Mongolian Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War:

The 1964 Coup Attempt and the Sino-Soviet Split

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Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) in February 1956 and the subsequent years of de-Stalinization had a profound and lasting effect on the socialist camp and the international Communist movement. The scholarly literature on the relevance of Khrushchev’s “thaw” for the crises in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and for China’s rift with the USSR at the end of the 1950s is extensive. But one topic that has been overlooked is how de-Stalinization affected a long-standing Soviet ally, the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR), which was the second country after the USSR to embark on the path of “socialist construction.” This article seeks to fill that gap by showing how the thaw affected...


2. A number of recent Mongolian books have explored the political struggle in Mongolia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Two unofficial Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) historians, Jigjidiin Boldbaatar and Chuluuny Dashdavaa, have produced remarkable archival evidence about the behind-the-scenes infighting in Yumjaagiyin Tsedenbal’s circle, depicting it as a struggle against Tsedenbal’s despotism by allegedly progressive second-in-commands. See Jigjidiin Boldbaatar and Chuluuny Dashdavaa, *Shinechleliin tuluu khudulguum, tuurii khuv‘ zayaa* [Movement for Reform, and

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Mongolian politics, Soviet relations with Mongolia, and Mongolia’s standing in the Communist world.

**The Impact of De-Stalinization**

De-Stalinization had an immense impact on Mongolian politics. In Mongolia as in Europe, the first calls for greater openness in society and for overcoming the consequences of the “personality cult” were made in 1956. Amid demands for “party democracy,” the personality cult of Marshal Khorloogiin Choibalsan came under criticism at the April 1956 plenum of the Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP). Mongolian Prime Minister Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal took a cautiously negative attitude toward the Mongolian “thaw.” Tsedenbal realized that sharp criticism of Choibalsan’s crimes would raise unwelcome questions about Tsedenbal’s own participation in those misdeeds. The MPRP First Secretary, Dashiin Damba, tried to use criticism of Choibalsan’s personality cult to weaken Tsedenbal’s hold on power, but Tsedenbal managed to curtail the “thaw” and to remove Damba in 1959 for his “lack of principles, insincerity before the party, [and] ideological and political backwardness.”

In 1962, Tsedenbal faced greater criticism, this time from Daramyn Tumur-Ochir, a Central Committee Secretary and head of the MPRP ideological department, for his supposed lack of appreciation of Chinggis Khan. The 800th anniversary of the birth of Chinggis Khan sparked the reemergence of long-suppressed national consciousness, interpreted in Moscow as a manifestation of “unhealthy nationalism.” Tsedenbal halted the celebrations and ousted Tumur-Ochir for excessive nationalist zeal. The following year,

Its Fate] (Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing, 2005). Similar arguments, with rather less evidence, are presented in Sovdyn Baatar, Ekh oronchid ba Tsedenbal [Patriots and Tsedenbal] (Ulaanbaatar: Gan Print, 2005).


Tsedenbal dismissed yet another key figure, the MPRP Second Secretary, Luvsantserengiin Tsend. Tsedenbal told Soviet leaders that Tsend was connected with Tumur-Ochir and was a “supporter of nationalist tendencies.” Tsedenbal’s successful campaign against his rivals indicated his political skill and maneuverability. At the same time, because Tsedenbal was well aware that his political survival depended on Moscow’s backing, he repeatedly proclaimed his unwavering commitment to Soviet-Mongolian friendship and condemned the “nationalism” of his opponents. In 1964, however, Tsedenbal faced another outburst of nationalist and dissenting sentiments in Mongolia. His critics closely watched the developments in Moscow in the fall of 1964 and, inspired by Nikita Khrushchev’s removal from power, attempted to get rid of the Mongolian leader.

The conspirators, later known as the Lookhuuz-Nyambuu-Surmaajav “anti-party group,” meticulously prepared for an MPRP Central Committee plenum and lobbied for support among the delegates. Tsedenbal’s challengers asserted that the Mongolian leader had usurped power from the people and cared little for the fate of Mongolia, that he had engaged in drinking and debauchery, that he had brought incompetent flatterers and liars into his entourage, and that his leadership methods contradicted principles of party democracy. Tsedenbal’s opponents—Tsogt-Ochiryn Lookhuuz, Baldandorjiin Nyambuu, and Bandiin Surmaajav—barely touched on Mongolia’s foreign relations. To the extent they did bring up foreign policy issues, they called for a more flexible and independent line and for less reliance on the Soviet Union. Tsedenbal and his followers seized on this foreign policy agenda to depict the “anti-party” affair as an attempted coup against Soviet-Mongolian friendship, undoubtedly inspired by the Chinese. Soviet leaders were willing to go along with this interpretation. At the same time, Tsedenbal downplayed his challengers’ calls for internal reform, and his efforts in this regard were helped by the shift of political climate in the Soviet Union after Nikita Khrushchev’s dismissal from office in October 1964. Khrushchev’s successor, Leonid Brezhnev, had no reason to defend the movement for “party democracy” in Mongolia. The failed attempt to displace Tsedenbal in December 1964 marked the end of Mongolia’s nationalist movement. The views of the “anti-party” group were not taken up again until the late 1980s, when the disintegration of the social-


ist camp provided the foundation for the domestic and foreign policies of current-day Mongolia.6

**China Exerts Pressure**

The summer of 1964 was a difficult one for Mongolia. The year started with a zud—an exceptionally harsh winter with temperatures colder than forty degrees below zero. Livestock, the foundation of Mongolia’s economy, was badly affected by the calamity, and more than a million animals were lost. Some help came from China, which supplied Ulaanbaatar with 10,000 tons of corn, medicine worth 30,000 yuan, and 200 million yuan in cash— all free of charge.7 But China’s show of good will did not impress Tsedenbal. He blamed Beijing for sabotaging Mongolia’s economy and aggravating the country’s difficulties by withdrawing workers, boycotting the Mongolian railroad, and failing to live up to promised assistance—all charges that had merit.8

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Chinese provided considerable economic assistance to Mongolia. Not only did the Chinese finance the building of factories, infrastructure, and housing in Ulaanbaatar and the provinces, but roughly 10,000 Chinese workers were involved in the construction pro-

6. The 1964 Lookhuz-Nyambuu-Surmaajav “anti-party” plot has not been discussed in Western studies of contemporary Mongolian history because relevant materials were largely inaccessible until recently. Studies by Russian Mongolia specialists Shaiken Nadirov and Leonid Shinkarev provide important insights on the subject. See Nadirov, *Tsedenbal*, pp. 79–81, 182; and Leonid Shinkarev, *Tsedenbal Filatova Khoyor: Khair durlal, erkh medel, emgenel* [Tsedenbal and Filatova: Love, Power, and Tragedy] (Ulaanbaatar: Munkhiin useg khevlekh uildver, 2004), pp. 217–221. In Mongolia, open discussion of the Lookhuz-Nyambuu-Surmaajav affair began in the 1990s. Several articles have been published in Mongolian newspapers on the topic. See, for instance, A. Minis, “Namyn esreg yavuullagyn tukhai” [On Anti-Party Activities], *Unen* (Ulaanbaatar), 24 February 1990, pp. 2, 4; and Baldandorjiin Nyambuu, “Turii esreg khandsan buleg, khuivaldaan baigaagui” [There Was No Group, No Conspiracy against the State], *Ardyn Erkh* (Ulaanbaatar), 17 April 1998, p. 4.


jects. Mongolia by itself could not have come up with enough workers to drive economic development. Also, Ulaanbaatar cashed in on the flow of goods between China and the Warsaw Pact countries, charging fees for railroad transit. These fees were a major source of state revenue.

