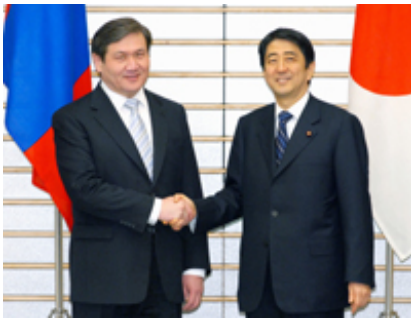




The Great Japan-Mongolia Love Affair: What price the UN Security Council Seat?

By Hisane MASAKI

TOKYO - Japan rolled out the red carpet for Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar when, at Tokyo's invitation, he arrived on Monday for a five-day visit for talks with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and a luncheon hosted by Emperor Akihito in his honor at the Imperial Palace.



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) meets with Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar at his official residence in Tokyo on Feb. 26.

Ostensibly, the Mongolian leader's visit is to mark the 35th anniversary of the two countries' establishing diplomatic relations in February 1972. But Tokyo has another particular reason to extend the greatest possible hospitality to him. Only a month ago, Tokyo received a much-appreciated diplomatic present from Ulan Bator.

The High Stakes Politics of the Security Council

Abe and Enkhbayar agreed in a telephone conversation on January 24 that Japan will seek a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term starting in 2009 in lieu of Mongolia. Enkhbayar conveyed to Abe Mongolia's decision to withdraw its bid for a seat to let Japan run for the post.



Mongolia is sandwiched by giant neighbors – Russia to the north and China to the south.

After the teleconference, Abe told reporters, "I thank the Mongolian president for his leadership and express my appreciation to the Mongolian people. We want to fulfill our responsibilities to live up to Mongolia's goodwill." Abe thanked Enkhbayar again on Monday for Mongolia's decision.

As part of efforts to strengthen bilateral relations, Abe's predecessor, Koizumi Junichiro, visited Ulan Bator last August, the first such trip by a Japanese premier in seven years. Unlike two of his predecessors who also visited the Mongolian capital while in office as part of their overseas tours, Koizumi flew directly between the capitals of the two countries.

In Ulan Bator, Koizumi pledged new grant-in-aid worth 350 million yen (US\$2.91 million). While thanking Japan for its assistance as the biggest donor, Ulan Bator asked Tokyo to consider extending yen loans for a new international-airport project.

Before the January telephone conversation between Abe and Enkhbayar, Japanese officials had been engaged in strenuous behind-the-scenes efforts to persuade Mongolia to bow out of the Security Council race, reportedly even harping on how costly it would be for the impoverished country to have its UN mission in New York sufficiently staffed to serve as a council member nation.



Mongolian steppe

But perhaps the biggest factor in Tokyo's successful persuasion of Ulan Bator to drop its bid for a non-permanent Security Council seat is the particularly friendly relations between the two countries. Japan has been Mongolia's largest aid donor for many years, and Mongolian public sentiment toward Japan is highly favorable.

Japan at the Security Council

Japan held a two-year rotating non-permanent council seat through the end of last year. But Tokyo has been keen on returning to the council as soon as possible to influence decisions on regional and global security concerns, especially North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Non-permanent seats cannot be held for consecutive terms.



Japan's UN Ambassador Kenzo Oshima (R) and his then US counterpart, John Bolton at the UN HQ in August 2006.

As a non-permanent Security Council member, Japan played a leading role in having a resolution adopted to condemn North Korea's missile launches last July. When North Korea conducted its nuclear test in October, Japan held the rotating monthly presidency and presided over the adoption of a council resolution slapping sanctions against Pyongyang.

Japan also believes that serving as a non-permanent Security Council member as many times as possible and thereby boosting its profile in the international diplomatic arena will serve as a stepping stone to realizing its long-cherished dream of obtaining permanent membership of the powerful council. At present, only the five permanent members - the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France - enjoy the privilege of veto power.

Of the 15 council seats, the remaining 10 are held by non-permanent members and are allotted regionally - three to Africa, two each to Asia, Latin America and Western Europe, and one to Eastern Europe. Japan, along with Brazil, has so far served on the council nine times, the most among the UN member states. Japan is also the second-largest contributor to the UN budget after the United States, accounting for close to 20% of the overall budget. Mongolia has expressed its support for Japan's bid for permanent Security Council membership.

Abe has stressed that, regardless of whether the council seat is permanent or not, it "makes a difference being on the council because otherwise Japan cannot make statements or learn about what is discussed. One must realize that the resolutions [in condemnation of North Korea] last year were realized because Japan took leadership as a non-permanent council member," Abe said. "That makes a big difference."

