

Mongolian Independence and the British: Twentieth-Century Geopolitical Notes

Written by Matteo Miele

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This is a preprint excerpt from *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911–1916*, by Matteo Miele. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

Much of the historical-political and diplomatic dynamics that I have tried to examine in this work are reflected in a contemporary framework, which, although changed on an ideological and international level, has been structured during the twentieth century, and then until today, on the same geopolitical scenario. One of the main reasons for the historical reconstruction of this research is precisely to provide an interpretative key for the analysis of contemporary phenomena of the geopolitics of High Asia and, in a broader system, of relations between China and India. The point of view of the British, the most important European political and economic power in Asia, was chosen as the backbone of the work. After the end of the Second World War and the subsequent Indian independence, as well as the Communist victory in China, the institutional structures underwent a radical metamorphosis, but the same geopolitical logics survived, on the basis of the indisputable principle explained by Morgenthau: 'the most stable factor upon which the power of a nation depends is obviously geography'.^[1]

Choices made at the beginning of the twentieth century had their effects on events following the independence of India from the British Empire and the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek^[2] in 1949, with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China by Mao Tse-tung and the flight of nationalists on the island of T'ai-wan where they tried to preserve their political legitimacy. As for Bhutan, in 1949, the Kingdom signed another treaty with India and the guide of Bhutanese foreign policy passed from London to New Delhi.^[3] In 2007 a new treaty was signed between the two South Asian countries where the Indian guide is no longer recognized.^[4] In 1950, Sikkim became ('shall continue to be') a protectorate of (independent) India, in accordance with Article II of the Gangtok Treaty of December 5, 1950 ('Sikkim shall continue to be a Protectorate of India and, subject to the provisions of this Treaty, shall enjoy autonomy in regard to its internal affairs'^[5]). Article VI of the Treaty provided, among other things, that '[t]he Government of India shall have the exclusive right of constructing, maintaining and regulating the use of railways, aerodromes and landing grounds and air navigation facilities, posts, telegraphs, telephones and wireless installations in Sikkim'. In 1975, after a difficult and failed democratization process, the small Himalayan state was annexed by India.

Through the lens of the interests of the British Empire in Asia, this work has tried to define the political dimension of Tibet in the early twentieth century, its role in international relations of the time and its institutional reality. London remained the center of this research because the British were certainly the most interested in the actual independence of Lhasa from Peking. Therefore, through the British archival sources it has been possible to reconstruct a picture of High Asia that provides a meditated view of political aspects still at the center of the debate on the Tibetan question today. The intention was to contribute to the political and historical analysis while expanding the framework of the role of the People's Republic of China on the Roof of the World, by participating in the debate on the effective independence of Tibet in that period.

De facto independence, in the Tibetan and Mongolian case, can be effectively translated in terms of legitimacy, although only Mongolia was lucky enough to be able to retain its status after the Communist victory in China. It was

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essentially the different geopolitical role, and not a matter of international law, that allowed Outer Mongolia to maintain its independence while Tibet was conquered by Mao Tse-tung. In the first case, the presence of the Soviet Union prevented any Chinese claims, while Tibet was in fact abandoned by the British. The unenviable status of Soviet satellite at the time of the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949, proved to be much more favorable for Mongolia than the real autonomy, the substantial independence, which Tibet enjoyed in the first half of the twentieth century and which instead decreed the invasion by the People's Liberation Army. When the Tibetan question reached the United Nations in 1959, the British government, chaired by Harold Macmillan, had to face an obvious embarrassment, forced to abstain 'despite our sympathy with the present plight of the Thibetan people'.^[6] In fact, given their own history and the still present colonial dimension, the British had prevented the United Nations, in the course of previous years, from taking a position on human rights.^[7] The British government, therefore, chose abstention.^[8] However, the United Kingdom still voted in favor of the other two resolutions on Tibet in 1961^[9] and 1965.^[10]

The British position regarding the Chinese role in Tibet officially changed only in 2008, when the then foreign secretary, David Miliband, in a Written Ministerial Statement explained that:

Our interest is not in restoring an order that existed 60 years ago and that the Dalai Lama himself has said he does not seek to restore.

We are also concerned about more immediate issues arising directly from the unrest of this spring, including the situation of those who remain in detention following the unrest, the increased constraints on religious activity, and the limitations on free access to the Tibetan autonomous region by diplomats and journalists. These issues reinforce long-held unease on the part of the Government about the underlying human rights situation in Tibet.