But things changed dramatically after 1962. When the Sino-Soviet rift began to widen, Mongolia had to choose whether to follow Moscow or Beijing. Tsedenbal unequivocally sided with the Soviet Union, to the dismay of Chinese leaders, who began to pull economic levers to force a change in Mongolia’s foreign policy. In 1962, for example, when Tsedenbal visited Beijing to sign the Sino-Mongolian border treaty, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai accused the Mongolian leader of cravenly obeying the Soviet Union’s wishes. “Are you blindly following the CPSU?” he asked. “Did you do this during Stalin’s personality cult as well? Did you loyally follow Stalin?” Zhou warned that if this submissive policy continued, China would withdraw its workers from Mongolia. Tsedenbal took offense at Zhou’s words. “We will not retreat in terms of ideology and will not alter the correct political line of our party because of 8,000 workers,” he exclaimed. The meeting became so tense that the Mongolian ambassador in Beijing, Dondogiin Tsevegmid, “thought at times that the barriers will be broken and they [Tsedenbal and Zhou Enlai] will come to blows.”

In the end, Mongolia did not alter course, and the Chinese carried out their threat. In 1964, Chinese workers were withdrawn from Mongolia, undermining a number of key construction projects. At the same time, because Sino-Soviet trade was grinding to a halt, the Mongolian railroad lost its attraction. Mongolia’s rail revenues shrank by 75 percent from 1960 to 1963, causing budgetary difficulties. Ulaanbaatar’s efforts to remedy the difficulties in 1964 were rebuffed by the Chinese. When Deputy Prime Minister Sonomyn Luvsan went to China in October 1964 to ask Zhou Enlai for economic assistance, the Chinese premier politely turned him down, hinting that the aid would come only if Mongolia changed sides in the Sino-Soviet quarrel.

After the catastrophic failure of Mao Zedong’s economic experiments in the late 1950s, the Chinese leader blamed bad weather and the Soviet Union for China’s economic hardships. Tsedenbal played the same card in the sum-

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mer of 1964: The *zud* and the Chinese sabotage, he argued, had undermined Mongolia’s economy. For many Mongolian intellectuals, however, the country’s economic hardships were attributable to Tsedenbal’s own economic mismanagement and his corrupt and incompetent leadership, obscured by a carefully cultivated personality cult. Dissatisfaction with Tsedenbal seems to have been widespread, especially among the intelligentsia, though the true dimensions of discontent are impossible to discern. The Mongolian ambassador to China, Dondogiin Tsevegmid, explained to his Soviet colleague that the government investigation in late December 1964 and early January 1965 revealed that “not everything was in order in terms of the educational work at some institutions” and that students, in particular, were “under the influence of unhealthy sentiments.”

The Plan to Oust Tsedenbal

As political tensions within Mongolia increased, an unprecedented development occurred in the Soviet Union. On 15 October 1964 the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) dismissed Nikita Khrushchev from his responsibilities as the head of the party and the government. Although the official statement released by the Central Committee claimed that Khrushchev stepped down for reasons of poor health, indications soon surfaced that his leadership methods, economic mismanagement, and “hair-brained schemes” had caused dissatisfaction among senior officials.

Following Khrushchev’s removal, the top leadership posts in the party and government were divided between Leonid Brezhnev, the CPSU First Secretary, and Aleksei Kosygin, the prime minister. The new arrangement was called “collective leadership” and advertised in Soviet propaganda as the restoration of

“Leninist principles of leadership.” The reversal of some of Khrushchev’s wildest undertakings in November 1964 and the adoption of a more flexible foreign policy seemed to indicate that the collective leadership would pursue sound economic policies at home and be guided by pragmatic considerations abroad.

These developments were not lost on two Mongolian graduate students in Moscow, Tsogt-Ochiryn Lookhuuz and Baldandorjiin Nyambuu. The two men were formerly in positions of leadership in the Mongolian party and government. Until Tsedenbal sent Lookhuuz to the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy in 1962, Lookhuuz was the head of state farms and, earlier still, the head of the Gov’ Altai Aimag party committee.15 At the April 1956 plenum of the MPRP Central Committee he took the politically reckless step of criticizing both Damba and Tsedenbal (at the time the two most important Mongolian leaders) for failing to deal thoroughly with the consequences of Choibalsan’s personality cult and for covering up their own shortcomings. Lookhuuz also condemned efforts to Westernize (or rather Sovietize) Mongolia, earning reprimands for “nationalism” from the other speakers. Tsedenbal accused him of voicing “anti-party criticism.”16 But Lookhuuz escaped largely unscathed with his critical remarks, a sign that the time was right for pluralism. The political screws had been loosening since shortly after the death of Josif Stalin in 1953, and Mongolian leaders quarreled among themselves about the best means of de-Stalinizing Mongolia. In 1962, Lookhuuz decided to follow up on his earlier successful challenge to the top leadership and once again attacked Tsedenbal’s methods of rule. But the result this time was much less auspicious, as Tsedenbal exiled him to Moscow for graduate study.17

Nyambuu was the former head of the Umnugov’ Aimag party committee and a member of the MPRP Central Committee. He sometimes is depicted in the Mongolian historiography as a relentless critic of Tsedenbal.18 A critic he certainly was, but not always of Tsedenbal. For example, in March 1959, at a Central Committee plenum that dismissed Damba from the Politburo (an event now misleadingly portrayed by Mongolian historians as Tsedenbal’s political “repression” of Damba), Nyambuu claimed that an increase in red tape

15. An aimag is a Mongolian territorial-administrative unit equivalent to a province. Mongolia consists of twenty-one aimags.
16. “Speech by Tsogt-Ochiryn Lookhuuz at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum,” 3 April 1956, in Mongol Ardyn Khuvsgalt Namyn Arkhiv (MAKNA), F. 4, Da. 23, Kh/n 1, khuu. 209–237. After Damba agreed with Lookhuuz’s points, Tsedenbal reportedly jumped from his seat and exclaimed: “You are agreeing with a man who criticized the party. He expressed erroneous criticism. He is slandering the improvement of life of our people.” Boldbaatar and Dashdavaa, Shinechlelien Tuluu Khudalgwuun, p. 42.
18. Ibid.
and a decline in professional discipline among the leading cadres were “indisputably connected” with Damba’s shortcomings. Nyambuu also attacked Chimeddorjiin Surenjav, a Politburo member and Tsedenbal’s former rival, for “backwardness,” a charge that led to the unintended removal of Surenjav. Nyambuu then wrote a letter to the Central Committee expressing sharp criticism of Tsedenbal’s second-in-command, Tsend. Tsedenbal took that letter as a pretext to remove Tsend at the December 1963 plenum of the MPRP Central Committee. Nyambuu later complained, however, that Tsedenbal cunningly exploited him in the plot to oust a longtime rival.

