Taiwan as both became full-fledged voting democracies with more than one party. Mongolia would soon vote in a non-communist party and Taiwan by 2000 would elect a non-KMT president by popular vote.

There is one more important element in this story that most are not aware of. Back in 1945, when both the KMT and the CCP wanted Russia's help in China's fight against Japan, Moscow, for motivations of its own, required that they agree to allow Mongolia to conduct a referendum on whether it would be a part of China or an independent nation.

In that referendum, with almost 100 percent approval, Mongolia voted to be independent.

This poses an interesting question that Taiwanese still pressured by the "one China" canard might ask: "Who will be our Russia?"

In its actions, Russia was not altruistic. It long understood the hegemony proposed by Han chauvinists in China; it wanted a buffer state. Tibet lacked such help to protect it in the "one China from time immemorial" game.

Today, Taiwan's president still seems drawn to the dream of "one China" and the old KMT/ROC days. He still quotes the outdated 1947 constitution as if times had not changed. He appears more like a quisling than a president of the new democratic Taiwan. However, Taiwan is a mid-sized state, with a population of 23 million and an economy in the top 20 of the world.

While it remains threatened by the PRC, it can wonder: Does it need a Russia? If so, could that role be filled by Japan or the US? And what about a referendum?

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