

TSAKHIAGIIN ELBEGDORJ

Former President of Mongolia

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Mr President, let me first say a few things about your extremely interesting career. You were a student in Moscow.

Tsakhiajiin ELBEGDORJ

It was in the Ukraine.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

It was in the Ukraine, then in the Soviet Union, but in the time of Gorbachev, so that was of course an extremely interesting time to be a student in the Soviet Union. Your field was military journalism, and you could observe the last year of the Communist regime from within in a very interesting way. That is one point. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union you became a political actor with a background in journalism, and altogether you have been in office for 12 years, four years as Prime Minister and eight years as President – for two terms. I understand that your political career is not necessarily finished.

During those years you developed a very interesting foreign policy, but let me start by asking you to say a few words about the economic situation in Mongolia, because not so long ago Mongolia was considered to be an emerging, booming country, but then the commodity crisis came and the situation is slightly different today. Could you give us a few words about the current and foreseeable situation of the Mongolian economy? Then we will switch to wider subjects.

Tsakhiajiin ELBEGDORJ

The World Policy Conference is a great platform, and I am really grateful to you and your team to put this event together. I am also grateful to our gracious host, the Kingdom of Morocco. Yesterday night was really amazing. Regarding Mongolia and our economy, Mongolia has over three million people, is 1.5 million square kilometres, has 60 million livestock, and is one of the ten richest countries in terms of mineral resources; many foreign investors are attracted by that. Mongolia was one of the fastest growing economies in the world in 2011 to 2012. The rate was 17%; now we have 3%. The Mongolian economy is based on commodities. Our biggest market is China – Mongolia is located between Russia and China – and it is a liberal economic and political establishment.

However, there are still some bigger investment interests in Mongolia. People think that it is a good place because of its market, its young population and its openness. Mongolia is a really open country, and everyone coming to invest can benefit from Mongolian cooperation.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Let us switch to international affairs and Mongolia's contribution, which is actually much more than most people think. You have very close relations with both Koreas, South Korea and also North Korea. You know the situation extremely well, and there are also some cultural connections between Mongolia and Korea. You also have very balanced relations with Russia and China, and you have had and still have a personal role you might comment on.

You also have deep knowledge of as well as relations with Iran, and this is not the end of the list. This is relatively unknown, except for a few experts, so it would be very interesting to listen to you talk about these aspects of Mongolian foreign policy, to which you have been a great contributor.

**Tsakhiajiin ELBEGDORJ**

Regarding our relations with North Korea, we have an embassy in Pyongyang and we have a long-standing relationship with South Korea. My government and myself launched an initiative called the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security; it is like the Helsinki Process. It is still going on every year in June, and we have experts from North and South Korea, from America, Europe, Russia, China and Japan, and with them we discuss issues related to the northeast Asian situation.

I have visited North Korea several times and gave a lecture at the Kim Il-Sung University titled, 'No Dictatorship Lasts Forever,' and they actually asked me not to mention words related to 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'market economy', and I did not mention them. That lecture was a really interesting experience for me. Many Mongolians come to North Korea, and we still keep that channel open.

Now one of the biggest questions is how to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue, and I have my own perspectives there. There needs to be a global channel. The Korean War did not end with the peace agreement; North Koreans want that peace agreement. I think that the nuclear issue and the peace agreement should be discussed at the same time. That might be good. The Korean nuclear programme is not an ordinary one – the regime depends on that, and without the nuclear programme that regime might not be so wild. Because of that, we understand that we have to use face-saving tools and give face-saving opportunities to them, and that might be the peace agreement.

The Chinese are also talking about a dual freeze in terms of nuclear programme, and in this regard some trusted partner is needed. My country and I can be that trusted partner because we have no vested interests and have good relations with Japan, China, Russia, both Koreas and America. Mongolia hosted several bilateral meetings between North Korea and Japan in Ulaanbaatar under my presidency. I really think that Mongolia can play a special role there, and I am ready to contribute to that. That is my take on North Korea.

You mentioned Russia and China also.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

We will move on to that in a moment, but let us stay with Korea. You mentioned, and I think everyone now understands, that for North Korea access to nuclear weapons is a matter of regime survival. Could you be more specific on what kinds of compromise could be acceptable for the North Korean regime in terms of giving up nuclear weapons while nevertheless feeling seriously reassured on the future of the regime itself? It is a very difficult equation.