Although Nyambuu was hardly a dedicated opponent, he did criticize Tsedenbal on a number of occasions. At the January 1962 Central Committee plenum, Nyambuu argued that Tsedenbal was “seriously backward” and “stuck in the past.” A decade earlier, such accusations would have been unthinkable, but de-Stalinization had changed the rules of the game, and Nyambuu (like several other speakers) felt secure enough to voice his complaints in public. Nyambuu also met with Tsedenbal in private to discuss the Mongolian leader’s shortcomings. Nyambuu warned Tsedenbal that it was unwise to back the Soviet Union against China in the Sino-Soviet split. Tsedenbal gave the impression of being receptive to the criticism. On one occasion, Nyambuu recalled, Tsedenbal thanked him for expressing his concerns and gave him two phone numbers. “If you have more things to discuss,” Tsedenbal said, “do not hesitate to call me.” But in reality, Tsedenbal deeply resented Nyambuu’s comments, particularly his criticism of Tsedenbal’s personal life. Nyambuu was soon sent to the Higher Party School in Moscow—ostensibly for graduate study but actually so that he would be kept out of politics.

Nyambuu and Lookhuuz knew each other in Mongolia but never worked

20. Surenjav disputed Tsedenbal’s claim to leadership after Choibalsan’s death in January 1952. However, with Damba’s support, Tsedenbal won the premiership, and Surenjav soon thereafter was removed from the leadership. He was brought back in 1957 and helped Tsedenbal demote Damba in November 1958 and then oust him altogether in March 1959. Tsedenbal apparently intended to keep Surenjav in the Politburo, but Nyambuu’s criticism of Surenjav’s performance made it hard for Tsedenbal to defend him, though the extent of Tsedenbal’s commitment to Surenjav is difficult to ascertain. See “Comments by Baldandorjiin Nyambuu at MPRP Central Committee Plenum,” 30 March 1959, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 24, Kh/n 185a, khuu. 278–279.
22. “Speech by Baldandorjiin Nyambuu at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum,” 26 January 1962, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 26, Kh/n 1v, khuu. 159.
23. Nyambuu, interview.
closely together. In Moscow they had an opportunity to discuss Mongolia’s future, Tsedenbal’s shortcomings, and the means to redress them. The two men found Tsedenbal’s leadership wanting on several counts. In their view, his entourage consisted of flatterers and natives of his own Uvs Aimag rather than people chosen on the basis of merit or knowledge. The MPRP Politburo, they believed, was filled with hopelessly corrupt men who had no idea about the plight of the common people, knew next to nothing about economic management, and relied on the Soviet Union to subsidize Mongolia’s socialist construction. Nyambuu and Lookhuuz wanted Mongolia to rely more on its own resources for economic development rather than blindly following the USSR. As Lookhuuz later explained, he thought in 1964 that Tsedenbal’s economic policy was based not on real demands or a sound understanding of the economy but on whatever the Soviet Union dictated. In foreign policy, overreliance on Moscow increased Mongolia’s dependence on its northern neighbor. Lookhuuz and Nyambuu believed it was essential to maintain good relations with both the USSR and China and to promote a more independent role for Mongolia by selling its resources on the world market instead of serving as a Soviet resource appendage.

Lookhuuz and Nyambuu agreed that the only way to implement far-reaching changes was by bringing new leaders to power. But they disagreed about the best way to do this. Lookhuuz wanted to remove Tsedenbal from power once and for all. As he kept telling Nyambuu in Moscow, “we need to get rid of this stupid Dorvod.” Nyambuu believed that Tsedenbal, despite all his shortcomings, had ensured through successive purges that no one really could replace him. Nyambuu suggested that they instead try to separate the positions of MPRP leader and prime minister (Tsedenbal held both), just as the Soviet Union had done. Tsedenbal could maintain his party position, but another man would be appointed head of the council of ministers, bringing fresh blood into the top ranks. Although some disagreements persisted, Nyambuu and Lookhuuz were united on the basic point that they should try to limit Tsedenbal’s powers. The two men believed that the forthcoming plenum of the MPRP Central Committee would be a good opportunity to move

25. Sovdyn Baatar claims, incorrectly, that Lookhuuz and Nyambuu “never met” in Moscow because they studied at different institutions. Baatar, *Ekh oronchid ba Tsedenbal*, p. 108. Similar claims are sometimes made in recent Mongolian historiography to show that Lookhuuz and Nyambuu presumably acted independently and had no political aims other than to state the grievances of the Mongolian intelligentsia.
27. “Baldandorjiin Nyambuu to MPRP Politburo,” 19 August 1983, p. 12. Dorvods are a minority nationality in Mongolia. Although Dorvods are closely related to Khalkh Mongols (the main nationality) and speak the Mongolian language, some ethnic tensions exist.
against the Mongolian leader. No doubt, the circumstances were advantageous. Popular discontent with Tsedenbal’s policies and the country’s economic travails gave Tsedenbal’s challengers a powerful wedge against him. More important, Lookhuuz and Nyambuu felt a sense of urgency because they realized they would not be reelected to the Central Committee. The upcoming plenum would be the last one in which they could participate. Both men later claimed they had realized ahead of time that they would be defeated at the plenum, but they wanted to speak out anyway to highlight Tsedenbal’s shortcomings. Whether this was truly the case is doubtful. If Lookhuuz and Nyambuu had genuinely believed that they were fighting for a lost cause, it is unlikely that they would have undertaken such meticulous preparations ahead of the plenum. Lookhuuz and Nyambuu knew that if Tsedenbal fell from power, they would almost certainly receive hefty portfolios in Ulaanbaatar.

