



SINOPSIS

**Sacred Authority and State
Power: The Dalai Lama Institution
in a Global Context**

**Return of the Bogd
Lama: Developments
in Mongolia**

Kate Saunders



Return of the Bogd Lama: Overview	2
Recognised by the Dalai Lama, the Bogd Lama returns: impacts and outcomes in Mongolia	6
The Bogd returns to a Kalachakra ceremony	13
The Tenth Jebtsundamba.....	15
The Tenth Jebtsundamba, the Dalai Lama and Mongolia's Buddhist history	18
The (Tibetan) Ninth Jebtsundamba and the Dalai Lama	23
A child is recognised – and the consequences	30
'Holding a knife behind each other's backs': China and Russia in Mongolia	31
Mongolia: centre of the Shugden offensive.....	35
Cooperation of Chinese and Mongolian security state	39
Conclusions and recommendations.....	42



Illustration in 19th century album 'Finding a Dalai Lama', dated to the Qing dynasty, 1644-1911. Enthronement of 9th Dalai Lama. Mongolian ambassador, Majubazar to his right. Harvard Art Museums.



Return of the Bogd Lama: Overview

“The creation of Jebtsundamba’s institution as well as the other two highest-ranking lamaist institutions — the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama — coincide with the period of Inner Asian history, where various Mongol monarchs vied to emulate Kublai Khan’s imperial model of combining the Chinggisid lineage with that of Buddhist wisdom.”

Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva, ‘The Return of Mongolia’s Holy Man’, 11 August 2023¹

The Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutughtu line² from the Gelugpa school has traditionally led Buddhists in Mongolia, just as the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lamas have in Tibet. The lineage is symbolic of the rich heritage and history of Tibetan Buddhism and of independent Mongolian nationhood.

Ever since the Ninth Bogd Jebtsundamba - who was born in Tibet - died in 2012, there had been fears that China would seek to interfere in his reincarnation and even try to impose their own candidate. China wanted to retain control over a new incarnation linked to Dharamsala and the Dalai Lama, given that this could become a powerful Pan-Mongolian figure for Buddhists across Mongolia, including in Southern (Inner) Inner Mongolia and Russian Buddhist areas, as well as commanding attention globally. Beijing is also aware that the Tenth Bogd Lama might play a role in any future succession process of the Dalai Lama, given the strong connection between the lineages and the current historic circumstances.

Beijing had warned Mongolia publicly that they “hoped” it would handle the reincarnation of the Mongolian spiritual leader “autonomously”, in other words, without Dharamsala’s involvement. Nevertheless in 2016, following a visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama, who has strong connections with the Jebtsundamba lineage and had been close to the Ninth Bogd, announced that a reincarnation had been found.

¹ Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva is a geopolitical analyst and election observer based in Ulaanbaatar who previously worked at the National Security Council of Mongolia. ‘The Return of Mongolia’s Holy Man’, *Inkstick*, 11 August 2023, [online](#).

² The terms Bogd Lama and Bogd Jebtsundamba are used throughout this report. Of the previous nine reincarnations, only the Eighth Bogd Jebtsundamba was the king, or ‘Khan’ in Mongolia. ‘Bogd Khan’ is generally used to refer to the ‘Eighth Bogd Jebtsundamba’.



The identity of the child was kept secret until the boy, then eight years old, was introduced by the Dalai Lama at a public teaching in Dharamsala on 8 March 2023, before thousands of devotees from all over the world. This quiet announcement was met with a mixture of joy and anxiety by Buddhists from Central Asia. (Its significance was mostly lost on Western visitors including a group of EU Parliamentarians present, or misunderstood, with some Indian media outlets reporting it erroneously as the discovery of the next Dalai Lama.)

Although officially the PRC accepts the independence and sovereignty of Mongolia, it has a covert, asymmetrical campaign to isolate its neighbour and make it dependent upon the PRC. It seeks to control Mongolia's rich mineral assets, major businesses, trade and security apparatus as well as its media and cultural institutions. An important element of this campaign is to gain control of the Mongolian Buddhist leadership and community, and the Jebtsundamba reincarnation and institutions are central to that strategy.

Mongolia's powerful neighbours China and Russia frequently cooperate to isolate and dominate Mongolia. In this context the identification of the Tenth Bogd Lama with the active engagement of Dharamsala was treated as a national security issue.

The Dalai Lama's public recognition of the Tenth Bogd Lama propelled the child, his family and the monastic establishment into the heart of a complex web of geopolitical tensions. China has used proxies at the highest levels in Mongolia to pressure the child's family, including detaining his grandmother, threatening their safety, raiding the family home and targeting their business, a company in Mongolia run by the boy's mother.

"What Mongolia faces now, Tibetans may face in future," said Telo Tulku Rinpoche, honorary representative of the Dalai Lama in the region. "The stage is now global and it is essential that Tibetans understand the entwined connections with Mongolia, which make us stronger."

At its height, the Mongols ruled the largest contiguous land empire the world has ever known. Now, since its peaceful revolution against Soviet rule in 1990, landlocked Mongolia maintains a delicate diplomatic balance with its powerful neighbours China (with more than 90% of its exports, mainly mineral resources, finding their way to the PRC), Russia, and its 'Third Neighbour', the US and the West.

"That Mongolia is now free to publicly acknowledge the reincarnation, and that the Tenth reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu — in addition to being a Buddhist saint — is ethnically Mongol, is essential for reinforcing Mongolian national identity," wrote geopolitical analyst Munkhnaran Bayarkhagva, formerly of the National Security



Council of Mongolia. “In a secular nation where communist purges exterminated all the Chinggisid royalty, the Tenth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu is the closest thing to both royalty and god, making him essential to the nation-state’s political identity. For a Buddhist national that believes Chinggis Khan to be a proliferator and protector of its religion in Inner Asia, the Tenth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu provides a direct spiritual and institutional link to the very origins of the nation, all the while serving as a living icon who can remind the nation about its continuity and identity.”³

While Tibetan Buddhism is recognised by the Mongolian government for its civilisational importance,⁴ the ruling party effectively aligns itself with the CCP, the economy is dependent on China’s investments and only a few Mongolian politicians dare to be openly supportive to the Dalai Lama. Although some prominent politicians known to support connections with Dharamsala and Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the country remained in power following the June 2024 elections, this status quo remained largely unchanged.

Mongolia’s independent democracy is vulnerable as Mongolia grows closer to China on almost every front. Former President Elbegdorj, who led the country to democracy during its peaceful transition, has spoken of moving from the “democratic model” to the “China Model”.⁵ Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to Mongolia has continued to grow, while FDI from other sources, such as Canada, Russia, and the United States, has diminished. China has also expanded its social and person-to-person linkages with Mongolia through collaboration in education and health development. For instance, the scope and scale of China’s volunteer teacher force in Mongolia now exceeds that of the Peace Corps, which has been an important public diplomacy tool for the United States toward Mongolia since 1991.⁶

China’s weaponized corruption of political figures in both major parties of Mongolia has become a threat to human rights, freedom of press, democracy and Mongolian sovereignty. As Russia weakens in relation to China, and as the geopolitical rules of

³ Bayarlkhagva, Munkhnaran. ‘The Return of Mongolia’s Holy Man’, *Inkstick*, 11 August 2023, [online](#).

⁴ In the Mongolian Constitution, the state emblem symbolizing Mongolia’s independence and sovereignty features the Buddhist symbols of a white lotus, a wheel entwined with a white silk khatag, and the Triple Gem, signifying the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Mongolia Constitution [online](#).

⁵ According to Mongolian analysts consulted for this report, behind the scenes Elbegdorj contributed to engineering this shift, including efforts to control the judiciary, sink political opponents, and attempts to hand over the Mongolian mineral resources to China. Also see Putz, Catherine. ‘Mongolia’s Mega Coal Mine Deal Likely to Stall, Again’, *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2015, [online](#).

⁶ Reeves, Jeffrey. ‘Mongolia’s Place in China’s Periphery Diplomacy’, *Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, The ASAN Forum*, 7 April 2016, [online](#).



the game change following the invasion of Ukraine, Mongolia's future sovereignty is less assured, which in turn intensifies the risk for those prominent in Tibetan Buddhist institutions and connected to the child recognised as the Tenth Bogd Jebtsundamba.

In its efforts to develop and exploit divisions among the Mongolian Buddhist community, China's United Front has drawn upon long-term tactics inside Tibet promoting the propitiation of Shugden, which the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhists worldwide regard as a divisive and harmful force, as part of a systematic ideological and political campaign to undermine the Dalai Lama. The Shugden (or Dolgyal) sect has been used in Mongolia as a front for advancing Chinese political and business interests, with its supporters at the heart of government and commercial life. (A lama prominent in the sect suggests that Mongolian monks have "saved" Shugden.)⁷ In 2015, a delegation from the Mongolian Buddhist Association visited China's Panchen Lama, who has prominent Shugden connections, in Beijing and issued a statement endorsing him as the legitimate reincarnation and inviting him to visit Mongolia.⁸

China's extraterritorial interventions in Mongolia have also involved cooperation by Mongolian and Chinese security, for instance in the seizure and involuntary return to China of citizens critical of the CCP.

Mongolia faces difficult choices, but another way forward is possible. Protecting Buddhism - which only just survived Stalinist purges of the 1930s – and strengthening civil society and democratic institutions helps to protect Mongolian sovereignty and its independent identity.

"Since the democratic revolution in 1990, Mongolia has experienced a religious revival, with Buddhism once again playing an important role," said prominent professor and

⁷ Tsem Rinpoche for Dorje Shugden website: 'How Mongolia Saved Dorje Shugden', *TsemRinpoche website*, 27 Feb 2021, [online](#).

⁸ The post on the Dorje Shugden website stated that "As China and Mongolia have historically worked together to facilitate the growth of the Dharma, may this meeting lead to many more future collaborations to further the spread of Je Tsongkapa's teachings." 'His Holiness the 11th Panchen Lama Welcomes Mongolian Buddhist Delegation', *Dorje Shugden website*, 28 July 2015, [online](#).



author of books about the Jebtsundamba lineage Batsaikhan Ookhnoi. “Mongolia should embrace its Buddhist identity as a part of its historical and cultural heritage.”⁹

Recognised by the Dalai Lama, the Bogd Lama returns: impacts and outcomes in Mongolia



In 2016, following a visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama announced that a reincarnation of the Ninth Jebtsundamba (Bogd Lama), equivalent to a Mongolian Dalai Lama, had been found. The identity of the child was kept secret until the boy, then eight years old, was introduced by the Dalai Lama at a public teaching in Dharamsala on 8 March 2023, before thousands of devotees from all over the world. This image depicts the reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba presenting traditional offerings to the Dalai Lama at the start of the Chakrasamvara empowerment at the temple. Image courtesy of Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL.

⁹ Email correspondence with author. Dr Batsaikhan Ookhnoi's book 'Mongolyn Sүүлчийн Езэн Хаан VIII Богд Жэбтсундамба: Амдрал ба Домог (The Last Emperor of Mongolia Bogdo Jebtsundamba Khutuktu: The Life and Legend)', was first published in Mongolian in 2008 and revised and translated into English in 2011. It was the first comprehensive biography of the Eighth Bogd Jebtsundamba published after the socialist period, during which he was largely misrepresented. The book helped to re-establish his status as the legitimate Emperor of Mongolia from 1911 to 1924 correcting the official socialist-era narrative that labeled him merely as a "yellow feudal lord." Dr Batsaikhan said: "Under communist ideology, the Bogdo Khanate period was dismissed, and Mongolian modern history was said to begin only with the 1921 People's Revolution. Buddhism was portrayed as backward and harmful to Mongolia's development. This view shaped much of the country's history, literature, film, and art until the 1990s. My book contributed to the reassessment and correction of this narrative." Dr Batsaikhan also published a book in 2015 about the Ninth Bogd Jebtsundamba (in Mongolian), and has made frequent broadcast appearances discussing the lineage, for instance [here](#).



The 89-year old Dalai Lama and the nine year old Mongolian Bogd Lama, an identical twin who was born in Washington DC, share a 300-year old political history and religious lineage. It is a history that shapes the present and future of Mongolia, Tibet and China.¹⁰

The Dalai Lama has emphasised the centrality of Mongolian Buddhist engagement and the importance of the Jebtsundamba's role to the future of Tibet and the survival of Tibetan Buddhist civilisation. When asked about his own reincarnation in 2020, he said that "the Himalayan Buddhists of Tibet and Mongolia will decide what happens next."¹¹

In 1578 the Mongol ruler Altan Khan gave the title 'Dalai Lama' to Sonam Gyatso, the third Dalai Lama. "The title means 'Ocean of Wisdom' and he was the first Dalai Lama to be called by that title," the Dalai Lama told an audience of Mongolian Buddhists. "The word 'Dalai' has otherwise no meaning in Tibetan."¹² When the Dalai Lama was studying in Lhasa in the 1950s, Mongolian students were dedicated scholars of philosophy, and his "best debating assistant" was from Inner Mongolia.¹³

In March (2023), Dharamsala was crammed with Buddhist devotees from Mongolia, central Asia and Russia as well as European Parliamentarians and other foreign visitors. Since the Dalai Lama stopped travelling outside India during the pandemic, and because of concerns over his health and age, more and more people from across the world have flocked to the small Himalayan hill town. This occasion was a teaching historically linked to the Gelugpa (yellow hat) lineage and the Mongolian Buddhist tradition requested by the Gandantegchenling monastery in Ulaanbaatar.

