

## **The Japanese-Soviet struggle for dominance over Mongolian territory (1921-36)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Japan's interest in the Mongols was mostly due to the geographical area that was under them and the importance of the area geopolitically in case any conflict took place with either the Soviet Union or China. The Mongol lands were a capable base for military operations northwards or southwards as well a potential buffer against Chinese or Soviet counter attacks. Inner Mongolia's eastern part was important strategically as it was situated very close to the Manchurian plain, where Japan's strong economic and strategic interests were being developed since the early twentieth century. The region was politically significant also. It was the belief of the Japanese that if they could win the Mongol's support there, then winning the sympathy and support of the Mongols living in the areas controlled by China and the Soviet Union was evident. A concern of Japan was also that control of Inner Mongolia would be financially worrisome with regards to administrative or personnel terms.

**Key Words :** Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, Manchukuo, Buriat, Soviet

### **INTRODUCTION**

The dominance of Soviet Union and Imperial Japan in the Mongolian territory were created by the combination of direct military force and political manipulation to win local support. Japan's interest in the Mongols was mostly due to the geographical area that was under them and the importance of the area geopolitically in case any conflict took place with either the Soviet Union or China. The Mongol lands were a capable base for military operations northwards or southwards as well a potential buffer against Chinese or Soviet counterattacks. Inner Mongolia's eastern part was important strategically as it was situated very close to the Manchurian plain, where Japan's strong economic and strategic interests were being developed since the early twentieth century. The region was politically significant also. It was the belief of the Japanese that if they could win the Mongol's support there, then winning the sympathy and support of the Mongols living in the areas controlled by China and

the Soviet Union was evident. A concern of Japan was also that control of Inner Mongolia would be financially worrisome with regards to administrative or personnel terms. This reasoning made them want a regime in the area that would be economically self-sufficient and also predominantly acceptable to the Mongols, and that would contribute to the war effort as well. In some respects these three goals were contradictory. To win Mongol acceptance meant adjusting to prevailing Mongol institutions, however, being economically self-sufficiency in wartime meant significant changes economically, socially, and institutionally. However, this contradiction couldn't really resolved by the Japanese policy (Narangoa, 2003).

Outer Mongolia was the scene of the Japanese war with the Soviet Union. Japanese believed that Outer Mongolia has been separated by force from other Mongols, and that this separation hinders their development. It is stated also that they look "yearningly" to Japan for their "liberation"; liberation to be brought about by a war between Russia and Japan. In this regard, Pan-Mongolism and Kodo (Imperial Way) are supposed to serve these ends (Mishima, 1942).

Soviet Union carried out negotiations with China to consolidate its control over Outer Mongolia and finally drew it into Soviet-led Communist bloc. The methods it adopted, find parallels in soviet policy in Eastern Europe after World War II (Elleman, 1993-94). The revolutionary change and transfer to the "non capitalist" way of development was resulted from the merger of traditionally systemic and external factors. These were the objectives to shift towards socialism and Mongol nationalists' decision to ally with Soviet Russia (Morozova, 1999).

### **The Japanese-Soviet ventures on Mongolian land:**

In the period from 1921 to 1945, there was a sort of Cold War between Moscow and Tokyo that made each side bristle at any comparison between their Mongolia, the abode of peace and development, and the benighted Mongol regimes on the other side of the frontier. The regimes of Soviet Russian and the Imperial Japan in the Mongol lands were created by a mixture of direct military force and political manoeuvring to win local support. The Red Army advanced into Russia's Buriat Mongol lands in the winter of 1919-1920. In July 1921, the Soviet Russian troops expelled White Russian troops from NeisielKhür. Similarly, the Japanese advance into the Mongol lands took place in two stages. One from 1932 to 1933 put Eastern Inner Mongolia under Japanese control. In the second stage, from 1933 to 1937, the Japanese pushed into central Inner Mongolia (Atwood, 2009).