Other countries have made similar points. But our position is unusual for one reason of history that has been imported into the present: the anachronism of our formal position on whether Tibet is part of China, and whether in fact we harbour continued designs to see the break-up of China. We do not.

Our ability to get our points across has sometimes been clouded by the position the UK took at the start of the 20th century on the status of Tibet, a position based on the geopolitics of the time. Our recognition of China's "special position" in Tibet developed from the outdated concept of suzerainty. Some have used this to cast doubt on the aims we are pursuing and to claim that we are denying Chinese sovereignty over a large part of its own territory. We have made clear to the Chinese Government, and publicly, that we do not support Tibetan independence. Like every other EU member state, and the United States, we regard Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China. Our interest is in long-term stability, which can only be achieved through respect for human rights and greater autonomy for the Tibetans.^[11]

Only in 2008 was the line that had characterized the British approach – namely the recognition of Chinese suzerainty, but not of full sovereignty, over the territory of Tibet – to Tibetan affairs finally set aside.

The work, therefore, tried to give an interpretation of the geopolitical dimension of Tibet and Mongolia, as well as a necessary comparison between the political and cultural elements of the period under examination. However, some of these elements lived on, even after the birth of a People's Republic of China which continues to maintain, at the base of its actions, the same motivations of the Empire, further highlighting the importance of studying the end of the Manchu dynasty. Those same motivations are translated into concrete actions, such as the attempt to appoint religious offices, using traditional methods for their identification on a formal level. If this could have some logic in the imperial framework of the Ch'ing dynasty, any criterion of rationality is lost within a communist system, which should, therefore, try to redefine its relationship with Tibet by not mimicking past customs and institutions, but in an honest political and legal confrontation.

The fundamental problem for the Chinese communist leadership today, however, is that the only source of legitimation of its presence in Tibet lies precisely in those imperial institutions that the Chinese Communist Party – albeit with its numerous and extravagant ideological evolutions – should instead deny. In a broader vision, Peking

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must rely on imperial history to give a foundation to its power over Lhasa and thus obtain its own geopolitical and economic advantage over a huge region, with very few inhabitants, but with the sources of the rivers that then flow in the areas of the planet with the highest population density. And, after geography, the other factor of relative stability indicated by Morgenthau in his book is represented precisely by natural resources.^[12] It would be impossible not to consider the subsequent history of Tibet, China and Mongolia and the political and cultural space of the Tibetan question, but this very question, in my opinion, also has its roots in that precise historical moment, in those few years that I have tried to delineate in this work. The border that passes between autonomy and independence is repeated today in the space of confrontation between the Central Tibetan Administration and the Government of the People's Republic of China in an attempt by the fourteenth Dalai Lama to find a satisfactory agreement that should guarantee substantial self-government for the Tibetan plateau, even within the Chinese system.

[1] H. J. MORGENTHAU, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948, p. 82.

[2] Again, as with Sun Yat-sen, I use the transcription of his Cantonese name. The transcription of the name in Mandarin Chinese is Chiang Chieh-shih.

[3] For the full text of this treaty see *Documents on Sikkim and Bhutan*, edited by S. K. Sharma and U. Sharma, New Delhi 1998, pp. 224-226.

[4] The text of the 2007 treaty is available on the website of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://mea.gov.in/Images/pdf/india-bhutan-treaty-07.pdf>).

[5] Full text of the treaty: TNA, DO 133/124, Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom Frank K. Roberts to the Commonwealth Relations Office, December 15, 1950 (Treaty between India and Sikkim, December 5, 1950).

[6] TNA, CAB 128/33/54, Cabinet – Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, 20th October, 1959, at 11.15 a.m., p. 3.

[7] TNA, CAB 128/33/54, Cabinet – Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, 20th October, 1959, at 11.15 a.m., p. 3.

[8] TNA, CAB 128/33/54, Cabinet – Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, 20th October, 1959, at 11.15 a.m., p. 3; General Assembly of the United Nations (GA), Resolution 1353 (XIV).

[9] GA, Resolution 1723 (XVI).

[10] GA, Resolution 2079 (XX).

[11] House of Commons Daily Debates, Vol. 481, Tibet, 29 Oct 2008, col. 31WS.

[12] MORGENTHAU 1948, p. 82.

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