Before an audience of thousands of pilgrims from across the world, the Dalai Lama introduced a small boy sitting at his feet as the reincarnation of Khalkha

¹⁰ See Millward, James A., professor of history in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. 'China's Reincarnation Monopoly Has a Mongolia Problem', *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2023, [online](#).

¹¹ 'Dalai Lama: Seven billion people 'need a sense of oneness'', *BBC News*, 13 June 2020, [online](#). The Dalai Lama has also referred to the importance of the preservation of the dharma teachings in Mongolia, saying: "Buddhist countries like Thailand and Burma preserve excellent Buddhist practices. But only Tibetans and Mongolians engage in rigorous study of the dharma, although even in Mongolia this has declined so much." 'Losar Greetings', *the Dalai Lama's website*, 10 February 2024, [online](#).

¹² The Dalai Lama said: "As for Tibet and Mongolia, we have had close relations for well over a thousand years. Both peoples uphold the practice of Buddhist lineage as introduced by the great Nalanda masters." 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama begins two-day teaching for Mongolian Buddhists', *Tibet.net*, 28 February 2019, [online](#).

¹³ "When I was studying in Lhasa, I had 17 debating assistants selected from the colleges of Drepung, Ganden and Sera Monasteries. Among them, the best, and personally, the most influential, was Ngodup Tsoqnyi who came from the Abak region of Inner Mongolia." Ibid.



Jebtsundhampa Rinpoche of Mongolia, saying: “His predecessors had a close association with the Krishnacharya lineage of Chakrasamvara [a ceremony connected to the Bogd Jebtsundamba’s lineage]. One of them established a monastery in Mongolia dedicated to its practice. So, his being here today is quite auspicious.”¹⁴

In identifying the Tenth Jetsundampa, the Dalai Lama had upheld his spiritual and religious authority and the connection of his lineage to Mongolia. He had also frustrated China’s ongoing efforts to control the process – which some Mongolian Buddhists feared might involve a CCP-imposed Jebtsundamba being installed in Chinese-controlled Southern Mongolia.

When the Dalai Lama announced the recognition of Gendun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama, the child and his family were disappeared, never to be heard of since. How far would China’s reach extend outside the PRC, in its extensive efforts to control the process of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation, given the significance of the Tenth Bogd Lama’s role in the process?

Mongolian Buddhists experienced a mixture of joy that the “Bogd is back”, and at the same time, collective anxiety over the possible consequences from China and its supporters at high levels in Mongolia.¹⁵

When the late Pope Francis was the first pontiff to visit Mongolia six months later, former head of Buddhism, Khamba Lama Choejiants, said that the return of the Jebtsundamba is “an extraordinary fortune for us.” “Buddhism played the most significant role to strengthen the spiritual independence – the very bases of national independence,” he told the Pope and a multi-faith audience. “Due to the influence of the political ideology in the past, Mongolian Buddhism was severely suppressed. But after the National Constitution was adopted in 1992, the people obtained religious freedom and as a consequence, Mongolian Buddhism is on the path being revived according to its authenticity. The most significant and deserved result achieved is that His Holiness the Tenth Bogd Jebundamba Khutugtu was recognized recently and is being educated in both the religious and contemporary studies.” (The invitation to the

¹⁴ ‘Preliminary Procedures for the Chakrasamvara Empowerment’, *The Dalai Lama’s website*, 8 March 2023, [online](#).

¹⁵ Mongolian scholar Uradyn Bulag observed soon after the recognition was made public that: “China’s uncharacteristic public silence is holding the Mongolian public and government in suspense anxiously awaiting the imminent fall of the Sword of Damocles.” Bulag, Uradyn E. ‘Reimagining Mongolian Buddhism in the Geopolitical Crack between China and the Dalai Lama’. *The Dalai Lama’s Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question*, edited by Janannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj, Institute for Security and Development Policy and the Organisation for Research on China and Asia, May 2023, [online](#).



Pope was the initiative of Mongolia's ex-President Nambaryn Enkhbayar, a friend of Washington's powerful Tibet lobby.)¹⁶

While the Tenth Bogd and his parents did not make an appearance in public at a prominent Buddhist festival in August 2023, the Danshig Naadam, the first day was dominated by celebratory songs and other cultural references to the Jebtsundamba lineage.¹⁷ It was the first such festival after the announcement of the Jebtsumdampa reincarnation and the first in more than 200 years with a Mongolian Jebtsundamba.¹⁸

When the Dalai Lama had initially announced the Tenth Bogd Lama's recognition in 2016, following a visit to Ulaanbaatar, China had punished Mongolia by imposing import taxes on Mongolian goods and additional transit fees. The Mongolian government succumbed to pressure and promised in January 2017 that it would not invite the Dalai Lama back, but it also invoked a constitutional provision stating that politics and religion were separate, and that this was a matter for Buddhists. But the political stakes are higher in 2025, and the Mongolian security establishment indicated its concerns as soon as the child the Dalai Lama had recognised was introduced on a public stage in India.

"The way the Chinese see it is if left uncontrolled, the Tenth could become a powerful Pan-Mongolian figure for Buddhists in Outer and Inner Mongolia and Russian Buddhist areas," said a Mongolian analyst based in the US.¹⁹ "A Bogd Lama not selected, controlled, and indoctrinated by the PRC could be problematic for them. If the Chinese lose control of the process and the Bogd Lama is taken to South India to the Drepung Gomang Monastic University for his education, then he surely will one day be a thorn in the side of the CCP. He could become an obstacle to the future integration of Mongolia into the Motherland. Therefore, the PRC is working with its many resources within Mongolia to ensure that the person recognized will be someone they help select and someone whose education will be controlled by them and their agents in

¹⁶ Enkhbayar, head of a party that broke away from the socialists who long ruled Mongolia, has high-profile foreign friends including the late U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein. Beech, Hannah. 'Hesitant Steppes', *Time*, 20 August 2012, [online](#).

¹⁷ But the Tenth Bogd Lama and his parents did attend a religious empowerment at Gandantegchenling monastery on 30 August 2023: Manlai, B. 'Х Богд Жавзандамба эрдэнийн эрх ёсчлон хүртлээ', *lkon.mn*, 31 August 2023, [online](#).

¹⁸ Monhnaran Bayar, @MoRientalist, *X post*, 4 August 2023. "Tomorrow starts the Danshig Naadam. This yr is special since it is the 1st one after the revelation of Tenth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu & 1st in 2.5 centuries w/ a Mongolian JK [Jebtsundamba]. As THE prototypical 'national' Naadam, the importance of Danshig will only grow."

¹⁹ The analyst asked to remain anonymous.



Mongolia. The pressure brought on this matter on Mongolia's government, its financial institutions and powerful allies is intense.”

The boy known to many simply as ‘The Tenth’ was in Dharamsala at the time of his introduction by the Dalai Lama with his identical twin brother and his parents, both highly educated professionals. The boy's mother, Ms Munkhnasan Narmandakh, is an economist and business leader who runs her family business, the Monpolymet Group, which was founded by her mother Ms Garamjav Tseden, a former Member of Parliament from the Mongolian People's Party. Munkhnasan is active in civil society, supporting maternal health care in hospitals and other causes, and involved in projects to mentor and empower women in Mongolia. The Bogd Lama's father, Mr Altannar Chinchuluun, is a respected maths scholar who studied in London and Florida and serves as Associate Professor of Business School at the National University of Mongolia.²⁰

The family were in California in 2024, where Mr Chinchuluun was teaching at Stanford, when on 29 May 2024, the Mongolian Independent Authority Against Corruption detained the boy's grandmother Ms. Garamjav Tseden, a 66-year old Mongolian geological engineer, who founded Monpolymet LLC in the early 1990s. Mongolian media reported that Ms Tseden was interrogated for eight to nine hours without breaks for food or water,²¹ and accused of non payment of a Development Bank of Mongolia loan, even though the bank had confirmed the loan was fully paid,²² and that its

²⁰ He is also a researcher at the Mongolian Mathematical Institute.

²¹ Lawyers pointed out that this violates Article 25.2.1 of the criminal law, which stipulates that interrogation can continue for a maximum of 4 hours without a break and allows for a 1-hour break. ‘Ц.Гарамжав дээр “бөөгнүүлсэн” хэргүүдийн мөрөөр: Алтны үйлдвэр, уул уурхайн лиценз, Хөгжлийн банк’, *Eguur.mn*, 24 June 2024, [online](#).

²² Tseesuren, A., ‘АТГ: Ц.Гарамжав Хөгжлийн банкны зээлээ зориулалтын бусаар зарцуулсан байж болзошгүй’, *News.mn*, 29 May 2024, [online](#). A lawyer acting for the family responded to the accusations of money laundering: “Since the loan money transferred from the Development Bank to ‘Monpolymet’ LLC is legal, there can be no concept of money laundering. Unless the Development Bank obtained the money illegally. The Criminal Code defines money laundering as “the act of knowingly receiving, possessing, or using assets, money, or proceeds obtained through a crime, or concealing their illegal source,” as well as “the act of changing, transferring, or concealing their true nature, source, location, method of disposal, owner, or property rights with the intent to help any person involved in the crime evade legal liability.” However, ‘Monpolymet’ LLC prepared the relevant documents, obtained the loan in accordance with the appropriate procedures, repaid it as specified in the loan agreement, and concluded and closed the loan agreement. If money laundering is involved, there is no requirement to return the money.” Statement/interview with Mongolian media, Mongol Beat, ‘The decision of the ATC to suspend the activities of the Monpolymet Group is without legal basis’, *Gogo*, 2 July 2024, [online](#). Also see Batjargal, Ganbold, ‘Are you calling Ts. Garamjav a criminal mastermind?’, *iToim*, 14 June 2024, [online](#).



collaboration is regarded as one of the best projects selected by the Bank.²³ Ms Tseden was held for 48 hours in custody and later was hospitalized.²⁴

The Mongolian media specifically referred to Chinese pressure, reporting that this was applied at the highest levels: “The public knows that Ts. Garamjav is the grandmother of the Tenth Bogd, as revealed by the 14th Dalai Lama. There was a lot of opposition to this. However, in the year of the parliamentary elections, due to the influence of the PRC, Ts. Garamjav was suddenly investigated and many cases ‘stacked’ in political circles.”²⁵ Mrs Tseden had been a close follower and patron of the late Ninth Jebtsundamba, her grandson’s predecessor, and several days before he died in 2012, he had told her: “I will come to your family.”²⁶

The authorities harassed other members of the family, attempting to take the young Rinpoche’s aunt and her husband into custody, and freezing bank accounts of company executives and their families. On 28-29 May 2024 homes of the family were raided, involving the seizure of various financial documents, office equipment and other items.²⁷ Mongolian authorities also seized personal items from their home, which had nothing to do with their financial affairs, according to the Facebook posts written by the family. Monpolymet Chair Ms Narmandakh, the boy’s mother, posted: “They dug up and took everything from our house, including personal notebooks that had nothing to do with the [...] loan, personal family photos, videos of our children, personal diaries kept by our teenage daughters, and loose change given to our sons for safekeeping, etc.”²⁸

²³ Development Bank of Mongolia social media post, *Facebook/Meta*, 16 May 2025, [online](#) (from around 15:42).

²⁴ Social media post by her daughter Ms Narmandakh, *Facebook/Meta*, 14 November 2024, [online](#).

²⁵ The same Mongolian media source speculated that even the President’s office was said to be involved. ‘Following the accusations against Ts. Garamjav’, *Eguur Mongolia*, 24 June 2024, *Eguur.mn*, 24 June 2024, [online](#).

²⁶ ‘Be ri rig pa’i rdo rje 2015b’, p. 226, *Skyabs mgon khal kha rje btsun dam pa sku pren dgu ba’i mdzad rnam ma bcos drang por brjod pa mtshan ldan bla ma’i zhal lung chog shes dang bag yod kyi mi tshe*, vol 1. New Delhi: Norbu Graphics, cited by Treasury of Lives, ‘The Ninth Jebtsundampa, Jampel Namdrol Chokyi Gyeltsen’, [online](#).

²⁷ Lawyers acting for the family said that although the prosecutorial resolution stated that the Independent Authority Against Corruption raids should end by 10 p.m. on both days, officials continued their operations until 3-4 a.m., justifying the extended hours under the ‘Immediate Action’ clause of the criminal law. The family was not permitted to involve lawyers during the raids at some of the locations, according to their lawyers’ statements.