Preparations for the Plenum

The discussions between Nyambuu and Lookhuuz did not escape Tsedenbal’s attention. Some of the other Mongolian students in Moscow, having learned about Nyambuu’s and Lookhuuz’s plans, reported them to Tsedenbal, who in turn did all he could to prevent his challengers from taking part in the plenum. In November 1964 Tsedenbal visited Moscow to meet with the new Soviet leaders. Before departing from the Soviet capital, the Mongolian leader held a reception at the embassy for Mongolian students. At the reception, he called Lookhuuz aside and told him that the plenum would not be of great political significance and that only economic questions would be discussed. Tsedenbal advised Lookhuuz not to come to the plenum so that he would not be distracted from his studies in Moscow. Lookhuuz realized Tsedenbal’s real intentions, but he departed for Ulaanbaatar in November 1964, leaving Nyambuu in Moscow to make up his mind. Nyambuu wanted to go back to Ulaanbaatar to speak out against Tsedenbal and also to visit his son, a sixth-grader. He went to the Mongolian embassy in Moscow twice, but the consular officer refused to give him a visa to return to Ulaanbaatar. Defiant, Nyambuu left Moscow and arrived in Mongolia on 16 December, just days before the plenum.
Preparations for the plenum by this point were well under way. Many people suspected that Tsedenbal would encounter a serious challenge to his leadership, and initially it appeared that a large number of Central Committee members were involved in the plot. On the night of 17 December, Nyambuu met with the mayor of Ulaanbaatar, Mangaljavyn Luvsanchoimbol, and another high-ranking official, Sampilyn Jalan-Aajav. The mayor produced a scrap of paper outlining proposed changes in the party and state leadership. Under the plan, Tsedenbal would be removed from his prime-ministerial post and replaced by either Demchigiin Molomjamts (a deputy prime minister who was also Mongolia’s chief economist) or Nyamyn Jagvaral (a Politburo member and Central Committee secretary for agriculture), both of whom were younger and more promising than Tsedenbal. The party’s elder statesman, Jamsrangiin Sambuu, who chaired the Ikh Khural Presidium, would be sent into retirement, and several party secretaries would be removed as well. Luvsanchoimbol included Lookhuuz and Nyambuu among those who would be promoted. The three men agreed to meet again in the next few days before the plenum to discuss the details of the purge. The meeting never took place, however, apparently because Luvsanchoimbol and Jalan-Aajav recognized the danger of opposing Tsedenbal and opted out. Or did they? Nyambuu has repeatedly claimed Luvsanchoimbol and Jalan-Aajav were merely staging the distribution of portfolios to compromise him. Jalan-Aajav in his memoirs denies that he had any association with the “anti-party group.” Luvsanchoimbol left nothing behind to shed light on his role in the plot except for his ritualized denial at a party meeting on 28 December 1964: “I did not participate in preparations for the plenum. . . . I did not participate!” Tsedenbal added a further twist to this already complicated story in his speech at the plenum that Nyambuu did not have permission to come to Mongolia. See the transcripts of his speech, delivered on 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 120.

31. Baldandorjiin Nyambuu, letter to MPRP Politburo, 19 August 1983, p. 12a. Luvsanchoimbol criticized Nyambuu at the plenum but did not mention his own participation in the plot. See the transcript of his speech, delivered on 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 120. On the second day of the plenum, when Nyambuu was questioned about his recent contacts, he said he had met with Banzragch, Luvsanchoimbol, and Jalan-Aajav. See “Comments by Bandiin Surmaajav at the MPRP CC Plenum,” 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 178. According to Lookhuuz, Nyambuu did meet with Luvsanchoimbol and Jalan-Aajav, but the two quickly recognized the danger of opposing Tsedenbal and declined to take part. Lookhuuz, interview, 15 September 2004.


34. Baatar, Ekh oronchid ba Tsedenbal, p. 189.
an undated diary entry: “Lookhuuz said, ‘I was not the leader. Ja was the leader. . . . Jalan-Aajav pushed us and himself remained behind’. Nyambuu said, ‘this [Jalan-Aajav] is a very cunning character. He does things through other people.’”35 Whether Luvsanchoimbol and Jalan-Aajav were, as Nyambuu believes, Tsedenbal’s “spies,” “horse and dog,” and “servants,” or whether they simply threw in their lot with Tsedenbal at the last moment, may never be fully clear. Either way, their unwillingness to join the “anti-party group” undermined the conspirators’ chances of success.36

Among those who supported Lookhuuz was Dejidbalyn Baasanjav, an economics professor, who gave eleven questions to Lookhuuz to raise with Tsedenbal at the plenum in the hope of prompting general debate. The topics of the questions ranged from purely economic issues to much more sensitive personal matters: “Is it true that we run a foreign trade deficit?” “Is it true that our state budget has a deficit?” “Is it true that you give away the state’s gold reserves as gifts to foreign countries?” “Is it true that your wife sells first-rate, valuable items abroad?” “Is it true that after participating in the 47th anniversary of October [Revolution] you stayed behind and drank alcohol for six straight days with the Aleksandrov Ensemble?”37

What Lookhuuz intended to do with these questions is unclear (as is so much else in this story). Tsedenbal claimed to have uncovered a plot involving Jamsran Byambadorj, the former head of the Mongolian trade unions. Byambadorj was dismissed from his post in 1963 for squandering state money, and Lookhuuz reportedly knew that Tsedenbal was planning to remove Byambadorj from the Central Committee at the December 1964 plenum. Lookhuuz allegedly contacted Byambadorj and pointed out that he had nothing to lose by working with them against Tsedenbal. Lookhuuz allegedly suggested that Byambadorj, when given the floor to defend himself, should accuse Tsedenbal of misdeeds and thus cause confusion at the plenum, enabling Tsedenbal’s challengers to act. Amid the uproar, they could revoke Tsedenbal’s chairmanship of the plenum, thus assuring his defeat. Tsedenbal told Soviet officials that Byambadorj had agreed with Lookhuuz and prom-

35. Sumyaa, *Gerel suuder*, p. 66. Although this diary entry is not dated, it was probably made in the early 1980s, prior to Jalan-Aajav’s ouster for allegedly having been the “chief organizer” of the 1964 affair.
ised to criticize the MPRP leader. Lookhuuz, however, strenuously denied having anything to do with Byambadorj.

Lookhuuz knew that the state security organs would be crucial in any move against Tsedenbal. Hence, in a daring step, he revealed his plans to the minister of state security, Badrakhyn Jambalsuren. Lookhuuz and Jambalsuren at one point had lived in the same apartment building, and the two men had known each other for more than ten years. Jambalsuren later admitted that he and Lookhuuz had been on friendly terms and “respected each other.”

One evening, Lookhuuz went to Jambalsuren’s home and told him that he intended to criticize Tsedenbal at the forthcoming plenum. Lookhuuz said that he wanted Jambalsuren to back the plot. Reportedly, Lookhuuz promised Jambalsuren the post of prime minister if everything went smoothly. Jambalsuren quickly agreed, but in the end, far from going along with the plot, he betrayed Lookhuuz and warned Tsedenbal about the impending showdown. Tsedenbal was not surprised. Although Byambadorj may have promised Lookhuuz to launch an offensive against Tsedenbal at the plenum, he, too, ended up warning the Mongolian leader about the plot. In return, Tsedenbal assured Byambadorj that he would not raise the question of removing Byambadorj at the plenum and would thereby preempt any criticism. Thus, Lookhuuz’s scheme was doomed well before the plenum started.