Rotation of Non-permanent Security Council Seats

Non-permanent seats have staggered terms, so that the council changes five non-permanent members every year, instead of 10 non-permanent members every two years. For the 2008-09 term, Vietnam has declared its candidacy for a non-permanent council seat in an election this autumn. For the 2009-10 term, Iran has also expressed its intention to run for a non-permanent council seat, and a few other countries may emerge to seek the post as an Asian candidate.

The non-permanent members are usually chosen by regional groups and confirmed by the UN General Assembly. But if coordination fails between Asian candidates for the 2009-10 term - at this moment Japan and Iran - a decision will be left to a General Assembly vote in the autumn of 2008.

Japan is confident that it will be able to defeat Iran in a General Assembly vote because of a council resolution adopted last December imposing sanctions against the Persian Gulf nation over its failure to halt uranium enrichment. The sanctions ban the supply of nuclear-related technology and materials and impose an asset freeze on key individuals and companies.

Abe and Enkhbayar held talks on Monday evening, only hours after the Mongolian leader's arrival in Tokyo. They signed a joint statement to step up cooperation on global issues, including the North Korean nuclear and abduction issues and reform of the United Nations. The joint statement contained a basic action plan for broadening the nations' high-level political dialogue and strengthening cooperation in the areas of politics, economics, culture and education over the next 10 years.

Japan as Mongolia's staunch supporter

Mongolia abandoned its 70-year-old Soviet-style one-party system and embraced political and economic reforms in 1990. Democracy and free-market reforms were enshrined in a new constitution, but the collapse of the economy after the withdrawal of Soviet assistance triggered widespread poverty and unemployment.

During the Cold War, when Mongolia was a one-party state, the country relied heavily on the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, on other Moscow allies for trade and economic aid. But since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union, Mongolia has sought increased relations with the Western camp, especially the US and Japan.

After four consecutive years of decline, in 1994 the Mongolian economy posted its first growth - albeit a modest one - in 1994, largely thanks to generous aid from Japan and other industrialized countries and international lending institutions. The Mongolian economy has since kept growing. Its growth rate was robust in 2006, estimated at 8.4%.

Other data point to an improvement in the nation's overall economic conditions. Inflation dipped to 6.0% in 2006 from 9.5% in 2005. Unemployment is low, at an estimated 3.3% in 2006. Mongolia is believed to have posted its first surplus in both the government budget and trade in 2006. The nation's main export items are copper concentrate, dehaired cashmere, textiles and hides. Its main trading partners are neighboring China and Russia. The former is the biggest market for Mongolian exports. Per-capita annual GDP of the landlocked Asian nation with 2.6 million people is still low, at around \$480, however.

Japan spearheaded international efforts to assist Mongolia in its transition to democracy and market economy. Then-prime minister Kaifu Toshiki became the first leader of a major industrialized nation belonging to the Western camp to visit Mongolia, in 1991. Tokyo also hosted the first six meetings of aid donor nations and organizations for Mongolia from 1991 until 1997, which were co-chaired by Japan and the World Bank.

The 10th such meeting was also held in Tokyo in 2003. Japan has been Mongolia's largest single aid donor since 1991, providing a total of 140 billion yen in official development assistance, including about 75 billion yen in grants-in-aid, by the end of fiscal 2005 last March.

Mongolian President Enkhbayar delivered a speech before Japan's parliament on February 27 and thanked Japan for its generous aid for his country. Enkhbayar described Japan as "a real friend" because of the assistance it extended when his country experienced particular hardships in the early 1990s.

Soviet troops were long stationed in Mongolia, mostly on its border with China. They were completely withdrawn at the end of 1992 amid an easing of tensions between Moscow and Beijing. Ulan Bator has prioritized developing friendly and balanced relations with its two giant neighbors - Russia to the north and China to the south. At the same time, however, Mongolia has pursued strengthened relations with what it calls "third neighbors", especially Japan, the US and Europe.

Mongolian Prime Minister Miegombyn Enkhbold chose Japan last March as the destination for his first overseas trip since taking office. During his visit, Enkhbold watched the final day of the 15-day Spring Grand Sumo Tournament and awarded Yokozuna (grand champion) Asashoryu with the Mongolian Prime Minister's Cup in person. Asashoryu is the most successful of many Mongolian wrestlers in Japan's sumo world.