²⁸ Narmandakh, Nasaa. *Meta/Facebook*, 6 June 2024, [online](#). According to Mongolian media, despite Monpolymet suffering from foreign exchange losses amounting to 100 billion MNT (Mongolian Tughrig), repayment of the loan was completed in full, totaling 260.2 billion MNT. ‘Monpolymet Group completes repayment of its Development Bank loan’, *Itoim*, 21 August 2023, [online](#).



While the investigation was initially focused on the loan from several years ago, the investigation expanded with additional charges. Monpolymet's legal team denied the accusations, arguing that no such criminal charges had been filed and called for a fair investigation.²⁹ A spokeswoman for the Mongolian anti corruption agency confirmed the investigation, confirming that all personal and business banks' accounts were frozen.³⁰

Employees, whose salaries and continued employment were suddenly now at risk, staged rare demonstrations outside their workplace, with umbrellas in the company's colour, blue, chanting: "We want to work".³¹ "Let's note there is no political goal," said one Facebook post. "The blue umbrella is a souvenir given to the employees on the occasion of the [company's] 30th anniversary. We just want to do our job."³² Company CEO Delger said that the authorities had not responded to more than 100 requests for information about the reasons for the shutdowns, saying: "Our 400+ employees are supporting their families like everyone else. They are unemployed and have no income."³³

Representatives of businesses in Mongolia, including the European, British and Australian Chambers of Commerce, issued a statement in solidarity expressing concern about the government's actions, in "infringing on private properties, disseminating biased information to the public" and "halting operations". They said that "measures taken during inspections such as restricting property movement, closing bank accounts, and stopping operations disrupt the salaries and incomes of employees and subcontractors of the affected organisations, causing significant anxiety among business owners."³⁴

²⁹ American Chamber of Commerce, letter to Mongolian Prime Minister, published by International Republican Institute Mongolia, 19 September 2024.

³⁰ Newspress. *Twitter/X*, 21 June 2024, [online](#).

³¹ A further *Twitter/X* post said that the employees of Monpolymet group said that the authorities' actions destroys the desire of Mongolian young people to contribute to the Mongolian economy by participation in its heavy industry. Newspress. *Twitter/X*, 21 June 2024, [online](#). The same spokesperson confirmed that given the demonstrations of workers, the prosecutor's office were allowed to do payrolls for workers.

³² The Facebook post stated that the workers had a constitutional right to speak and express their opinions peacefully, and defend the values built up over 32 years of the company. Haliuna Tse. *Meta/Facebook*, 21 June 2024, [online](#).

³³ Mongolian media interview. 'Б.Дэлгэр: Манай 400 гаруй ажилтны үндсэн хуулиар олгогдсон ажил хөдөлмөрөө эрхлэх эрх ноцтой зөрчигдсөөр байна DNN.mn', *DNN.mn*, 31 July 2024, [online](#).

³⁴ Statement on the Impact of Regulatory Actions on Key Economic Sectors, 21 June 2024. The statement urged "regulatory bodies to refrain from any actions that violate the rights of enterprises."



The American Chamber of Commerce appealed directly to the Mongolian Prime Minister as the investigation into Monpolymet Group surpassed 100 days without updates, warning of negative consequences on Mongolia's investment climate with a major business risking bankruptcy.³⁵ "The development, which is still unfolding, portends to place a further chill on Mongolia's business and investment climate – a negative trend that Mongolia's new grand coalition Government is reportedly looking to turn around," the American Chamber of Commerce stated. "Freezing the accounts of Monpolymet's executives and family members is an unbalanced measure, harming Mongolia's business reputation internationally."³⁶

The Bogd returns to a Kalachakra ceremony



Altar at the main Gandentegchinlen monastery, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.
Image courtesy of the author.

In August 2024 a Kalachakra ceremony bestowed by senior Tibetan Rinpoche Jhado Rinpoche was held in Ulaanbaatar. Thousands of Mongolians attended the religious empowerment, and for the first time in a public setting, Mongolian people expressed their joy and reverence for the young incarnation of their religious leader. The nine

³⁵ Published by the International Republican Institute Mongolia, 19 September 2024.

³⁶ Ibid.



year old Bogd Lama, on his throne throughout for eight hours every day, demonstrated a rare composure and familiarity with the proceedings that was astonishing even to monks.

Pro-China Shugden supporters made wild threats of thunderstorms and cosmic events to stop the Kalachakra (which did not succeed). There was a wave of disinformation at the same time, with disturbing threats and fake information circulated on social media, particularly on Meta/Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Mongolia.³⁷

Despite the pressures, the boy's parents are trying to ensure he has a proper education, both religious – at Gandan monastery – and secular.³⁸ The family has a strong public profile, respect and popularity among ordinary Mongolians and some prominent politicians. The boy's mother Ms Narmandakh is active on social media in countering malicious allegations and her postings objecting to her mother's detention went viral.

In a similar example of the soft power of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia, in 2024 for the first time Mongolian Buddhists marked the Dalai Lama's birthday with high profile public events. The 'Festival of Compassion' on 6 July 2024, organised by Telo Tulku Rinpoche, Representative of His Holiness to Russia, Mongolia, and CIS countries, was attended by more than 600 guests including Tibetan religious figures and foreign ambassadors.³⁹

While Mongolian Buddhists were relieved that a recent transition in the role of Khamba Lama of Ganden monastery was allowed to occur without interruption, pressures on Gandan monastery and their relationship with the child and his family are still subject to interference. In November 2023, Geshe Jetsun Dorji became the new incumbent while Gabju Demberel Chojamts retired.⁴⁰ The Mongolian press described the peaceful transition in roles as "a significant event for Mongolia, marking the strength

³⁷ For instance, one account reportedly linked to Shugden devotees circulated a distressing image of the boy's picture on a shrine, saying that he and his twin had died. There are more than 2.9 million Facebook users in the country out of a total population of 3.4 million Mongolians (National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2023). In comparison, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok are used at a much lower rate.

³⁸ Pierson, David. 'The 8-Year-Old Boy at the Heart of a Fight Over Tibetan Buddhism', *New York Times*, 4 October 2023, [online](#).

³⁹ The festival, which organisers hope can be an annual event, was brought together by the Diluv Hutugthu Foundation, in cooperation with the Jetsundamba Centre and Asral NGO, organised the festival. 'Mongolia Celebrates His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Birthday in Historic First', *Central Tibetan Administration Dharamsala*, 8 July 2024, [online](#).

⁴⁰ The Dalai Lama assured both Khamba Lamas of his good wishes in a congratulatory message. 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama Congratulates New Khamba Lama of Mongolia', *Tibet.net*, 7 November, [online](#).



and resilience of the country's Buddhist spiritual leadership and offering an optimistic indication for the revival and spread of Buddhism following its suppression under communist rule from 1924–1992.”⁴¹

The Tenth Jebtsundamba

The boy known simply to many Mongolians as ‘The Tenth’ is a Mongolian twin boy born in Washington, DC.⁴² He was recognised by traditional means, even though for the Mongolian lamas involved, this meant referring to religious texts in the national archive and consulting the Dalai Lama’s Private Office.

Ever since the Ninth Jebtsundamba had died in 2012, there had been fears that China would seek to interfere in his reincarnation, and even impose their own candidate. A Chinese Embassy delegation was among the first to arrive at the monastery where he died – and to warn that the Dalai Lama should not be involved in recognising a successor, according to Mongolian sources. There were even rumours that a monastery in Inner Mongolia was being readied for a fake candidate.

The recognition of the Tenth by the Dalai Lama does not mean that China has given up in seeking to influence the course of events. Further efforts may be made to achieve endorsements among Mongolians and Shugden-ites aligned with the CCP, with the aim of undermining the Tenth recognised by the Dalai Lama and associated Buddhist institutions. A prominent Mongolian intellectual who now lives in the U.S. and who asked to remain anonymous said: “Just as with the Chinese Panchen Lama they certainly wanted to make the next Bogd Lama a tool of the Chinese state.”

In secret, a list of thousands of names of boys born in Mongolia in around 2014-5 was put together, and following a traditional process the list was winnowed down to around 13 for the final test.⁴³ Not all of the families of the boys on the shortlist responded to the request for the search team to carry out the final identification.

Indicating its significance, the then Mongolian President established a reincarnation search committee chaired by Khamba Lama Choijamts and involving the religious advisor to former President Elbegdorj; Odser Rinpoche, an assistant to the late Ninth Bogd Lama, together with reincarnate lamas studying at Drepung Gomang monastery

⁴¹ Ankhtuya. ‘The Gandantegchilen appoints new Khamba Lama’, *News.mn*, 8 November 2023, [online](#).

⁴² At present he has dual citizenship, and at the age of 18 will need to choose between either American or Mongolian citizenship.

⁴³ According to Yangten Rinpoche from the Dalai Lama’s private office.



in India. A second working group was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to handle how the reincarnation might affect Mongolian foreign policy.

Then one day in 2016 several of the children and their parents were gathered together in a room at Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar. Monks spread out objects in front of them including religious texts and clothes that had previously belonged to the Ninth Jebtsumdampa. While some children didn't even approach the table, one and a half year old A. Altannar picked up a set of prayer beads and other belongings without any hesitation. A religious scholar Bataa Mishigish, head of the Religious Studies Department at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, who observed the ceremony, said: "Incredibly enough, he demonstrated his extraordinary identification of precise elements. He chose them. None of the others did, and at that age, you can't tell a child what to do."⁴⁴

At first, the boy's parents were shocked and concerned about the implications of the recognition. But the Dalai Lama reassured them by saying that in a few years, things would be clearer, and that there was no need to rush into public announcements. "One day, in the future, he will enter the light," said Bataa Mishigish. "For now, he's learning. [...] We don't want to upset China. We're a small nation."⁴⁵

The parents were assured that the recognition would be kept secret to give them time, which it was, until March 2023. His family worried that if they resisted their son's recognition they would be failing in their duty to important Mongolian institutions, not to mention denying Tibetan Buddhists in Mongolia and across the world a future leader. There was also the character of the boy to consider; according to observers and Tibetan lamas who know him, he is unusually mature and spiritually inclined, appearing to naturally know what to do during religious ceremonies without being taught.

The Nechung 'Dharma Protector' or State Oracle has a historic relationship with Mongolia. Nechung Kuten, the monk who acts as the medium for the state oracle, has

⁴⁴ Cited by Thibault, Harald. 'Mongolia's sacred child: The heavy geopolitical responsibility weighing on a 9-year-old boy', *Le Monde*, 21 June 2024, [online](#).

⁴⁵ Ibid.



been travelling to Mongolia since 1990⁴⁶ and was involved in preparing the ground for the recognition of the Bogd Lama. He says that the child is different, “thoughtful and mature, interested in monastic activities, while his twin brother is more playful”.⁴⁷

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition for tulkus, a child recognised as a reincarnate lama of his status would study at a monastery in India for some years from a young age. But even without the unique political pressures they are experiencing, this would be a major decision for modern, secular parents.

In terms of religious faith, there is a changing picture in today’s Mongolia. Some Mongolians feel that recognition of a spiritual leader by a leader outside the country is inappropriate for a modern society. Although Tibetan Buddhist faith is deep and strong after surviving Soviet purges of the 1930s, in the 2010 census just over half (53%) of Mongolian citizens identified as Buddhist, while ten years later in 2020 this figure dropped to 51.7%. Just over 40% of people identified as non-believers in any religion.⁴⁸

Even so, Mongolians remember the persecution of Buddhism and how spiritual faith was a bulwark against Communism and its promotion of atheism. The Jebtsundamba institution, and the freedom to believe or not to believe, is inextricably tied to Mongolia’s rich and independent identity. When the boy’s predecessor the Ninth Jebtsundamba experienced difficulties in coming back to Mongolia after 1990, the political fallout led to the realisation that “Mongolians were much closer to the issue of

⁴⁶ Nechung Kuten says: “There are accounts of mediums in Mongolia channeling the Nechung Dharma protector in the past. But in recent times, after Mongolia’s government became communist, all of that was completely abolished and no longer exists. However, the palace where the mediums resided and their ritual items have been preserved and can be seen these days in a museum. Because of this connection, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama travelled to Mongolia. I myself was able to visit Mongolia after 1990, and my personal relationship with the Mongols began then. In 2008 and 2009, I investigated the original sacred site of the Nechung Dharma protector in Mongolia. It was very far away from the capital, Ulaanbaatar. You need to fly for two and a half hours, then drive for eight or nine hours, and then after that, hike to reach it. [...] Since the Mongols themselves have considered this site as a sacred site for centuries, there is the custom that when a new president of Mongolia is elected, they go there and offer the smoke of burning juniper branches and make requests to the protector.” Lindén, Matt. ‘Interview with the Nechung Oracle’, *Study Buddhism by Berzin Archives*, [online](#).