The Far Eastern territory of the Soviet Union was invaded by Japan immediately after the Revolution of 1917. Japan took the lead in this intervention, although forces from Great Britain, France and the United States participated in the blockade of Soviet ports and the Siberian Expedition. To the Japanese military this invasion, though described as a campaign to restore "peace and order" in revolutionary Russia, was just a good opportunity to attempt expansion on the Continent. Great Britain seems to have been sympathetically interested in giving Japanese imperialism an "outlet" into Siberia. The official *Izvestia*, which denounced the invasion as a Japanese attempt to seize the territories of Siberia, also pointed out that Britain was "hand-in-hand with Japan in working Russia's ruin," and that "the American Government, it seems, was against the Japanese invasion." The Siberian adventure ended in

utter failure, with the expulsion of the invaders from Soviet territory (Asiaticus, 1941: 274).

This fiasco paved the way for resumption of normal diplomatic relations between Japan and Soviet Russia, which remained up to 1931 on a peaceful and good-neighbourly basis. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, however, was the signal for another display of anti-Soviet hostility. Litvinov, then Soviet Foreign Commissar, in a speech before the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R., December 1933, explicitly denounced the new anti-Soviet Japanese policy: "Japan began her military operations two years ago on the assumption that she would only have to declare that these operations were directed against the Soviet Government in order to win the whole capitalist world to her side and to obtain its blessings on her actions." In the same speech he affirmed that the Soviet Union still wanted to live at peace with Japan: "We say to Japan: we do not threaten you; we do not want your land or any territories on the other side of our boundaries; we want to live at peace with you as we have done up to the present; respecting your rights and interests, and asking only that you adopt the same attitude toward our rights and interests." He stressed that up to the end of 1931 Soviet relations with Japan had been of a most neighbourly character, and since there had been until then no occasion for mistrust "we left our Far Eastern border almost without any defense" (Asiaticus, 1941: 275).

Though the occupation of Manchuria was "a violation of the Portsmouth Treaty, confirmed by the Peking Agreement [both signed at the end of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05], according to which Japan has no right to maintain more than a defined minimum number of troops in Manchuria," the Soviet Union did not seek conflict with Japan. He further recalled that in 1931 the Soviet Union offered Japan a non-aggression pact, which was rejected, and in 1933 sold Japan the Soviet share of the Chinese Eastern Railway. As the Japanese policy of concentrating troops along the Soviet frontier was a direct threat, the Soviet Government had to take the necessary military measures. These, however, were "exclusively defensive," and the Soviet Union did not want "to profit by a favourable situation" for waging war on Japan. (Asiaticus, 1941: 276)

Outer Mongolia categorically refused to enter into diplomatic relations with Manchukuo. When the latter thereupon declared Outer Mongolia to be a "danger zone" whose existence on its frontiers could not be tolerated, Soviet Russia responded by entering into an offensive and defensive alliance with the Mongolian People's Republic; equipped Outer Mongolia with airports, wireless stations and hundreds of armoured cars; established a military academy at Urga; founded machine-gun works, munition factories, and textile mills; provided the Mongolian army with up-to-date weapons; and made the herdsmen into warriors once more. (Prawdin, 1961: 540-41)

Thus in 1932 there happened what Mongolia had tried to prevent two decades earlier. When Mongolian national aspirations began to be voiced. The country was severed into three parts, under distinct leadership, each having its own peculiar prospects and developmental trends. However, in each of these three parts the propagandists of rival powers- China, Russia, and Japan- continued at work (Prawdin, 1961: 541)

This penetration of Inner Mongolia forecast the ultimate encirclement of Outer Mongolia on the east and to the southeast. Thus it brought Russia again into the foreground of relationships. The creation of Manchukuo had established a frontier between the Japanese

controlled state and the Russian, as well as a common frontier to the north along the Amur and its confluents. Already there had been frontier disputes between Manchukuo and Mongolia, inevitably so because of the largest undefined nature of the frontier. The first of these came in January 1935. Each side claimed in this, as in subsequent incidents, that the clash occurred because the troops of the other were on the wrong side of the frontier. Attempts were made to settle these questions in a conference of representatives of Mongolian and Manchukuo, but only partially successful. The conference, which convened on June 3, 1935, was immediately deadlocked on account of the refusal at the Mongols to entertain the demand that more than the immediate frontier incidents should be considered. The Japanese-Manchurian desire was to agree upon conditions of opening Mongolia to trade and residence. These Mongol authorities were not willing to consider, although agreeing to "exchange of the resident representatives." They however, specified, "that the competence of the representatives should be restricted to the settlement of border disputes and that they should be stationed at prescribed points near the boundary. Manchukuo agreed to this, but on conditions that the number of representatives and the place where they were stationed should be considered at a subsequent conference (Vinacke, 1967: 544)

Negotiations were renewed in October but no agreement was reached because of insistence on the part of Japan that three representatives should be appointed for residence in the principal cities of each country. Threats failed to move the Mongolian representatives beyond an acceptance of the appointment of a purely frontier representative for each party.