In addition to continued generous economic aid, Mongolia apparently hopes for Japan's continued support in further integrating its economy into the regional - and global - economy. In 1998, Mongolia joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a multilateral forum established in 1994 to discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

Last September, Mongolia was also admitted to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), a forum of Asian and European nations established in 1996 to discuss inter-regional cooperation in a wide range of areas. But Mongolia has no membership yet in key regional groupings mainly discussing economic cooperation, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Plus Three (the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus Japan, China and South Korea) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Mongolia as Japan's reliable partner

Tokyo sees Mongolia as a valuable pro-Japan nation in Asia. According to an opinion poll conducted in late 2004 by the Japanese Embassy in Ulan Bator through the National University of Mongolia, more than 70% of Mongolian people polled said they felt an affinity with Japan. In addition, the largest percentage - 37.4% - of those polled cited Japan as a foreign country with which Mongolia should have the most intimate relations.

In stark contrast, Japan's relations with other Northeast Asian neighbors, except Taiwan, are tense or often uneasy at best. Japan has no diplomatic relations with North Korea. Anti-Japan feelings still run deep among many people in China and South Korea, where Japan's wartime aggression and atrocities are still bitterly remembered.



Soviet armoured vehicle during the Battle of Khalkhin Gol

To be sure, there were military clashes between Japan and Mongolia in the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries. Among them is the Battle of Khalkhin Gol - or the Nomonhan Incident as it is called in Japan - which occurred during the undeclared war between the Soviet Union and Japan in Mongolia in 1939. Mongolia fought Japanese troops alongside the Soviet Union. But according to the 2004 opinion poll, 41.7% of Mongolians polled said that the 1939 battle is already a thing of the past, while 29.6% answered they do not know about it.

Last year, Mongolia celebrated the 800th anniversary of Genghis Khan establishing the Mongol empire in 1206. In conjunction with this anniversary, Japan and Mongolia designated 2006 as “The Year of Mongolia in Japan” and 2007 as “The Year of Japan in Mongolia.” The legacy of Genghis Khan has been invoked in Mongolia in an attempt to foster national pride.



Genghis Khan 800th anniversary



The samurai Suenaga facing Mongol arrows and bombs. *Moko Shurai Ekotoba*, circa 1293.

There are other reasons for Japan to place great emphasis on relations with Mongolia.

Unlike Japan, Mongolia has diplomatic relations with North Korea. Concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons and missile programs have not abated despite recent progress on the diplomatic front leading to the Beijing agreement.

Resource-poor Japan has recently focused its diplomatic attention on Central Asia, a region rich in oil, gas and other resources.

Mongolia is rich in a variety of minerals, especially coal and copper, although these remain largely unexploited. This is another magnet for resource-strapped Japan's growing attention. The joint statement signed by Abe and Enkhbayar on Monday calls for increased cooperation in the development of Mongolia's underground resources.

The Tavan Tolgoi coal deposit in the Gobi Desert in southern of Mongolia could be the largest unmined coking-coal deposit in the world. The Oyu Tolgoi copper-gold porphyry deposit, also in the Gobi Desert, is also highly promising as it is believed be the second-largest such deposit in the world. China is also keen to exploit Mongolia's mineral and energy resources to fuel its red-hot economy.

Koizumi made a trip to the region last August, the first by a Japanese premier. Japan's diplomatic foray into Central Asia comes at a time when the US, Russia and China are all flexing their political muscles in the resource-rich but volatile region, competing to secure energy and influence. Japan apparently desires to play a greater geopolitical role, not only in Central Asia but in Eurasia as a whole, while countering the growing influence of Russia and China in the region.

In a development that raised eyebrows in the US, Japan's most important ally, China, Russia and four Central Asian countries issued a joint statement at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2005 calling for an early withdrawal of US forces from Central Asia. The four Central Asian nations are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. There is now only one US base in Central Asia - in Kyrgyzstan.

Mongolia joined the SCO as an observer along with India, Pakistan and Iran, but wants closer ties with the US and Japan to reduce its heavy dependence on China and Russia. Meanwhile, Japan's ties with both China and Russia, leading members of the SCO, are far from easy over a variety of issues, including nasty territorial rows. Japan has also frequently locked horns with China over natural-gas reserves in the East China Sea.

When Koizumi visited Ulan Bator last August, he proposed the establishment of a working-level "forum for dialogue" to discuss North Korea and regional and international affairs, citing Mongolia's diplomatic relations with North Korea and participation in the SCO as an observer. His Mongolian counterpart, Enkhbold, agreed to Koizumi's proposal.

Although it was probably sheer coincidence, on the second and final day of the Japanese leader's visit to Ulan Bator, a two-week joint military exercise in peacekeeping techniques, code-named "Khan Quest 2006", kicked off in the suburbs of the capital, mainly involving US and Mongolian troops. Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Tonga and Fiji also sent troops to participate. Several countries, including the UK, France, Italy, Japan, Russia and South Korea sent observers. Nukaga Fukushima, the then Japanese defense chief, also made a visit to Mongolia last September, the first by a Japanese defense chief.

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