⁴⁷ Conversation with the author, March 2023.

⁴⁸ Хүн ам, орон сууцны 2020 оны улсын ээлжит тооллогын нэгдсэн дүн [2020 National Population and Housing Census Summary]. National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2020, [online](#). Archived 7 Nov. 2020.



Bogd Gegeen (Jebtsundamba) than we thought,” according to the then director of the Civil Service Council of Mongolia, Samdan Tsedendamba.⁴⁹

The Tenth Jebtsundamba, the Dalai Lama and Mongolia’s Buddhist history

“The subsequent emergence of the Fifth Dalai Lama in Tibet and the Tibetan-Mongol coalition government established earlier between Sonam Gyatso [the Third Dalai Lama] and Altan Khan created the necessary potential for Dalai Lamas to be born in both Tibetan and Mongol worlds.”

Namloyak Dhungser, in ‘Aflame for Freedom in Tibet’⁵⁰

The PRC controls only a portion of historical Mongolia, Inner (Southern) Mongolia, while Mongolia itself has been an independent country since 1911. During the Cold War, Mongolia aligned itself closely with the Soviet Union, who promised to protect the country from Chinese encroachment and ambitions. But the Mongolians paid a high price. For centuries, Buddhist monasteries and temples had played a critical role in Mongolian culture and society with more than a thousand Buddhist sites flourishing there by 1920 and monks making up at least 10% of the population.

But Buddhism was very nearly extinguished under Soviet rule. Most monasteries were destroyed between 1937 and 1939 under the Great Purge, and thousands of Buddhist monks and lay practitioners were executed or disappeared into labour camps.⁵¹ “It was the kind of catastrophe that could lead to the loss of a culture’s memory. But the story of Buddhism was so deeply anchored within Mongolia that it couldn’t be forgotten,” according to a documentary made by the London-based Tibet Foundation, which ran a Buddhism in Mongolia project to help revive the religion.⁵²

⁴⁹ Samdan Tsedendamba, former director of the Civil Service Council of Mongolia, cited by Fagan, Geraldine. ‘Mongolia: Religious Freedom Oasis?’. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 23, no. 6, article 3, [online](#).

⁵⁰ Dhungser, Namloyak. *Aflame for Freedom in Tibet: The Origin and Development of the Self-Immolation Movement*. Edited by Joshua Esler, Lexington Books, 2024.

⁵¹ My young Mongolian host in Ulaanbaatar during a visit in summer 2023 recalled her father telling her about her devout Buddhist grandfather, who prayed in secret late at night at home. During the Soviet era, he disappeared into a Soviet gulag in Siberia for more than 15 years.

⁵² From the documentary by the Meridian Trust, ‘[The Blue Scarf](#)’, which tells a story dating back to the 13th century, when the leader of the great empire of the Mongols decided to make Tibetan Buddhism the religion of the state. “Seven hundred years later, Mongolia is emerging in the modern world, and despite the systematic destruction of Buddhism under 70 years of Soviet communist rule, the majority of the population is still devoted to their religion.”



A tableau in the National Museum of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar depicting Soviet purges of monks under Stalinist rule. Image courtesy of the author.

Buddhism has made a resurgence since the democratic revolution of 1990, when the country emerged after 70 years of close alignment to the Soviets. Sue Byrne, who led the Buddhism in Mongolia project, recalled that she used a Chinese railway company map from the 1920s from the Royal Geographical Society that showed the sites of all the temples: “I went with a senior monk from the monastery to his home in the Gobi and saw the site of the temple where he had been as a boy – only an earth platform and some circles of stones were left. Imagine all the parish churches in England being destroyed, even in the Reformation most church buildings survived. Mongolia had its own culture, and the cornerstone of it was simply obliterated. [...] There were quite a few old men at the Ulaanbaatar temples who had re-appeared after years, pulled out



their lama robes from ancient trunks and told their families that they had been a monk, so we asked them to tell us their life stories.”⁵³

Mongolian monks started to travel to Tibetan monasteries in south India to study for Masters or Geshe degrees. There are currently around 500 Mongolian lamas studying at the Drepung Gomang Monastery in south India, and these trained scholars will be key for further revival of Buddhism in Mongolia.⁵⁴

In this interconnected Buddhist world, it was a Chinggisid Mongol Khan in the 16th century who first bestowed the title ‘Dalai Lama’ on a lama in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, combining the Tibetan word for priest with a Mongolian word meaning “oceanic wisdom”. Mongolian analyst Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva explains: “The creation of Jebtsundamba’s institution as well as the other two highest-ranking lamaist institutions — the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama — coincide with the period of Inner Asian history, where various Mongol monarchs vied to emulate Kublai Khan’s imperial model of combining the Chinggisid lineage with that of Buddhist wisdom. This model led the Altan Khan of Tumed Mongols in present-day Inner Mongolia to grant the title of Dalai Lama to the leader of the Tibetan Buddhism’s Gelug sect in 1580.”⁵⁵

The Fourth Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia after the Third was the only one of his lineage to die in exile there.⁵⁶ Just as there has been speculation over a possible 15th Dalai Lama being reincarnated in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh (where the Sixth Dalai Lama was born), there has been similar discussion over a future reincarnation being

⁵³ ‘Primrose Hill Passion: Sue Byrne’, *The Primrose Hill Magazine*, 9 February 2015, [online](#). A group of international researchers working in Mongolia in the field of Buddhist and cultural preservation collaborated with the Arts Council of Mongolia (ACM) to conduct a project ‘The Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries’, between 2005 and 2007. “The goal was to create a database of the location and condition of Buddhist temple and monastery sites in Mongolia at the beginning of 20th century that could be found in the main survey period of summer of 2007. It was important to do the project then as elderly people who were disciples in the temples and monasteries up to 1938 were the people who could guide the surveyors to the sites. The opportunity was also taken to conduct oral history interviews with old people drawing on their reminiscences of the monasteries and their life at that time, and to survey the temples that were active in the country at the time of the survey.” <http://www.mongoliantemples.org/en/>. Also see [Database “Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries”](#).

⁵⁴ This figure was given by Geshe Bumsan Lama, currently in Mongolia after completing his geshe degree, and Javjandorj Lama, currently studying for Lharampa degree in Drepung Gomang Monastery and senior lamas at Mongol Mitsan, a Mongolian lama’s campus at Drepung Gomang. For some evidence refer to the Facebook page of [Mongol Mitsan](#).

⁵⁵ Bayarlkhagva, Munkhnaran, *ibid*.

⁵⁶ The previous Tibetan Buddhist head Khamba Lama Choijamts refers to three waves of Buddhist dissemination in Mongolia, from the early wave among ancient tribes, to the middle Chinggis Khan period with the coming of monks from the Sakya and Kagyu schools, with the last during the Third Dalai Lama period. Meridian Trust documentary ‘[The Blue Scarf](#)’.



recognised in Mongolia – although less so since the Tenth Jebtsundamba was recognised.

While there is almost no literature available speculating on the political impacts of this possibility, a paper from 2007 by Mashbat Otgonbayar Sarlagtay of the National Security Council of Mongolia provided valuable insights from a security and cultural context and describing the various options for Mongolia in terms of balancing domestic political systems with immediate military threats and economic dependencies.⁵⁷

Based on a number of interviews with leading figures in religion and politics in Mongolia, Sarlagtay offered a range of perspectives presenting both the opportunities and threats of such an eventuality. The reincarnation of the Dalai Lama in Mongolia would “provide the country with some unique opportunities in security and foreign policy”, the paper noted, citing a former MP who said that the domestic impact could be the elimination of the old outdated nomadic image of Mongolia and the reemphasis of the Buddhist character of Mongolian civilisation. “Mongolia could potentially become a centre of Mahayana Buddhism, which would attract tourists and be profitable for its economy [which] would actively promote ‘security of Mongolian civilisation’, one sector of the comprehensive security concept of Mongolia [...] in the emerging Sino-centric East Asian regionalism.” By the same token, the Dalai Lama would help Mongolia to attract the attention of other great powers, protecting its interests.⁵⁸ The main argument presented against the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation was that it would drive Mongolia onto a collision course with China’s security policy. Comparing the situation to Taiwan’s, Sarlagtay said that: “Mongolia would find itself caught between a democracy that requires its government to be responsive for its people’s religious needs, and a security threat due to Beijing’s concern about the Dalai Lama’s influence.”⁵⁹

Broadly speaking the same arguments could be made now about the reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba and current circumstances.

Today’s Mongolia owes more to the Buddhist reincarnation lineage of the Bogd Jebtsundamba than to Chinggis Khan. Historian Uradyn E. Bulag points out that when the region gained its independence as a country from the Manchu-led Qing China, it was named ‘Olnoo Orgogdson Mongol Uls’ after the reign title of Bogd Khan, meaning

⁵⁷ Sarlagtay, Mashbat Otgonbayar. *International Politics of the Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama*. National Security Council of Mongolia, submitted as a thesis from the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, June 2007, [online](#).

⁵⁸ Hashbat Hulan, former Mongolian member of Parliament, February 2007, cited in paper *International Politics of the Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama*, *ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.



“Elevated by the many”, popularly known as ‘Bogd Khaant Mongol Uls’, after his title ‘Holy Ruler’.⁶⁰

The first Bogd Lama, Zanabazar (1635–1723), was identified as the reincarnation of the scholar Taranatha of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism. Zanabazar was the son of the Tüsheet Khan Gombodorj, ruler of central Mongolia, and himself became the spiritual head of the Khalkha Mongols. Like Zanabazar, the Second Bogd Lama was a member of Mongolia's highest nobility and direct descendant of Genghis Khan. After Chingünjav's rebellion and the demise of the second Bogd Lama, the Qianlong Emperor decreed in 1758 that all future reincarnations were to be found from among the population of Tibet. When northern Mongolia declared independence in 1911, the Eighth Bogd (1869–1924) was elevated to theocratic ruler, called Bogd Khan. He was the head of state until his death in 1924. The communist government of the Mongolian People's Republic, which replaced the theocracy in 1924, declared that there were to be no further reincarnations.



Display of the Eighth Bogd Khan and his wife Tsendiin Dondogdulam in the National Museum of Mongolia. The Bogd Khan (1869–1924) was enthroned as the Great Khan of Mongolia on 29 December 1911, when Outer Mongolia declared independence from China. Born in Tibet, as the eighth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu he was the spiritual leader of Mongolia's Tibetan Buddhism. Image courtesy of the author.

⁶⁰ Bulag, Uradyn E. ‘Reimagining Mongolian Buddhism in the Geopolitical Crack between China and the Dalai Lama’. *The Dalai Lama's Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question*, edited by Janannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj, Institute for Security and Development Policy and the Organisation for Research on China and Asia, May 2023, [online](#).



As the historic homeland of the Khalkha ‘tribe’, Mongolia brings together various groups under the institution of the Buddhist reincarnation lineage, the Bogd Jebtsundamba.⁶¹ By 1911, the Eighth Jebtsundamba had become the Holy Khan, the theocratic leader of the newly independent state. The Eighth Bogd, who was born in Lhasa to a father who worked at the 12th Dalai Lama’s court, led the revolution to restore the independence and sovereignty of Mongolia after the oppression of the Qing Dynasty.

In 2021, denoting his key significance to Mongolia’s national identity, a statue of the Eighth Bogd Khan was erected in front of his winter palace in Ulaanbaatar, “evoking the city and nation’s Buddhist past as a supplement, if not an alternative, to the current state’s emphasis on secular history.”⁶²

Considering the challenging position today for Mongolians, scholar Uradyn Bulag raises another prospect emerging from the special relationship of Tibet and Mongolia. “An interesting question now is whether the Mongolians today can [through their approach] resolve the entanglement between Tibet, China and Mongolia. Can the Mongolians today serve as mediators between China and Tibet and if so, how? This might seem like a quixotic proposition, given that today Mongolia doesn’t hold the same power as it once did, but nevertheless it is a suggestion worth considering.”⁶³

The (Tibetan) Ninth Jebtsundamba and the Dalai Lama

There had not been a Mongolian Bogd Jebtsundamba for nearly 300 years.⁶⁴ In the late 17th century, the Qing emperor decreed that all future reincarnations of the

⁶¹ “The Khalkha Chinggisid nobles established [the lineage] in 1639, during a period of intense military threat posed by the expanding Manchu who had already conquered what eventually became Inner Mongolia”, writes historian Uradyn E. Bulag, *ibid.*

⁶² Bulag, Uradyn E., *ibid.*

⁶³ Asia Freedom Institute online panel discussion. ‘Tibet, Mongolia and the Dalai Lama: A Special and Centuries-old relationship.’ *Asia Freedom Institute*, 22 August 2024, [online](#).

⁶⁴ Although Gelugpa lamas, the Jebtsundamba Khutugtus are considered incarnations of Tāranātha, a master of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism who had been converted to the Gelugpa tradition in the 17th century.