Lookhuuz and Nyambuu each knew that the other would criticize Tsedenbal, but they prepared for the plenum “independently.” The two men did not coordinate their efforts in meeting with and persuading Central Committee members to oppose Tsedenbal. In the end, both hoped that “a lot” of people would speak out at the plenum, but they could not say just how many. Lookhuuz and Nyambuu underestimated Tsedenbal, who acted zealously behind the scenes to make sure that his challengers would fail. With the administrative apparatus under his control, Tsedenbal of course had the odds in his favor from the outset. Shortly before the plenum, Nyambuu learned


39. Byambadorj acknowledged that he had several conversations with Lookhuuz before the plenum, but he did not specify whether Lookhuuz asked him to question Tsedenbal. See Byambadorj’s speech at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 101–107.

40. Speech by Badrakhyn Jambalsuren at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 139.


42. Lookhuuz, interview, 15 September 2004.
that Tsedenbal had been making strenuous efforts to isolate and condemn his critics. Nyambuu and Lookhuuz remained unconvinced by these disturbing reports, but even if they had been inclined to abandon their plans, it was probably too late to halt what they had set in motion.

**Charges against Tsedenbal**

On 21 December the plenum began in Ulaanbaatar. The question of Byambadorj was not on the agenda. Instead, Tsedenbal opened the plenum with a report on the strengthening of party and state control. Mongolia’s problems, Tsedenbal insisted, were the result of a weakening dictatorship. Various “babblers” spread “unsavory sentiments” and discontent among the people. Screws had to be tightened if these tendencies were to be reversed.43 Following Tsedenbal, Deputy Prime Minister Tumenbayaryn Ragchaa, who was also head of the state planning committee, delivered a report on the need to revise Mongolia’s five-year plan. The reason for changing the plan, Ragchaa claimed, was the economic pressure exerted by China through its withdrawal of workers, its failure to build promised factories on time, its sloppiness in completing factories, and its boycott of the trans-Mongolian railroad.44

After these reports, the floor was opened for discussion. Under normal circumstances, “discussion” would consist of dull speeches by Central Committee members regurgitating the content of the leaders’ reports. That was how things worked in the Soviet Union, and the MPRP ordinarily did the same. But this time a different scenario unfolded. In the middle of the session the head of Mongolia’s statistical bureau, Bandiin Surmaajav, took the floor and voiced criticism of Tsedenbal’s leadership. Surmaajav’s démarche came as a surprise to both Lookhuuz and Nyambuu. Surmaajav had not been involved in the plotting against Tsedenbal, even though he, like many other people, knew about the upcoming showdown.45 Surmaajav was related to Nyambuu through marriage, but the two men had no other connections.46

43. Speech by Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 21 December 1964, in MAKNA F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 1, khuu. 7–68.
44. Speech by Tumenbayaryn Ragchaa at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 21 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 1, khuu. 69–109.
45. Surmaajav spoke briefly with Lookhuuz and Nyambuu and knew that they would criticize Tsedenbal at the plenum. But he denied ever taking instructions from the two men. See the comments by Bandiin Surmaajav at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2g, khuu. 175–176.
46. The daughter of Surmaajav’s elder sister was married to Nyambuu. See “Comments by Bandiin Surmaajav at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum,” 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2g, khuu. 175.
denied ever having discussed politics with Surmaajav, and Lookhuuz confirmed that the statistics bureau chief was not a part of the original “anti-party group.”

Surmaajav, to be sure, had his own grievances against Tsedenbal. Unlike Lookhuuz and Nyambuu, Surmaajav had not openly criticized Tsedenbal in the past, but at a Central Committee plenum in December 1963 he had argued that building a vast industrial complex in the city of Darkhan in northern Mongolia was economically unwise. As reflected in the plenum protocol, Tsedenbal reacted sharply to Surmaajav’s comments:

Such words should not come from the mouth of a plenum delegate. Nihilist and nationalist views have come from Surmaajav’s mouth several times. Let’s pay attention to this. One should not say such words about work done with the help of fraternal countries.

Tseveenii Luvsansambuu, who also took part in the 1963 plenum, recalled that Tsedenbal yelled at Surmaajav, “I’ve told you many times: Watch your mouth!” In a society in which public respect means so much, Tsedenbal’s abusive remarks were bound to antagonize Surmaajav. Luvsansambuu, too, was so upset about Tsedenbal’s comments that he resolved to join the ranks of the Mongolian leader’s opponents in December 1964. Luvsansambuu even prepared his own speech but was browbeaten by Tsedenbal, who asked him at the plenum, “Are you a Chinese spy, have you been to China?” Surmaajav, however, was not intimidated, despite Tsedenbal’s threats to “discuss” him in the Politburo in December 1963. Knowing that others had also planned to voice their grievances against Tsedenbal, Surmaajav spoke out first.

Surmaajav pointed out that for several years Tsedenbal had been serving as both prime minister and MPRP First Secretary. Such sweeping powers, Surmaajav argued, should not be entrusted to a single man. The CPSU, he said, understood this clearly; and that is why the October 1964 plenum of the CPSU Central Committee decided to separate the two positions. “Up to now,” Surmaajav contended, “we have always been learning from the Soviet Communist Party; now we must again learn from it.” The party and state, he argued, should henceforth have separate jurisdictions, and one must not

47. Lookhuuz, interview, 15 October 2003; and Nyambuu, interview.
49. Baatar, Ekh oronchid ba Tsedenbal, p. 218.
51. “Comments by Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal,” 22 December 1963, khuu. 27.
52. Speech by Bandiin Surmaajav at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 21 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2g, khuu. 10.
infringe on the province of the other. The Communist Party should exercise political leadership, and the government must be responsible for day-to-day implementation of decisions. Surmaajav complained about the stagnation among leading cadres, describing it as “unhealthy.” Even a talented and effective leader, he said, could, after many years in office, become a burden and lose any effectiveness. Rotation of cadres was essential for successful leadership. Referring to Khrushchev, who had been dismissed two months earlier, Surmaajav maintained that the Soviet leader had committed mistakes but was a man of principles and had therefore stepped down. Surmaajav called on Tsedenbal to do the same. Tsedenbal, not surprisingly, rejected Surmaajav’s proposal.53

Surmaajav’s somewhat rarefied critique of Tsedenbal’s leadership, with only a slight amount of sarcasm mixed in, paled by comparison to the much sharper and more strongly-worded speeches by Nyambuu and Lookhuuz later that day. Lookhuuz spoke last, continuing for more than an hour, late into the night, with frequent interruptions by an increasingly annoyed Tsedenbal. Lookhuuz condemned the Mongolian leader, his entourage, and his policies, both internal and external. Mongolia’s problems, Lookhuuz argued, resulted not from a weakening dictatorship but from Tsedenbal himself and his style of leadership. Tsedenbal, he averred, had been corrupted by power. In the 1940s Tsedenbal had followed principles of Marxism-Leninism and enjoyed the trust of the people, but in the 1950s he had increasingly evolved along the petite-bourgeois track. “Tsedenbalism” in the leadership ranks clearly manifested itself in the way Tsedenbal selected his entourage. Lookhuuz emphasized that the Marxist-Leninist principle was to select people on the basis of their work qualities. What, he asked, has Tsedenbal replaced it with? Tsedenbal, Lookhuuz maintained, chooses all kinds of flatterers and college graduates with no experience for the most important positions. Tsedenbal’s followers, Lookhuuz continued, quickly become corrupted by “drinking, debauchery, and a thirst for money. . . . Our party is entering into some kind of reactionary medieval dictatorship.”54