The Japanese ascribed to the fact that neither frontier had been fully and definitely marked out ascribed these incidents, on both frontiers. The Russians asserted that Manchurian-Siberian frontier had been well defined by treaty and by accompanying maps. The Japanese, however, insisting on a new demarcation of boundaries, refused to accept such treaties and maps as a basis. As to the Manchurian-Mongolian boundary, there appears to have been no detailed delineation at any time. Custom and traditions had established it satisfactorily until Japan, bent on expansion, began to think in terms of strategic frontiers, with boundaries always well advanced from the customarily accepted lines. Until an agreement on frontiers had been reached, boundary disputes of at least a minor sort were certain to continue. (Vinacke, 1967: 545)

But what began as a series of minor incidents, with individual sentries and patrols sniping each other, grew progressively as the border forces on both sides were increased. Each was apparently determined to test the other's mettle. Thus the minor incidents of 1934-1935 led up to major clashes in 1936. Such a major incident on the Mongol-Manchurian border February 8-10, 1936, brought a crisis when several hundred Japanese and Manchukuoan troops, using trucks, tanks and planes, penetrated some six miles into Mongolia. In the encounter which followed the Japanese, definitely worsted, withdrew behind their own boundary. An even more dangerous climax was reached on the Manchukuoan-Siberian frontier when a Russian force of about 4,000, consisting of all arms, faced a mixed Japanese-Manchukuoan force of about 2,500 from March 25 to 29, 1936. A little discretion on the part of either of the commanders would probably have committed the two countries to a war for which, obviously, neither side was ready. In particular, Japan was forced to realize that the process of successive penetration and seizure, almost uniformly successful against China

and Inner Mongolia, could not be utilized for the moment against Siberia, or Outer Mongolia backed by Russia. Once the fact was clear, the border incidents relapsed for a time into minor affairs (Morozova, 2012).

In all of these negotiations, and in the resistance in general to Japanese pressure, Russia stood behind the government of Outer Mongolia. A pact of Mutual Assistance, in essence a defensive alliance between Russia and Outer Mongolia, was announced by Moscow on March 31, 1936, and Stalin further definitely stated that an attack on Outer Mongolia by Manchukuo, supported by Japan, would be considered as an act of war on Russia itself. This defensive alliance checked Japanese and Manchukuoan border aggressions. No other position could really have been taken by Russia since Japan's control of the territory would enable her readily to cut off and establish control of Siberia. It probably would not be very far from the facts to conclude that one Japanese interest in securing control of Outer Mongolia was strategic in relation to the Russian Far East. An additional reason for the attempt at penetration may be said to have been the desire to establish a buffer territory between Russia, Inner Mongolia and North China. These circumstances paved way for the signature at Berlin on November 25, 1936, of the German-Japanese Anti-Communist Pact (Vinacke, 1967: 546).

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up, the Japanese creation of Manchukuo and occupation of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia has left a legacy among the Mongols of these regions, the discussion of which falls outside our field. But we cannot refrain from adding that the recent history of Outer Mongolia might have been different if Japanese strategy had turned northwest instead of south.

During 1930s, the alliance of USSR MPR Manchukuo China was forming. Solving the Japanese soviet conflicts under consideration of the axis Rome-Berlin-Tokyo and the aggressive Panasiatic Japan's strategy must have happened and did happen in the form of military conflict. Despite all Japanese attempts to use the right and left mistakes of MPRP, to win the most important Party departments, government, administration and military apparatus, the USSR firmly adhered to forming the military-political axis Moscow Ulan Bator and was maintain MPRP according to the Soviet model. That provided the Soviet strategy with victory not only at Khalhin-Gol in 1939 but at the final establishing the social course of development in Mongolia. However, Inner Mongolia did not share that fate. It became a victim in the play among the Soviet Union, Japan and China.

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