Jetsumdamba should be found in Tibet.⁶⁵ A. Altannar's predecessor, the Ninth Bogd Lama, Jampel Namdrol Chokyi Gyeltsen, had been born in Tibet, and after he heard about the Dalai Lama's escape in March 1959, followed him into exile. After 12 years living in Darjeeling, where he visited and received empowerments and teachings from religious masters including the 16th Karmapa, the Ninth Bogd made a living like many Tibetan refugees by selling sweaters in Tamil Nadu. In the 1980s he relocated to a Tibetan settlement in Madhya Pradesh, where he lived as a farmer and community lama.



The Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutughtu line from the Gelugpa school has traditionally led Buddhists in Mongolia, just as the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lamas have in Tibet. This image depicts the Ninth Bogd Lama, who was close to the Dalai Lama and died in 2012. The Ninth Jebtsundamba was born in Tibet, and followed the Dalai Lama into exile. He was able to return to Mongolia after the collapse of the socialist regime. Image courtesy of Gursed Tserenpil.

After the socialist regime in Mongolia collapsed, the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs in Ulaanbaatar sent a letter dated 17 September 1991 to the Dalai Lama about the need to publicly recognise the Ninth Jebtsundamba Khutughtu. The letter stated that during their visit to Mongolia, the minister and secretary met with the Mongolian president and other dignitaries and that the Mongolians had inquired about the identity of a person in exile who was said to be the incarnation of Jebtsundamba Khutughtu. As a result, on 20 September 1991, on the eve of an official visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama announced that the then 59 year old Jampel Namdrol Chokyi Gyeltsen was the Ninth Jebtsundamba Khutughtu. It was a strong contrast to his earlier situation in India,

⁶⁵ Millward, James. 'China's Reincarnation Monopoly Has a Mongolia Problem'. *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2023, [online](#).



when he could not secure permission even for a plot of land in one of the Tibetan settlements in South India.⁶⁶

The Dalai Lama's recognition of the Ninth Bogd Jebtsundamba as the true reincarnation marked a turning point for Buddhism in Mongolia and opened the path for future Jebtsundamba incarnations to be recognized in Mongolia. In addition, the Dalai Lama made significant efforts to educate Mongolian students in India and recognised several other Mongolian reincarnations.

An official enthronement ceremony of the Ninth took place at the Dalai Lama's temple, the Tsuglakhang, in Dharamsala in March 1992, with a second at Drepung monastery in South India.⁶⁷ The Ninth and one of his sons and daughter in law settled in a house in Dharamsala where his room and temple are still visited by Mongolians, Russians and other Buddhists. Particularly in later years, he and the Dalai Lama were close; the Dalai Lama would send his doctor to the Ninth to give him a checkup, and he would often be invited to the Dalai Lama's residence.



The home of the Ninth Jebtsundamba is kept intact by his son and family in Dharamsala, India, and visited by many pilgrims and devotees from Mongolia. Image courtesy of the author.

⁶⁶ In his biography of the Ninth Bogd for *Treasury of Lives*, Lhagvademchig Jadamba writes that he was unable to secure permission of the Council for Home Affairs of the Tibetan government-in-exile to receive a plot of land in any of the settlements. *Treasury of Lives*, [online](#).

⁶⁷ The Dalai Lama visited Jampel Namdrol Chokyi Gyeltsen in Mainpat and publicly introduced him as the Ninth Khalkha Jebtsundamba Khutugtu in a meeting with local Tibetans held at Dakpo Shedrubling Monastery (dwags po bshad sgrub gling) For Dakpo Shedrubling Monastery see 'Blo bzang dar rgyas' 2016b, p. 130, cited by Lhagvademchig Jadamba, op. cit.



The Ninth Bogd Lama made his first visit to Russia in 1997, visiting temples in Buryatia with two of his sons. He said at the time: “Though I had to go to Mongolia, due to certain karmic connections, I first came to Buryatia, Russia. For this, there must be some strong spiritual connection. But I hope that this visit will open the door for Mongolia, and when I go there someday, I will do everything I can do to help Mongolian people.”⁶⁸

He was finally able to travel to Mongolia in 1999, making a first low profile visit on a one month tourist visa, without making arrangements through the government or Buddhist leadership. The Jebtsundamba's presence coincided with a state visit by the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who arrived two days later. The Ninth Bogd waited until the Chinese leader had left Mongolia before returning to Ulaanbaatar, where he gave teachings. But both the Mongolian government – which was following the Soviet era practice of not recognizing reincarnations - and Dharamsala were worried about diplomatic fallout. When he over stayed his visa and was enthroned formally at Erdene Zuu monastery, nearly 400 kilometres from the capital, he received a message from the then Kalon Tripa (Prime Minister) of the Tibetan authorities in exile to return to India. Nevertheless, by the enthronement and issuing of a seal, religious leaders had formally established a new Buddhist leadership in Mongolia.

The Dalai Lama, too, was pleased by the Ninth Jebtsundamba's efforts from then on to restore the lineage, encompassing visits to Buryatia and Tuva that same year to consecrate newly opened Buddhist temples.⁶⁹

In 2001, the Ninth Bogd became the first Vajrayana Buddhist lama to give the Kalachakra empowerment in Taiwan, and when he travelled to Kalmykia in 2005 to teach he was met at the airport by the President of the central Asian republic. In 2005, when he was in Russia, he sent a Mongolian disciple to Mongolia with his ceremonial crown and accouterments for giving a Kalachakra empowerment, even though he could not travel there himself.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Buddizm Rossii* [Buddhism in Russia], no. 28, 1997, p. 18. Cited by Lhagvademchig Jadamba in *Treasury of Lives*, op. cit.

⁶⁹ Jadamba, Lhagvademchig, citing an interview with venerable Ösönbayaryn Gündsambuu, 2016.

⁷⁰ “The Jebtsundamba Khutugtu told Jamyangdorj, ‘I will come to Mongolia from Buryatia. I will give the Kālacakra empowerment. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has assigned sixteen monks from Namgyel Monastery. When I reach Mongolia, they will come to Mongolia.’ The Jebtsundamba Khutugtu had hoped, under a new administration of the newly elected Mongolian President, to be able to travel to the country, but he was unable to do so, and instructed Jamyangdorj to return the suitcase to Buryatia. The Jebtsundamba Khutugtu declared, ‘My crown went to Mongolia before me. This is an auspicious sign.’” *Treasury of Lives*, op. cit.



It was not until Tsahiagiin Elbegdorj was elected president of Mongolia in May 2009 that the Ninth Bogd Lama was finally able to return to Mongolia. During the visit the President, who had first met the Jebtsundamba in 1999 when he was a member of parliament, requested that the Bogd Lama take rebirth in Mongolia. The Jebtsundamba Khutugtu confirmed that he would do so. His citizenship was granted in 2010. At his citizenship ceremony, he said: "I pray earnestly for a coming reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba Khutugtu who will be a fully ordained monk endowed with both high learning and realization. I have hope and am fully confident this will happen in the future."⁷¹

While in Mongolia, the Ninth Bogd Lama was involved in establishing a Religious Assembly and accompanying Religious Administration modeled on the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala. (A thinktank with PLA links, the China Energy Fund Committee, wryly characterised the restoration of the Jebtsundamba lineage in Mongolia "a great victory for the Dalai clique".)⁷²

In 2011, the Jebtsundamba's failing health necessitated a speedy formal enthronement ceremony at Ganden monastery in Ulaanbaatar. Some years before he had undergone a kidney transplant, donated by his son Tukse Rinpoche, and he was in a wheelchair following a stroke. President Tsahiagiin Elbegdorj enthroned the Jebtsundamba Khutugtu as the head of Mongolian Buddhism under a Presidential Order. Five days after the enthronement, on 11 November 2011, the Dalai Lama travelled to Mongolia, where he met the Bogd Jebtsundamba together with all senior monk officials of Gandantegchenling, including the then abbot the Khamba Lama Chojjams. The Dalai Lama suggested to the Jebtsundamba Khutugtu that it may be time to consider his next incarnation and the importance of taking rebirth in Mongolia. He assured the Mongolians: "There is an uncommon relationship between the reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and the Jebtsundamba. I am younger [than the Jebtsundamba Khutugtu.] I will take the responsibility for his next reincarnation."⁷³

For a Dalai Lama to assume responsibility for the recognition of a Jebtsundamba was a departure from historic precedent, although the Dalai Lama has recognised other Mongolian reincarnations – to date, at least 15. In addition, around four Mongolian reincarnations were recognized by the Ninth Bogd Jebtsundamba himself.

⁷¹ *Treasury of Lives*, op.cit.

⁷² Martin, Miguel. 'Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia'. *China Brief*, vol. 18, no. 12, 10 July 2018, [online](#).

⁷³ *Be ri rig pa'i rdo rje* 2015b, pp. 210–211. Cited in *Treasury of Lives*, op. cit.



Billboard in Ulaanbaatar welcoming the Dalai Lama to Mongolia. This was a surprise, unannounced teaching visit in 2011, when the Ninth Jebtsundamba was enthroned at Gandentegchinlen monastery. Image courtesy of Sue Byrne.

Mongolian scholar Christopher Attwood, author of ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’, noted that the oldest pattern of recognition of a Jebtsundamba is identification by Mongolian Buddhist elites. Although the Ninth Bogd Lama was Tibetan and chosen through Tibetan methods, it was only in 1990 that he was formally ‘recognised’ by the Dalai Lama. Christopher Attwood points out that the first two Jebtsundambas were determined by Mongolian aristocracy and lamas, and the next six by the Qing court through a ‘golden urn’ ceremony in Yonghegong monastery, close to the center of Beijing.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Mongolian scholar Uradyn E. Bulag writes: “After executing the 2nd Jebtsundamba in 1758 for his rebellion, the Qing attempt to destroy the politico-religious cohesion of the Khalka by mandating that his reincarnation be found in Tibet. The short lifespans of the Third through the Seventh Tibetan-born Jebtsundambas were evidence of ethnic tension, but the Eighth Jebtsundamba redeemed himself in the eyes of many Mongols by not only being adopted into the Chinggisid lineage of the Khalkha, but also by displaying defiance against both the Qing Emperor and the 13th Dalai Lama. He never visited Beijing for imperial audiences, and he avoided meeting the Dalai Lama during his two-year sojourn in Khalkha Mongolia from 1904 to 1906. This laid the groundwork for Mongolia’s independence from both the Qing Empire and what may be called ‘the Tibetan Buddhist Society’ dominated by the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama in 1911.” Bulag, Uradyn E. “Reimagining Mongolian Buddhism in the Geopolitical Crack between China and the Dalai Lama.” *The Dalai Lama’s Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question*, edited by Janannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj, Institute for Security and Development Policy and the Organisation for Research on China and Asia, May 2023, [online](#).



The Ninth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu was hospitalized several times after the enthronement, and he sought advice in January 2012 from the Dalai Lama in a phone call about where and when he should pass away. The Dalai Lama directed him to die in Mongolia after the Tibetan New Year. On 6 February 2012, the Ninth Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutugtu issued his testament titled *The Word for All the Faithful (dad re kun la gtam)*. The testament was written in Tibetan and four copies were made for Ganden Labrang, Gandantegchenling Monastery, the Government of Mongolia, and the Dalai Lama. In it he affirmed that he would be reborn in Mongolia, that he would be recognized by the Dalai Lama and that the Mongolian people should accept his decision, and that his next incarnation would be devoted solely to religious affairs,” writes Mongolian scholar Lhagvademchig Jadamba.⁷⁵

The Ninth died on 1 March 2012, just after Tibetan New Year, as the Dalai Lama had advised, at Ganden monastery. The then President Elbegdorj, the Mongolian Speaker and then Prime Minister sent condolences with the wish that the Bogd Lama be reborn in Mongolia. The Dalai Lama sent Samdhong Rinpoche, who now heads his Gaden Podrang Foundation in charge of arrangements over future succession, to Mongolia as his representative.

The Ninth’s son Choephel, who still lives in the family home in Dharamsala, said that his father ended his post-mortem meditation, a state known as *tukdam (thugs dam)*⁷⁶ when Samdhong Rinpoche arrived from India and offered him a ceremonial scarf. On 5 March 2012, the Dalai Lama composed *The Prayer for the Swift Rebirth of the Ninth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu*.⁷⁷

A Chinese Embassy delegation was among the first to arrive at the monastery where he had died, according to sources in Mongolia, and to warn that the Dalai Lama should not be involved in recognising a successor.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Batsaihan, Oohnoin. *IX Bogd Javzandamba Khutagt: Amidral ba Tsag Hugatsaa* [The Ninth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu: Life and Time]. Mönhiiin Üseg, 2015.