Nyambuu’s complaints about Tsedenbal were similar. “Lip-service is paid to the principles of party democracy and collective leadership,” he argued, “but in reality these principles are not observed.”55 The Central Committee plenums, he said, have lost their importance and serve as rubber-stamps for the decisions of the Politburo. Our party, he declared, is essentially closed to

53. Ibid., khuu. 10–19.
54. Speech by Tsogt-Ochiryn Lookhuuz at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 21 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2g, khuu. 37, 46.
55. Speech by Baldandorjiin Nyambuu at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 21 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2g, khuu. 22.
criticism and self-criticism, and the Politburo has ascended beyond the party's control. When decisions were made about economic issues, foreign policy, national defense, and the borrowing of capital, Central Committee members played no role—all such decisions were made by the Politburo.56

Most of the top leaders, Nyambuu argued, were incompetent. Lookhuuz warned that with these sorts of leaders in power, Mongolia would never succeed in building socialism. Every year the country became increasingly dependent on the USSR.57 “It is rare to see in the world a country as economically retarded as ours,” lamented Nyambuu. “We live off borrowed capital.”58 Lookhuuz stressed this same point: “We do not know how to use the help of the Soviet people, and therefore we . . . are wasting their capital.”59 Soviet leaders themselves, he said, were getting wary of Tsedenbal’s frequent trips to Moscow to request more aid. Lookhuuz had learned from a Foreign Ministry official close to Tsedenbal that a Soviet Presidium member, Anastas Mikoyan, had scolded the Mongolian leader at a reception in Moscow in 1963:

You say that the Soviet Union helps you in everything, but you should also talk about what you do yourselves. We must help, and we will help as much as we can. But we cannot give you everything for nothing. Some of it we must take back. You must learn how to use the things we give.60

Lookhuuz was thereby implying that Mongolia should take less from the Soviet Union and rely more on its own resources to spur economic construction. He later claimed that in 1964 he believed that Mongolia’s one-sided dependence on the USSR was of tremendous detriment to the national economy. He also was convinced that the Soviet Union, for all the help it provided to Ulaanbaatar, gained more from its exploitation of Mongolia’s cheap resources.61 The key to Mongolia’s bright future, Lookhuuz argued, was in marketing its natural resources internationally. We have three key resources, Lookhuuz said—livestock, minerals, and timber. He emphasized that by selling these on the world market Mongolia could acquire the financial means to develop its national economy.62

Nyambuu, for his part, contended that the national economy could not

56. Ibid., Khuu. 23.
58. Speech by Nyambuu, 21 December 1964, khuu. 20.
60. Ibid., khuu. 40. Sonomyn Luvsan in his speech at the plenum denied that Mikoyan said anything to this effect. See “Speech by Sonomyn Luvsan at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum,” 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 89.
fully develop until funds were no longer being eaten up by the military and state security apparatus. The state security organs, he averred, had overwhelmed the society through eavesdropping and the never-ending reading of letters. These activities, he insisted, were paid for by the capital so badly needed in the economy. Military expenditures, according to Nyambuu, had increased substantially from the level in 1940—that is, from the time when Mongolia faced the prospect of invasion by Imperial Japan. Why are we expanding the army, Nyambuu asked—to defend against whom? Why is Tsedenbal attempting to make Mongolia a party to the Warsaw Pact, how are we going to pay for this? These were the questions Nyambuu put before the startled plenum.63

Lookhuuz offered a more far-reaching critique of Mongolian foreign policy. He claimed that Mongolia's unequivocal support of Moscow in the Sino-Soviet split was inappropriate. Lately we hear much about the “Chinese danger,” he argued, “but if there is really such a danger, it should be shown to us where it lies. . . . The specter of the ‘danger theory’ is haunting Mongolia. This is not Marxism.” Mongolia's central problem, Lookhuuz suggested, was that it got involved in other countries' business. “If China and the USSR, these two great powers, can split with one another, they can also achieve unity. Why should we stick our forehead between these two?” Lookhuuz, as an example, cited Tsedenbal's criticism of the Chinese nuclear test. “We now hear that the Chinese nuclear test was directed against the Soviet Union and Mongolia. But according to official Chinese statements, it was purely for self-defense. So should we believe the official Chinese statements or our own empty talk?” Lookhuuz pointed out that during Tsedenbal's recent visit to Poland, Władysław Gomułka told the Mongolian leader that the Chinese nuclear test was a success for the entire socialist camp. “Comrade Tsedenbal,” Lookhuuz observed, “did not tell the Central Committee members about this.” Lookhuuz acknowledged that worsening relations with China, as Ragchaa argued in his report, had done considerable damage to the Mongolian economy. But the key to solving this problem, Lookhuuz said, was not to argue with the Chinese but to reach an “appropriate understanding with them.”65

63. Speech by Nyambuu, 21 December 1964, khuu. 27–28. Khrushchev attempted to bring Mongolia into the Warsaw Pact in 1963, probably in response to sharply deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations. Tsedenbal supported the idea. However, Khrushchev changed his mind in July 1963, possibly to avoid repercussions for the developing U.S.-Soviet détente. See the letter from Khrushchev to Władysław Gomułka, 10 July 1963, in Archiwum Akt Nowych (Warsaw), Archiwum Komitetu Centralnego PZPR, XIA/103, k. 521. The author is grateful to the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact for obtaining this document and to Douglas Selvage for insightful commentary.


65. Speech by Lookhuuz, 21 December 1964, khuu. 44–45.
The criticism of Tsedenbal’s high-handedness, corruption, and incompetence failed to impress the Central Committee members. Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav were roundly condemned for “anti-party activities,” expelled from the party, and sent into exile. Lookhuuz became a shepherd, Nyambuu was appointed a cow-b breeder, and Surmaajav found a new job as a junior accountant.66 This crushing defeat of Tsedenbal’s opponents was the last challenge to Tsedenbal’s authority for the next twenty years.

Why did the “anti-party group” lose in the struggle against Tsedenbal? A combination of factors was probably at play. Organizational issues were important. Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav had almost no say in the policymaking process in Ulaanbaatar. They did not exercise real power and could not use the immensely important “administrative resource” as Khrushchev’s colleagues had done just a few months earlier. Politburo members were not involved in the plot, with the possible exception of Jalan-Aajav (who was only a candidate member). Tsedenbal claimed that two former Politburo members—his ousted rivals, Tumur-Ochir and Tsend—discreetly helped the “anti-party group,” but that, too, is unlikely.67 In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the move against Khrushchev was prepared and instigated by senior Presidium members—Khrushchev’s closest colleagues. Lookhuuz and Nyambuu tried to rely instead on a much wider support base in the Central Committee, and this tactic did not pay off. The purges of the 1930s were still remembered by MPRP officials. Despite ten years of de-Stalinization, an all-pervasive fear lingered among Central Committee members, keeping many of them from speaking out against Tsedenbal.