⁷⁶ A global community of field researchers have found surprising new evidence from a study of an ancient postmortem meditative state known as ‘tukdam’, entered by present-day expert Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and how practices through which the state is entered might offer insight into mental, spiritual, and physical well-being during the death process. The Dalai Lama describes ‘tukdam’ as a meditative state achieved at the time of death, where the practitioner gains ultimate realization into the fundamental nature of mind and shows a delay in the normal timeline of physiologic processes typical after death. ‘The Field Study of Long-term Meditation Practitioners and the Tukdam Post-death Meditative State’, University of Wisconsin-Madison, [online](#).

⁷⁷ *Treasury of Lives*, op. cit.

⁷⁸ According to Mongolian sources present at the monastery at the time.



A child is recognised – and the consequences

Four years later, on 23 November 2016, on the last morning of a visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama publicly announced that the Tenth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu had been born in Mongolia. During a press conference in Japan, on his way home to India, the Dalai Lama said: “However, the boy is very young right now, so there is no need for haste in making an announcement. When he is three, four or five years old, we’ll see how things are. Placing a small child on a high throne is not what’s important. What is much more important is that he is able to study and become learned so he will be able to contribute to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma.”⁷⁹

The Dalai Lama confirmed his contact with the Ninth Bogd Lama, saying: “Previous Jebtsundambas have been close to the Dalai Lamas in the past. I knew the Ninth Jebtsundamba from childhood. As the time of his death approached, he asked me where and when he should pass away, which surprised me a little. However, during our last meeting, when he was already in poor health, I told him that it was important for him to be reborn in Mongolia. Considering the significance of his reincarnation and bearing in mind that he is a personal friend, I feel I have a responsibility to look after his reincarnation.”⁸⁰

Signalling the national symbolism of the development, it was the then President Tsakhia Elbegdorj who made the call to the Tenth Bogd Lama’s family to tell them their child had been recognised.

The identity of the child was kept a closely-guarded secret, as Dharamsala had promised, until he appeared in public with the Dalai Lama at the empowerment in Dharamsala on 8 March 2023.

The caution was prompted by China’s possible reactions to the return of the Bogd Lama to Mongolia. In 2016, when the Dalai Lama announced his recognition, without revealing his name, China punished Mongolia by imposing import taxes on Mongolian goods and additional transit fees. The government of Mongolia promised in January 2017 that it would not invite the Dalai Lama back during the period of its administration, but it also invoked a constitutional provision stating that politics and religion were separate, and that this was a matter for Buddhists.⁸¹ Despite China’s

⁷⁹ ‘Meeting with the Press before Returning to Japan.’ *The Dalai Lama’s website*, 26 November 2016, [online](#).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ A promise that Mongolian scholar Uradyn E. Bulag said “was rumoured to have been extended by the current President of Mongolia, Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh, during his state visit to China in November 2022, stating that the Mongolian government would not recognize the Tenth Bogd for the duration of his six-year term, or until 2027.” Bulag, Uradyn E., op. cit.



retaliations in 2016, it did nevertheless stop short of public discussion of the reincarnation issue, saying that it “hoped” Mongolia would handle the affair “autonomously”, in other words, without Dharamsala’s involvement.⁸²

Scholar Uradyn E. Bulag described China’s pushback as a “severe blow to a landlocked nation” and more recently has referred to a “collective anxiety”⁸³ among Mongolians about possible repercussions to the now public appearance of the Tenth Bogd.⁸⁴

China did not publicly express its displeasure after the appearance of the boy with the Dalai Lama in India. Nevertheless, there is suspicion that the postponement of the Prime Minister’s originally planned March-May (2023) visit to China and China’s refusal to accept Mongolian coal at market price were related to the Dalai Lama’s public recognition of the Tenth Bogd.

‘Holding a knife behind each other’s backs’: China and Russia in Mongolia

“The old lady said to me, of course I am tired – how can I sleep, when my [Buddhist] brothers and sisters are in Russia and China”.

A monk at Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar recounting a conversation with an elderly Mongolian Buddhist at a religious teaching⁸⁵

China’s sensitivity over matters of Mongolia’s independent history is so acute that in 2020 it demanded that certain words, including “Genghis Khan”, “empire” and “Mongol” be removed from an exhibition in a museum in Nantes on the Mongol empire.⁸⁶ (They failed).

⁸² PRC embassy to Mongolia, January 2017, cited by Miguel Martin/Jichang Lulu in ‘Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia’. *China Brief*, vol. 18, no. 12, 10 July 2018, [online](#).

⁸³ “China’s uncharacteristic public silence is holding the Mongolian public and government in suspense anxiously awaiting the imminent fall of the Sword of Damocles [...] Mongolians are no stranger to China’s economic sanctions, memorialized by the Great Wall, but they are also aware of the massive damage Chinese sanctions could cause to the country’s fragile economy.” Op. cit.

⁸⁴ Bulag, Uradyn E., op. cit.

⁸⁵ Conversation with the author.

⁸⁶ Chrisafis, Angelique. ‘Blockbuster show on Genghis Khan opens in France after row with China’. *The Guardian*, 3 November 2023, [online](#).



A scholar at the National University of Mongolia characterised the power relations between China and Russia in Mongolia as “holding a knife behind each other’s backs”.⁸⁷

In addition to the vast majority of Mongolia’s mineral wealth being locked into the Chinese economy, Russia supplies Mongolia with 95% of its fuel, and owns half the strategic railroad that crosses Mongolia from north to south. A second cross-border rail link with China – connecting the Mongolian border point Shivee Khuren with China – is intended to stimulate the transportation of bulk goods like coal and copper mine in particular.⁸⁸ It could also be repurposed for mass shipment of solar panels and may be an initial sign of Beijing’s interest in Mongolian renewables.

According to an estimate by the Asian Development Bank, Mongolia has the potential to generate around 63% of China’s total electricity generation in 2022. This also affects China’s relationship with Russia. Mongolian-generated electricity from renewables could displace or even replace Russian energy exports to China, including from the long-planned Power of Siberia 2 natural gas pipeline.⁸⁹

In the first half of 2023, 2.4 million tons of goods moved between China and Russia through Mongolia, a 58 percent increase from the same period a year ago.⁹⁰ In the past year the railroad saw a large spike in Russian traffic as the Kremlin sought to make up for its loss of access to Europe by importing an ever-larger quantity of Chinese goods.

The Russian Ambassador in Ulaanbaatar (from January 2023), Aleksei Evsikov, is a China expert, a development “that speaks loudly to both Russia’s priorities and Russia’s concerns in Mongolia”.⁹¹ This strong connection between Mongolia’s neighbours was underlined by an announcement that followed the visit in early July (2023) of Russian Prosecutor Igor Krasnov to Beijing. Krasnov revealed that in order to counter increasing Western influence on their “inner neighbour”, Mongolia, he had forwarded a proposal to his Mongolian counterpart to help strengthen ties with China and Russia.

⁸⁷ Conversation with author.

⁸⁸ ‘New China-Mongolia railway link enters construction stage.’ *Rail Freight website*, 31 May 2023, [online](#).

⁸⁹ Webster, Joseph. ‘Mongolia in the middle: China and Russia may split over the allure of renewables’. *The Interpreter*, 27 June 2023, [online](#).

⁹⁰ Gantulga, Tuvshinzaya and Radchenko, Sergey. ‘Mongolia’s search for a Third Way’. *Foreign Affairs*, 6 October 2023, [online](#).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*



Despite pressures from the Kremlin, Mongolian officials were forthright in condemning Russia's war against Ukraine. Mongolia has allowed protests of opposition to Putin's war, and has welcomed thousands of Russians who have fled Russia to avoid the draft.⁹² During a visit of an Indian Minister Kiren Rijju, a prominent friend of the Dalai Lama, to Ulaanbaatar in June 2022, a flag of Ukraine had been placed on the altar close to the flag of the Bogd Khanate of Mongolia.⁹³ For many Mongolians, there are clear parallels and anxieties over the invasion of a sovereign country by its powerful neighbour, with some fearing a 'Ukraine scenario' with China, where Beijing would annex territory in Mongolia's southern and western regions.

Although the official position of the government was more circumspect, a video message in September 2022, former President Elbegdorj Tsakhia said on the anniversary of the invasion in 2023: "There are some in Russia disappointed with other countries, including Mongolia's stance on the war against Ukraine. Due to its geography, squeezed between China and Russia, the Government of Mongolia is forced to perform a balancing act. However, public opinion in Mongolia resolutely condemns the brutal attack against this sovereign nation."⁹⁴

The imprisonment of a Mongolian poet and advisor to former President Battulga, Tsoodolyn Khulan (Ts. Khulan) in January (2023) was a further indicator of the complex factional politics of the Mongolian state. Ts Khulan's sentencing to nine and a half years in prison for espionage, which has barely been reported outside the country, appears to be directly connected to political manoeuvring over the recognition of the Tenth Bogd Lama, according to Mongolian sources.

⁹² "Just in the fourth quarter of 2022—essentially, in the three months that followed Putin's call for a partial mobilization of Russian citizens—153,162 Russians visited Mongolia, a greater number than entered Mongolia in any prior calendar year. In the first six months of 2023, over 140,000 Russians entered Mongolia. In August 2023, Putin signed a law to close the escape hatch by setting up a new system for conscripts: they will no longer be allowed to leave Russia if drafted." Gantulga, Tuvshinzaya and Radchenko, Sergey. 'Mongolia's search for a Third Way'. *Foreign Affairs*, 6 October 2023, [online](#).

⁹³ Bayar, Monhnaran, @MoRientalis, *Twitter/X post*, 16 June 2022, [online](#).

⁹⁴ Elbegdorj, Tsakhia. 'Why Ukraine Must Win'. *Stanford University*, 22 February 2023, [online](#). Former President Elbegdorj compared Mongolian solidarity against Hitler with Ukraine's fight for survival, saying: "In this regard, I would like to bring a historical record to your attention. When Adolf Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the people of Mongolia united against this fascist invader. They showed solidarity with the Soviet people and spared nothing. If nomadic herders had over 100 horses, they sent more than half of their livestock to the Soviet Union. A quarter of all the horses on the Soviet frontline during World War II came from Mongolia. In the days following the war's end, it was not rare to see a skinny but sturdy Mongol horse standing together with victorious allied forces in the ruins of Berlin. Horses were logistical lifelines, moving heavy equipment and weaponry through mud and rough terrain, including mined ones. In challenging circumstances, Mongolian horses were the only means of a ride and sometimes a much-needed source of nourishment. The number of horse supplies from Mongolian herders to the Soviets reached more than half a million."



Poet and cultural and religious advisor to former President Kh. Battulga, (Battulga is in the Democratic party while current President U. Khurelsukh is of the opposing People's Party) Ts.Khulan was detained by the Mongolian security services on 19 January 2023.⁹⁵ In February (2023) her detention was extended by a month, and in March it was extended once more before she was charged with cooperating with an unnamed foreign power. While information about the case remains classified, unofficial reports began to circulate that the foreign power was China⁹⁶ and that her detention was in connection with her opposition to the recognition of the Tenth Bogd Lama.

A statement made by Ts. Khulan from detention shed some light on the charges; she said [when] that she had never received, worked for or passed documents to any foreign power, but that she had openly and publicly opposed the recognition of an elite family's child as the Tenth Jebtsundamba since 2016. In her statement, she also acknowledged frequent travel across the border into Inner Mongolia in the PRC, but said that this was purely in connection with her poetry. Scholar Christopher Attwood pointed out in a social media post at the time that while many see this as partisan political payback, "At the same time, her detention on suspicion (whether merited or completely false) of being someone working with Chinese (Buddhist?) organizations to stop the enthronement of the Tenth Jibzundamba [sic] shows that the government believes or wants us to believe such activities are happening, and (this is the most important part), that the government is on the other side."

Security analyst Jeffrey Reeves makes the case that for China, Mongolia is an important "periphery state", in which BRI strategy is "fundamentally changing Mongolian domestic situation to ensure that "periphery states cooperate under OBOR to link their economic development strategies and policies and to ensure pragmatic cooperation on large-scale project development".⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ts. Khulan was charged under article 19.4.1 of the Criminal Code provides for the punishment in a form of imprisonment for eight-15 years. "It is applied to Mongolian citizens who agreed to cooperate with the intelligence service of a foreign state; theft, collection, storage or transfer of information, documents and items related to state secrets, or transfer for the purpose of extradition to a foreign organization or citizen." 'Famous Mongolian poetess arrested on suspicion of crimes against the state'. Mongolian media News, 19 January 2023, [online](#).

⁹⁶ Mongolian scholar Monhnaran Bayer @MoRientalist [referred](#) to her frequent visits to Russia in 2022 and her criticism in the press of the Tenth Jebtsundamba's reincarnation process. In a [later post](#) he said: "Exactly what sort of classified docs she dealt w/ & w/ which country she collaborated w/ will probably stay secret but all the eyes will be on Russia & about the Tenth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu."