The participation of the military and the state security apparatus in any coup d’état is another important ingredient for success. Marshal Georgii Zhukov provided critical support to Khrushchev in 1953 during the power struggle with Lavrentii Beria and did so again in June 1957, when the Soviet leader triumphed over the “anti-party group” led by Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar’ Kaganovich, and Georgii Malenkov. In 1964 the decision by the KGB chairman, Vladimir Semichastnyi, to back Khrushchev’s ouster was unques-

66. See “Resolution of the MPR Council of Ministers,” 12 January 1965, reprinted in Navagchamba, Khelmegdsen zayaa—38, pp. 99–100. Many more people lost their jobs, were sent into exile, or were given prison sentences for their connection with the “anti-party group.” For instance, economics professor Baasanjav, who supplied Lookhuuz with eleven questions about Tsedenbal, was sentenced to six years in jail on the charge of “slandering society and the state.” Gombojavyn Jambaldorj, an official at the state bank who supplied Baasanjav with exchange-rate figures (so he could work out the trade balance), was sentenced to a year-and-a-half for “leaking state secrets,” despite her claim that the exchange rate was not a state secret. See Badarchiin Myagmarjav and Tserengiin Navagchamba, Khelmegdsen zayaa—17 [Fate of the Repressed—17] (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolyn Uls Turin Khelmegdegsdiin Kholboo, 2000), pp. 18–55, 99–104.

67. Lookhuuz and Nyambuu denied connections with Tumur-Ochir and Tsend, although Nyambuu became Tumur-Ochir’s neighbor in exile until the latter’s assassination in 1985.
tionably a key factor in the latter’s defeat. Lookhuuz, by contrast, failed to gain support from State Security Minister Jambalsuren, who could have played a pivotal role in Tsedenbal’s removal. As Lookhuuz summarized later:

To capture power, one must gain control of three important institutions. We were taught in college that these are, first, the army and the internal affairs ministry; second, communications; and third, banking and finance. We did not have a single person from any of these organizations.

Equally important, Tsedenbal’s elaborate network of informers among party elites kept the Mongolian leader fully apprised of brooding discontent, giving him time to devise countermeasures. As Puntsagiin Shagdarsuren, the head of the MPRP international department, explained to a Soviet diplomat in 1965: “If it were not for the timely work carried out by Tsedenbal before the plenum, Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav could have caused a lot more trouble, the consequences of which can easily be imagined.”

The Alleged Chinese Connection

Defeating the “anti-party” group was only half the problem for Tsedenbal. How could such a formidable challenge to the Mongolian leader’s authority be explained to the Mongolian people, the party, and the Soviet comrades? After all, the thrust of the criticism voiced by Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav at the December 1964 plenum was directed against Tsedenbal’s abuses of power, his undemocratic working habits, and his corruption and incompetence—shortcomings all too evident to be dismissed as mere propaganda conjured up by “anti-party elements.” To defuse the issues raised by his challengers, Tsedenbal played the Chinese card. When the plenum condemned the “anti-party” group, foreign policy issues became the most powerful weapon for Tsedenbal’s supporters. Seizing on Lookhuuz’s proposal for neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split, Tsedenbal implied that Lookhuuz was at


69. Baatar, Ekh oronchid ba Tsedenbal, p. 125.

70. Nadirov, Tsedenbal, p. 182.
best an anti-Soviet element and probably even a Chinese spy. Lookhuuz expected criticism along these lines and tried to preempt it. “I have not taken the Chinese views,” he said. “I did not meet with the Chinese. I read Chinese pamphlets, but I also read Soviet pamphlets and books related to the polemics. I have my own understanding of this matter. I have not become a Chinese spy.”

These assurances, however, did not erase the stigma of the Chinese bias attached to the “anti-party group.” Tsagaanlamyn Dugersuren, an MPRP Central Committee Secretary, raised the matter when he denounced the conspirators: “Where is the Chinese danger, [you say]? You are. To say it in the simplest terms, you are [the Chinese danger].” A Politburo member, Nyamyn Jagvaral, described Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav as “true friends” of China and said they probably expected to become Mongolian leaders in a pro-Chinese Mongolia. Surmaajav, Jagvaral added, could even hope to become the head of the Chinese statistical bureau. Just how hard Tsedenbal tried to connect the “anti-party group” to Chinese subversion is shown by the Mongolian leader’s claim that Lookhuuz was of Chinese descent and that his very name was Chinese.

A special committee was appointed after the plenum to investigate the alleged contacts between the “anti-party group” and Chinese representatives. Lookhuuz recalled that he was questioned many times about his Chinese connections, but he repeatedly said that he had none. Although the committee concluded that Lookhuuz and Nyambuu had not been in contact with the Chinese, charges of being under “Chinese influence” were never lifted. Official explanations offered to party members played up the mistaken foreign policy views of the “anti-party group” and completely ignored the criticism of Tsedenbal’s personal qualities and the calls for greater “party democracy,” accountability, and rotation of cadres. Lookhuuz’s statements in favor of Mongolian neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split provided an excuse for Tsedenbal to evade the discussion inside the party about the merits of his leadership. During a special party meeting at the Mongolian embassy in Moscow that focused on the lessons of the December 1964 plenum, the partici-

71. Speech by Lookhuuz, 21 December 1964, khuu. 42.
72. Speech by Tsagaanlamyn Dugersuren at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 82.
73. Speech by Nyamyn Jagvaral at the MPRP Central Committee Plenum, 22 December 1964, in MAKNA, F. 4, Da. 28, Kh/n 2b, khuu. 121.
74. Lookhuuz, Tsedenbal claimed, means “tiger” in Chinese (laohu). In 2003, Lookhuuz denied having Chinese relatives and said that his name is rooted in old Mongolian and means “bottle face” (lonkhgor). Lookhuuz, interview, 15 October 2003.
75. Ibid.
pants condemned the “anti-party group” for falling under Chinese influence. They stressed that Soviet help to Mongolia vastly exceeded Chinese help, “yet the anti-party group did not know about this. This is evidence of Chinese attempts to manipulate the people’s minds against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, to bring them under dirty Chinese influence.”

Tsedenbal’s attempts to present the Lookhuuz-Nyambuu-Surmaajav affair as a Chinese-inspired coup attempt were not limited to MPRP forums. If he had told Soviet leaders that he had come under criticism for violating party democracy, for corruption and incompetence, and for holding on to power as Khrushchev had done in Moscow, they might have found merit in those accusations and lost faith in Tsedenbal. As a result, Tsedenbal chose instead to present Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav as anti-Soviet plotters and propagators of Chinese influence inside the MPRP, a scenario that seemed all too plausible to Soviet officials in the context of the deepening Sino-Soviet rift.