⁹⁷ Reeves, Jeffrey. 'Mongolia's Place in China's Periphery Diplomacy'. *Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies*, The ASAN Forum, 7 April 2016, [online](#).



Mongolia: centre of the Shugden offensive

China uses a group loyal to a 'protector spirit' Gyalpo Shugden (Dolgyal) to sow divisions and stoke tensions, involving the cultivation of connections to monasteries where Shugden followers are prominent and that may be unfriendly to the Dalai Lama not only inside Tibet, but also outside PRC territory.

In its efforts to develop and exploit divisions among the Mongolian Buddhist community, China's United Front has drawn upon long-term tactics inside Tibet promoting the propitiation of Shugden as part of a systematic ideological and political campaign to undermine the Dalai Lama. Mongolia appears to be both the frontline and centre of the Shugden offensive globally, with Shugden supporters at the heart of government, business, cultural and religious life and the sect used as a front for advancing Chinese political and business interests.

Two of the main centres of Dorje Shugden worship are the Amarbayasgalant monastery, one of the three largest monastic centers in Mongolia,⁹⁸ and the Ikh Khuree monastery in Ulaanbaatar, while other monasteries in Mongolia have contacts with the United Front and China's State Administration on Religious Affairs (SARA).

On 3 March 2015 the local online press reported that the Abbot Natsagdorj of Manba Monastery, Abbot Dambajav of Dashchoilon Monastery and Abbot Sanjdorj of Ikh Khuree Monastery had turned to the Chinese Panchen Lama seeking financing for construction and enlargement of their respective monasteries.⁹⁹ On 15 July 2015, abbot Natsagdorj met China's Panchen and invited him to come to Mongolia. Gyaltsen Norbu welcomed the pilgrimage delegation from Mongolia and stated "when the karma matures", he will visit Mongolia.¹⁰⁰

In October 2024, there were rumours that the Chinese Panchen's karma may have sufficiently ripened to accompany Xi Jinping to Mongolia. It did not happen but there is speculation that this may reflect an intention in Beijing, if Xi does make a visit to Ulaanbaatar.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ 'Amarbayasgalant Monastery.' *DorjeShugden*, 18 October 2015, [online](#). In 2018, Amarbayasgalant representatives attended a Shugden conference in Nepal, in which a monastery inside Tibet also reportedly participated (Kathmandu Tribune, Jan 2018; Tsem Rinpoche, Feb 2018 quoting Jichang Lulu).

⁹⁹ 'Mongolian lama-oligarchs divide Mongolian Gelugpa tradition'. *Sonin*, 3 March 2015, [online](#).

¹⁰⁰ 'Манба дацангийн хамба лам Д.Нацагдорж Хятадын КН-ын тодруулсан Банчин богдод бараалхжээ', *Sonin*, 20 July 2015, [online](#).

¹⁰¹ Posted by @Gonchig13 on Twitter/X, 15 October 2024. The post speculated that the Chinese side hoped to develop a connection with the Tenth Jebtsundamba.



The Mongolian monk Sanjdorj, an abbot of Ikh Khuree monastery in Ulanbaatar who heads the 'New Buddhist Center of Mongolia', is one of the most prominent pro-Beijing, Shugden supporters known to be backed by the United Front.

He has criticised the Dalai Lama's visits to Mongolia, regretting that the Dalai Lama had been invited "without the approval" of Mongolia's "neighbours", views that were quoted approvingly by Chinese state media. Sanjdorj also criticized the visit of the then Under Secretary of State Usra Zeya, Washington's former Coordinator on Tibetan Issues, accusing her of "disrespect" during her visit to Ganden monastery in February 2023.¹⁰² He also questioned the recognition of the Tenth Bogd Jebtsundamba by the Dalai Lama. Holding a press conference on 10 March, two days after the child appeared at the Dalai Lama's teachings, Sanjdorj questioned the validity of the recognition process and said it raised questions of "national security", saying: "It seems that it is becoming more and more clear that in the process of identifying the reincarnation of Bogd, it is not according to the rules of the book, but it is a mixture of outside interests and nonsense."¹⁰³ (In an attack on the Bogd Khan institution and the abbot of Gandantegchinlen, Sanjdorj also called for the 'reform' of Mongolia's Buddhist governing body, instituted in 1999 by the Ninth Jebtsundamba.)¹⁰⁴

Although his United Front connections had been known for some years,¹⁰⁵ Sanjdorj was suddenly arrested by Mongolian intelligence on 29 March 2024 together with two other Mongolians and a foreign national named Hua. They were accused of "colluding with a foreign intelligence agency," assumed to be China's. "Those citizens who betrayed their country and cooperated with foreign intelligence organizations and foreign persons who were spies in Mongolia were detained and are currently being detained in the 461st unit under the State Security Directorate, and the investigation has begun," the Mongolian media reported.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Bayar, Munkhnaran (@MoRientalist). X post, [online](#).

¹⁰³ *Ikon*, 10 March 2023, [online](#). A Mongolian analyst observed an encounter between the Dalai Lama and Sanjdorj in 2006, saying: "On Sanjdorj's turn for a blessing HH [His Holiness] barely touches his hand & HH's assistant is unusually rough to him. It feels like he was already recruited by back then." Bayar, Munkhnaran (@MoRientalist). X post, [online](#).

¹⁰⁴ *Ikon*, 2022, [online](#).

¹⁰⁵ A media outlet close to Sanjdorj provided positive coverage of contacts with Chinese Buddhism and the 19th Party Congress ([control.mn](#); March 2017, August 2016, October 2017); its editor-in-chief attended the CCP Propaganda Department's Chinese Tibet Development Forum 2016 ([chinanews](#), July 2016). Sanjdorj was also present when a foundation established by the Bank of China donated nine million tugriks (\$4,866 at that time) for another monastery (, Jan 2015).

¹⁰⁶ 'Buddhist monk arrested in Mongolia on suspicion of espionage', Akipress (Mongolian media), 4 April 2024, [online](#).



The specific reasons for his arrest at this time are not known; one Mongolian media outlet referred to a letter Sanjdorj had sent to the abbot of Gandan monastery threatening protests if demands for a joint assembly of all Buddhist temples and monks in Mongolia are not met.¹⁰⁷

The arrest demonstrates the tensions underlying Mongolia's government and institutions. Just as with other state departments, Mongolia's security services are likely riven by factions consistent with a strong sense of the country's sovereignty and Buddhist identity in conflict with struggles of political allegiance to powerful neighbours and trade imperatives.

Ts. Khulan, who was imprisoned for spying and had been known to criticise the Dalai Lama's recognition of the Tenth Bogd, is believed to have been connected to an anti-Dalai Lama faction at the revived Ikh Khuree monastery in Ulaanbaatar.

The late Guru Deva Rinpoche, an ethnic Mongol lama born in Inner Mongolia who arrived in Ulaanbaatar in 1991, is credited with spreading the Shugden cult among the country's business and political elites. Guru Deva, who died at the age of 101 in Mongolia in 2009, was expelled from Drepung monastery in South India because of his opposition to the Dalai Lama in 1986. Guru Deva constructed the Janraisig Buddha in Gandan Monastery, the Buddha Statue in Zaisan, Ulaanbaatar and restored Amarbayasgalant Monastery, making it the main Shugden monastery in Mongolia in 1991.¹⁰⁸ According to Mongolian sources, he has introduced many leading Asian business figures to Shugden, for instance Malaysian Buddhist Robert Kuok, owner of Kerry Group, to Mr. Odjargal Jambaltsamts, currently the most prominent Mongolian businessman and owner of MCS Group, now a major business conglomerate in Mongolia. The largest Dorje Shugden statue in the world is located near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.¹⁰⁹

The sect's public face in Mongolia is Zava Damdin Rinpoche, a reincarnation of a 19th century Mongol polymath, who publicly denounces the Dalai Lama, calls for Mongolia to break away from allegiance to Dharamsala, and endorses Beijing's Panchen Lama Gyaltzen Norbu.

¹⁰⁷ This was reported in 2022 in various Mongolian media sources, notably on 31 May 2022 by Zindaa, 'SOS: Хамба лам З.Санждорж ХҮЧИНГИЙН ХЭРЭГТ холбогджээ', [online](#).

¹⁰⁸ His Eminence [Sokpu Rinpoche](#). Cited in 'The CCP's use of the soft power weapon of religion to achieve territorial expansion and pacification of Tibetan and Mongolian minority areas: Case Study: Mongolia and the Buddhist Shugden Cult'. Unpublished study for a U.S. government briefing shared by a Mongolian author, identity withheld on request. September 2016.

¹⁰⁹ At Kechara retreat, Malaysia, according to Tsem Rinpoche's website on 10 August 2020.



Mongolian Buddhists loyal to the Dalai Lama were disturbed by the message conveyed, even if unintended, when US Ambassador to Mongolia Richard Buangan exchanged gifts with Zava Damdin Rinpoche in June 2024,¹¹⁰ and also visited Shugden stronghold Amarbayasgalant monastery.¹¹¹

Educated in a Shugden monastery in Switzerland, Zava Damdin Rinpoche is described vividly by Mongolian scholar Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva as being “infamous for his flamboyant excesses, from slapping and scolding ministers and oligarchs to claiming he will build a nuclear power plant. In a way, he is a testament to the boldness that has characterized the Shugdenites over the years, ready to challenge the Dalai Lama and nurture a Beijing-friendly Jebtsundamba Khutuktu.”

A Dorje Shugden website describes Zava Damdin Rinpoche as “A celebrity in Mongolia. His intense religious discipline has given him an uncommon spiritual qualification in Mongolia, and he is often a regular conversation topic on Mongolian news channels and talk shows.”¹¹²

Shugden followers have also pushed measures that blur the lines between Mongolian and Han Chinese cultures, for instance, seeking to change Mongolia’s Lunar New Year festival in favour of the Chinese calendar. This creates deeper worries given China’s assimilationist policies in Inner Mongolia, as in Tibet, where language policies sidelining Mongolian-language education in favour of Mandarin prompted protests across the province as well as demonstrations of support in Mongolia. “They use scare tactics,” a Mongolian businessman now based in the West said. “They basically say if you stop following [the practice] you will die.”

The activities of pro-China Shugden followers affected the Ninth Jebtsundamba, who was only able to travel to Mongolia to be enthroned in 1999 in his sixties. He was compelled to return to India following pressure at least partially from pro-Shugden factions before his eventual passing in Ulaanbaatar in 2012.

In Mongolia, all but one temple has adhered to the Dalai Lama’s requests regarding Shugden worship. Nevertheless, in 2014, the Trijang Rinpoche, a married layman and reincarnate lama who is a leader in the Shugden sect, visited Ulaanbaatar to perform rites to Dorje Shugden in the Chojin Lama state museum that once was a temple associated with the deity.¹¹³ Several prominent and notable politicians such as current

¹¹⁰ Posted by Zava Damdin on 5 June 2024.

¹¹¹ US Ambassador to Mongolia Richard Buangan, *X post*, 12 September 2024, [online](#).

¹¹² Posted 4 September 2015 on a Dorje Shugden [website](#).

¹¹³ [Footage](#) posted by Tsem Rinpoche..



President Elbegdorj Tsakhia and former Mayor of Ulaanbaatar Mr. Bat-Uul Erdene were noted to be present at the 20th birthday celebration of the Tibetan lama and strong Shugden supporter, Trijang Rinpoche, in Ulaanbaatar in 2003.¹¹⁴

Cooperation of Chinese and Mongolian security state

China's extraterritorial interventions in Mongolia are not limited to the socio-economic and religious sphere – they also involve greater coordination between the two states' armed forces on peacekeeping, counter terrorism, border defense and troop training, as well as cooperation by Mongolian and Chinese security apparatus.¹¹⁵

China achieves 'Type Three' involuntary returns - when the host country uses the guise of a deportation to allow Beijing to take the person back - in other authoritarian countries such as Laos and Cambodia sometimes with the help of local authorities. In Mongolia, China has been able to kidnap its citizens from a democratic country with its assistance or at least permission.¹¹⁶

"The sense of vulnerability in Mongolia resulting from closer security cooperation with China is palpable," said analyst Jeffrey Reeves, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.¹¹⁷ "There is a clear fear of a 'Ukraine scenario' with China, where Beijing would annex territory in Mongolia's southern and western regions out of 'concern' for terrorist activity in Mongolia aimed at China. One Ministry of Foreign Affairs official noted that China had already used counter-terrorism as an excuse to detain a Mongolian diplomat on the Sino-Mongolian border in 2015 in a breach of diplomatic protocol."

In 2022, a prominent Mongolian human rights defender and journalist, Munkhbayar Chuluundorj, was sentenced to ten years in jail after condemning his country's close

¹¹⁴ "The CCP's use of the soft power weapon of religion to achieve territorial expansion and pacification of Tibetan and Mongolian minority areas: Case Study: Mongolia and the Buddhist Shugden Cult". Unpublished study for a U.S. government briefing shared by a Mongolian author, identity withheld. September 2016.

¹¹⁵ 'China, Mongolia Vows to Deepen Military Cooperation'. *Xinhua*, April 21, 2015. In April 2015, deputy chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Lt. Gen. Wang Guanzhong and Commander of General Purpose Troops of Mongolia Radnaabazar Sukhbat discussed greater coordination between the two states' armed forces on peacekeeping, counterterrorism, border defense, and troop training. In May 2015, the secretary of China's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission Meng Jianzhu and general secretary of Mongolia's National Security Council Tsagaandari Enkhvuvshin met in Beijing to sign an MOU on bilateral law enforcement cooperation focused on combating the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. 'China, Mongolia Pledge Enhanced Security Cooperation'. *Xinhua*, 11 May 2015.

¹¹⁶ 'Chinese Police Kidnaps Writer in Mongolia'. *Safeguard Defenders*, 11 June 2023, [online](#).

¹¹⁷ Reeves, Jeffrey. 'Mongolia's Place in China's Periphery Diplomacy'. *The ASAN Forum*, 7 April 2016, [online](#).



ties with China.¹¹⁸ Mongolian writer Munkhbayar had received one of Mongolia's highest honours, the Order of the Polar Star in 2015. He had also campaigned for the rights of an estimated 4.5 million ethnic Mongols in the neighbouring Chinese region of Inner Mongolia. "Mongolia, the independent country of Mongolia, has already become one of the very few countries where the human rights of Southern Mongolians are violated the most," he said in a press conference in Ulaanbaatar. Campaigners said that his arrest in February 2022 was part of a wider effort to "clean up" Beijing's critics in Mongolia.¹¹⁹

On 3 May 2023 Chinese police arrived at the Ulaanbaatar apartment of prominent author 80-year old Lhamjab A. Borjigin and forcibly took him back to China. Borjigin, from Southern Mongolia is the author of several books on Mongolian history, including one that examines the deaths of thousands of Southern Mongolians during the Cultural Revolution, presenting the oral histories of survivors. He was sentenced to one year in prison in 2019 and then put under 'residential surveillance', a form of house arrest, in late 2020 before recently escaping across the border to independent Mongolia.¹²⁰ His arrest on Mongolian soil and deportation back to China "illustrates the Chinese government's repeated commitment to silence, harass, and threaten dissident voices beyond its national borders" said International PEN.¹²¹

When Borjigin had arrived in Mongolia from Chinese-controlled 'Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region' (Southern Mongolia) earlier in 2023, he explained his reasons, saying: "Publishing books in the Mongolian language in Southern Mongolia has been completely outlawed. Even government and party propaganda are no longer published in Mongolian. Having worked on my books for years, I took the risky path to Mongolia armed with the hope of publishing them here and bequeathing them for posterity. Through my books, future generations will understand what our nation has endured, and how our people fought for survival."¹²²

¹¹⁸ 'Activist critical of China sentenced to 10 years in Mongolia'. *AFP*, 6 July 2022, [online](#).

¹¹⁹ Yoki Ishii, whose husband, [Hidetoshi Ishii](#) (Senior Advisor to [Free Tibet Fukuoka](#)), acted as Munkhbayar's guarantor in 2016, helping him obtain a visa for travel to Japan, wrote: "Munkhbayar was arrested by the General Intelligence Agency of Mongolia and not by the police. This allows the proceedings against him to be carried out in secret. Secret trials, of course, were a feature of the Soviet era." 'China's Malign Influence in Mongolia Threatens All Liberal Democracies', *Japan Forward*, 4 April 2023, [online](#).

¹²⁰ 'Chinese Police Kidnaps Writer in Mongolia'. *Safeguard Defenders*, 11 June 2023, [online](#).

¹²¹ 'PEN America Condemns China's Arrest of Exiled Mongolian Writer and Historian Lhamjab A. Borjigin'. *PEN America*, 12 May 2023, [online](#).

¹²² 'A testimony by Southern Mongolian dissident writer Lhamjab Borjigin'. *Southern Mongolia Human Rights Information Center*, 27 March 2023, [online](#).



Borjigin's case is likely the fifth known example of an involuntary return to China from Mongolia since 2009, according to cases documented by Safeguard Defenders. Several previous deportations of ethnic Mongolian Chinese activists were conducted swiftly and without obvious due process: a deportation can be considered an involuntary return Type Three if proper procedures are not taken, in other words the host country uses the guise of a deportation to allow Beijing to conduct an involuntary return.

In 2014, two Southern (Inner) Mongolian exiles, Dalaibaatar Dovchin and Tulguur Norovrinchen, were deported from Mongolia by train to China. Mongolian police had detained them when they were about to give a press conference on raising attention about another ethnic Mongolian man from China who was in danger of being deported. Both men had legal status in Mongolia, and had studied at Mongolian universities.¹²³

In 2009, Batzangaa, a Chinese national and ethnic Mongolian was applying for asylum in Ulaanbaatar when he was apprehended by Mongolian officers and then handed over to Chinese police in the capital. Batzangaa, who had headed a Mongolian-Tibetan medical college in China, was sent back with his wife and child. He was later sentenced to three years in prison for what he says were trumped up charges because his work involved the sensitive issue of promotion of ethnic cultures.

After he was released from prison, Batzangaa gave a detailed description of the process of his arrest and deportation from Mongolia. When asked whether his case should it be considered deportation by force carried out by the Government of Mongolia, Batzangaa said yes. "Surrounded by so many police from both China and Mongolia, what other choice could I have had? [...] They forced me to call my wife and daughter to bring their passport with them [and] that night we were held at a hotel in Ulaanbaatar. The Chinese police officers from Dongsheng District Criminal Police Squad and the Ordos Municipality Criminal Investigation Bureau guarded me in a room, and my wife and daughter were held in a separate room. More than ten Mongolian police and security personnel guarded the hotel that night."¹²⁴

The stakes are high for Mongolia's democracy. USAID says that Mongolia "struggles with a weakening system of checks and balances, blurring between business and

¹²³ 'Two Southern Mongolian exiles deported from Mongolia to China'. *Southern Mongolian Human Rights Center*, New York, May 16 2014, [online](#).

¹²⁴ The next morning, Batzangaa, his wife and daughter were taken to the airport by about 30 people including Chinese Embassy officials, Mongolian officials and Mongolian police, where they boarded the flight to Beijing. English transcript of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center (SMHRIC) interview with Mr. Batzangaa, a Southern Mongolian exile and a UN asylum applicant: 'Striking Details on How Mongolia and China Cooperate to Deport a Southern (Inner) Mongolian Exile Back to China'. *World Uyghur Congress*, 30 January 2011, [online](#).



political power, and inconsistent implementation of the law and government functions.”¹²⁵ In 2022, former Mongolia Program Director at the International Republican Institute Mike Mitchell says that while Mongolia will never have military importance to the U.S., the country “can serve as a political laboratory and a beacon of freedom in a very tough neighborhood. Mongolians will decide on the government that suits them best at the ballot box. President Biden has made democracy promotion a core national interest. It’s time to push back on growing authoritarianism. It’s time to double-down on Mongolia.”

Young Mongolians point to the importance of both civil society and business in protecting Mongolia’s “oasis of democracy”. “Just over five years into democracy, Mongolia gained access to the internet, which led to a larger discourse among the citizens, connected thousand of people through web spaces, and started budding new ideas, concepts, and imaginations about what democracy could really mean to us,” said Sundari Enkhtugs at a conference organized by Democratic Party of Mongolia and the International Democratic Union on 25 April 2024 in Ulaanbaatar.¹²⁶ “When social media took up, we discussed political issues, human rights, and the rule of law. People started becoming more aware of the accountability of the state, significance of citizen participation, and the crucial need of diverse voices of different social groups.” But Sundari Enkhtugs highlighted that despite the mushrooming of educational establishments following the mining boom and healthy civil society organisations, a government of, by and for the people is not possible without securing equitable representation, effective participation, and without equitable, inclusive and quality education.

Conclusions and recommendations

Beijing perceives an opportunity during the potential leadership vacuum before the identification and emergence of a 15th Dalai Lama, if the institution continues. It aims to end international support for Tibet; prevent the emergence of an influential successor to the Dalai Lama in exile; consolidate control over Tibetan Buddhism, and project religious and political influence beyond PRC borders.

While the U.S. government adopted legislation in 2020 rejecting any foreign interference in the selection of the next Dalai Lama, China has signalled its intention to escalate its extraterritorial interventions over reincarnation by making it illegal for

¹²⁵ Cited by Mitchell, Mike. ‘Between the Bear and the Dragon, Mongolia Needs US Help.’ *Eurasia Review*, 29 Jan. 2022, [online](#).

¹²⁶ Enkhtugs, Sundari. Speech at “Mongolia — An Oasis of Democracy” International Conference, jointly organized by Democratic Party of Mongolia and the International Democratic Union on Apr 25th, 2024 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Speech published 25 April 2024, [online](#).



incarnate lamas to be born outside the PRC. This paves the way for heightened pressures on foreign governments to acknowledge PRC authority and not Dharamsala's over the future of the Dalai Lama institution. Mongolia is particularly vulnerable to such pressure.

China's aggressive extraterritorial approach signals risks for Tibetans and Buddhists not just within PRC borders but internationally in the diaspora(s) as part of broader patterns of transnational repression.

The situation in Mongolia represents a critical test case of China's strategy beyond PRC borders, particularly following the Dalai Lama's recognition of a Mongolian-American child as the Tenth reincarnation of the Bogd Lama (Jebtsundamba), a lineage symbolic of the rich heritage and history of Tibetan Buddhism and of independent Mongolian nationhood. This involves:

- Pressure on Buddhist institutions, interference in monastic practice and pressure on Tibetan Buddhists connected to Dharamsala;
- Heightened sensitivity linked to the birthplace of a previous Dalai Lama (the Fourth) in Mongolia;
- Direct interference in religious affairs through economic leverage;
- The complex interplay between religious authority, national identity, and economic dependence.

Under the Dalai Lama's leadership, Tibetan Buddhism has become a vital and socially progressive force globally, with the capacity to provide alternative frameworks to navigate a fractured global order and the devastation wreaked historically by communism in Mongolia and other countries. What hangs in the balance extends well beyond Tibet's future—it tests the international community's resolve to safeguard pluralism, religious freedom, and cultural autonomy against transnational authoritarian networks whose reach increasingly transcends borders through disinformation, economic coercion, and digital control mechanisms.

But the window for establishing effective countermeasures to these threats is narrowing as China accelerates elaborate plans to control Tibet's future and impact Buddhist discourse globally. The situation demands greater preparedness and new forms of multilateral engagement from neighbouring countries, Buddhist regions, and like-minded governments.



Part Three of ‘Sacred Authority and State Power’ presented recommendations and guidelines to support and protect Tibetan Buddhist communities, including the following:

- Develop knowledge in the international diplomatic community about the significance of the Bogd Jebtsundamba and Mongolian Buddhist culture; the support of the international community is essential in helping to protect and strengthen Buddhist institutions and counter PRC influence efforts.
- Funding of Buddhist projects. “Going to monasteries and asking for blessings no longer appeals to younger people,” a Mongolian scholar observed. “They want to know how to be involved in other substantive ways too.”
- Encourage and support the programme of Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning (SEEL) which has been introduced to the Mongolian education system by social entrepreneurs and Tibetan Buddhist leaders.¹²⁷ SEEL Learning is the culmination of an academic collaboration that began in 1998 between Emory University and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Guided by a shared vision for an education of heart and mind, the program conveys a universal, non-sectarian, and science-based approach to bringing the ethical development of the whole child into education—an approach long advocated by the Dalai Lama.
- Engagement of Buddhist institutions and practitioners in education, such as help with teaching English to Mongolian students, and secondary school projects such as meditation retreats. Provide support to translate books by the Dalai Lama and on Buddhism into Mongolian, a project initiated with positive results by Telo Tulku Rinpoche and his foundation. “After Bhutan, Mongolia is the only free country holding the Tibetan Buddhist tradition so we have a strong responsibility,” a Mongolian academic said. “And through doing so in Mongolia, we can also help improve the situation of Tibetan Buddhists elsewhere in Central Asia.” The translation of key texts from Mongolian would also support Mongolian authors.
- Provision of secular educational tools, such as children’s books to encourage holistic learning and critical thinking.
- Promoting democracy – discussions/education/civil society events on how to solve problems without violence. A Mongolian scholar said that these initiatives in civil society are essential: “Mongolia was a Communist country, so people don’t know how to argue, there were two sides, there was no inbetween.”

¹²⁷ Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning Mongolia and its introduction to the curriculum [online](#). Overview of SEEL programmes [online](#).



- Combined with this, the development of religious literacy is often overlooked. “We need to develop a harmonious society, to help people explore what Christianity is, what is Islam, what is Buddhism - to give kids the freedom and knowledge to choose, if we want to build Mongolia into a healthy democracy.”