On 29 December 1965, Mongolian First Deputy Foreign Minister Sandagiin Sosorbaram briefed Soviet Ambassador Leonid Solov’ev about the recent plenum. Sosorbaram said that the speeches of Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav were “exceptionally vicious” and manifested “pro-Chinese tendencies.” The deputy foreign minister emphasized that Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav called for friendly relations with China and that “their positions are different from Chinese positions in only one respect—that they were articulated in the Mongolian language.” The following day, Solov’ev met with Tsedenbal to pass on New Year’s greetings from Brezhnev. The Mongolian leader discussed the plenum at length. He talked about the alleged similarity of views of the “splitters” to those of the Chinese ambassador in Ulaanbaatar. Tsedenbal claimed that Lookhuuz had supported the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet ideological disagreements and even believed that “they [the Chinese] will inevitably win.” Tsedenbal warned that “Lookhuuz and Nyambuu are in touch with the Chinese about the conduct of their splitting activities.”

Tsedenbal and other Mongolian officials came up with an unlikely conspiracy theory—that the “anti-party group” had received covert support from the Chinese embassy in Ulaanbaatar. Although no evidence of such contacts was ever uncovered, Tsedenbal told Solov’ev that the Chinese were presum-

ably informed about the planned coup d’état before the plenum and that the Chinese ambassador in Mongolia, Zhang Canning, even “waited all night for the plenum to end, hoping for changes in the MPRP leadership.”79 Tsedenbal also alleged that Zhang Canning met with Lookhuuz twice before the plenum and praised him as an “intelligent and good person.”80 To be sure, the Chinese almost certainly would have welcomed the ouster of Tsedenbal. A change of leadership in Ulaanbaatar could have improved the atmosphere for Sino-Mongolian relations. But regardless of what Zhang Canning may have wanted, Tsedenbal clearly exploited every rumor of contacts between Lookhuuz and Chinese representatives to “prove” that his challengers had a Chinese connection. He told the Soviet ambassador to disregard the “opinions of certain people” who alleged that Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav suffered “for their criticism of [Tsedenbal’s] leadership.”81

In case Solov’ev failed to mention the “Chinese connection” in his reports to Moscow, Tsedenbal conveyed his interpretation of the plenum directly to Moscow through a trusted channel, the Mongolian ambassador to China, Dondogiin Tsevegmid. Tsevegmid met with his Soviet counterpart, Stepan Chervonenko, in Beijing on 8 and 16 January 1965, informing him in detail about the December 1964 plenum. Tsevegmid did his utmost to stress that the attack against Tsedenbal amounted to the sabotage of Soviet-Mongolian friendship and was aimed at shifting Mongolia toward rapprochement with Mao Zedong’s China. To show the ominous extent of Chinese influence on Mongolian society, Tsevegmid reported on a post-plenum investigation that revealed “unhealthy” sentiments among the Mongolian public, particularly students. Many students opposed measures directed against China, such as the increased police presence around the Chinese embassy and intelligence activities against the Chinese in Ulaanbaatar.82

Tsevegmid’s conversation with Chervonenko probably had the desired effect. The Soviet ambassador’s own report back to Moscow reflected his understanding of the “anti-party group” affair as essentially a Chinese-inspired coup against Soviet-Mongolian friendship. This scenario confirmed Chervonenko’s worst fears. He had long been encouraging Soviet leaders to pay more attention to Mongolia or else risk losing it to the Chinese. In particular, Chervon-

79. Ibid.
enko recommended that Moscow “bring authoritative, influential Mongolian leaders other than Tsedenbal closer to the CPSU . . . to ensure that the strength of Soviet-Mongolian relations does not depend so much on one or two people who are now in power.”83 The Lookhuuz-Nyambuu-Surmaajav challenge to Tsedenbal was precisely the kind of scenario Chervonenko hoped to avoid.

Chervonenko may have been willing to accept Tsedenbal’s interpretation of the plenum, but were the top leaders in Moscow similarly inclined? Documents pertaining to high-level Soviet deliberations about the attempted coup against Tsedenbal are not currently available. We do know that the CPSU Presidium dispatched one of its members, Aleksandr Shelepin, to Ulaanbaatar on a reconnaissance mission in early 1965. Shelepin advised Tsedenbal to stop criticizing the “anti-party group” on the radio and in newspapers.84 He also offered substantial aid to the Mongolians. Soviet leaders probably were aware that Tsedenbal had many shortcomings, that Mongolia’s economic situation was dire, and that considerable discontent with Tsedenbal’s leadership existed in the party and among the people. Still, Brezhnev decided to place his bets on Tsedenbal and even help the Mongolian leader by boosting Soviet credits. In the spring of 1965, Demchigiin Molomjamts visited Moscow for talks with Brezhnev. The Soviet leader promised to help Mongolia in the following terms: “Sons of bitches, you are so rich and you curse us for giving too little money. Robbers!” In the end, however, Brezhnev agreed to provide the money.85

The Soviet leader also promised Molomjamts that he would come to Mongolia in person—a deliberate contrast to Khrushchev, who for several years had declined to visit Mongolia despite repeated invitations. Brezhnev no doubt realized that if the Soviet Union did not pay closer attention to its “best friend in Asia,” he might one day find that another leader had come to power in Ulaanbaatar. Unanticipated developments like the challenge posed by Lookhuuz, Nyambuu, and Surmaajav were unwelcome in Moscow. Soviet leaders accepted Tsedenbal’s interpretation of events and worried that the “anti-party group” really could have threatened the stability of Soviet-Mongolian relations. They decided not to take any chances.

84. Lookhuuz, interview, 15 October 2003.
Conclusion

Tsedenbal’s challengers at the December 1964 plenum had an agenda only marginally related to foreign policy. They were mostly concerned about Tsedenbal’s shortcomings as a leader, his incompetence and corruption, and his personality cult and abuses of power. To the extent that Lookhuuz and Nyambuu touched on foreign policy matters, they expressed hope that Mongolia would rely less on the Soviet Union and conduct a more vigorous and independent foreign policy. In this sense, the “anti-party group” certainly professed nationalist sentiments, which after this incident were suppressed in Mongolia until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Lookhuuz’s calls for improved relations with China were the result of his nationalist views, but he certainly did not want Mongolia to become a Chinese ally against the USSR. The “anti-party group” never had any “Chinese connection,” as Tsedenbal argued. What Lookhuuz had in mind was a genuinely neutral role for Mongolia and a more diversified international outlook. If Tsedenbal’s challengers had succeeded in gaining power, Mongolia would probably have become more nationalist and less eager to obey Moscow’s wishes. But part of Mongolia’s tragedy was that the Soviet Union preferred to keep an incompetent leader in Ulaanbaatar who would unquestionably stay on the Soviet “leash” rather than take some risks with a competent but more independent figure. Largely because of Soviet support, Tsedenbal, despite his terrible shortcomings, was able to remain in the country’s highest office for decades, successfully quashing all dissent.