Tsakhiajiin ELBEGDORJ

The crucial thing is engagement. I would invite Kim Jong-un if I were the leader of the US or another country like China, and we need to take him away from his weapon and show him how the world is striving for this and what kind of possibilities there are. Engagement is crucial, and currently there is almost no engagement. They want to talk about issues, and most of the powers do not listen; they just tell them to stop their nuclear programme, and that if they do not accept this condition they will not talk.

A second door needs to be opened, a peace agreement, along with other issues – there are many dimensions, and dialogue is very important. There are no losers or winners in a dialogue, and that is why engagement is really crucial.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Have you ever met Kim Jong-un yourself?

Tsakhiajiin ELBEGDORJ

I have not done so officially.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Have you done so unofficially?

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

I do not know.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

However, you seem to be totally healthy mentally. Did you meet his father?

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

His grandfather actually visited Mongolia twice. We had better relations historically. Mongolia raised many North Korean orphan children after the war. Mongolia maintained diplomatic relations with North Korea since its inception, one of few countries to do so.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Let us switch now to Russia and China.

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

Russia and China are our two big neighbours. We have an important mechanism now, and we call it a summit. Once every year, the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Presidents meet at a high level; we have had three meetings, and our new President is maintaining this. China and Russia are committed to that, and Russia and China also really respect our people's choice, our way of life and our sovereign right to exist between them. We do not have any border or political disputes with Russia or China, and we have been living together for centuries, maybe for thousands of years.

You know that the Mongolians actually built the biggest land empire under Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, and in historical terms the Mongolians actually introduced a new world order, under which they ruled according to written law, a law called Great Government. The Mongolians also respected people's religious beliefs, and they established the biggest pony express-type of postal system all over the kingdom. We were in Persia, we were in Asia, we were in Europe, and because of that, Mongolian thinking is quite big. Because of that, we are really proud of our history, we are really proud of our present state, and Mongolia is the only liberal political and economic establishment since 1990 in the region. We have one of the newest election systems, for example – every election is computerized, with a biometric fingerprint system, and the results can be seen live on TV in every household.

We have that vibrant democracy, and now I am committed to sharing our experiences. We are not going to preach to anyone, but people come from Myanmar and eastern countries, even from North Korea, to learn that there is a different way if you give people rights and people can use them. Free people can be really creative, and the Mongolian philosophy is very different from those of Russia or China. It is also my philosophy – we have to give more rights to our people, and there should not be a central nervous system, like a starfish – if you cut off one of the limbs of a starfish, it grows back, because there is no central nervous system. However, if there is a bad president or a bad government in Mongolia, I think our people will survive thanks to their rights, thanks to their creativeness.

There is no media censorship, and total freedom of expression is taught in Mongolia. If you have never been to Mongolia and want to see it, there is a lot to experience there..

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

I must also add something which is not well known, that under your leadership capital punishment was abolished. Moving to a different level, when I was the director of policy planning stuff in the French Foreign Ministry, we used to

say that the worst capital to be an ambassador in was Ulaanbaatar. There was somebody whose name you may know who was very famous because he was the ambassador to Ulaanbaatar and lived in a very small apartment which was the embassy at the same time, and he found that to be ambassador to Vietnam, which he was also, was paradise compared to Ulaanbaatar.

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

That was a different time and a different system, and now even some French ambassadors are living permanently in Ulaanbaatar after their retirement.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

That was actually my point; it is one illustration among many of all the changes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

Our friend Mr Fabius is a very famous advocate for Mongolia and Mongolian freedom.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

It is not just Mr Fabius; today Mongolia is being discovered, and for some in the room that may also be the case. Give us a few words about Iran.

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

I had a chance to visit Iran, and that was really interesting – at that time I was the only sitting president who visited their underground nuclear facility. During my visit I met the Ayatollah Khomeini, and when we met we shook hands and he told me that he and his people were very grateful to Mongolia. The obvious question was why. He said that during the Mongolian domination of Persia, the Mongolians built the first hospitals and universities there, the first observatory, and even the first hospital for mentally ill people, treating them with music. Mongolia also made Shia the dominant religion during that time, and the Ayatollah Khomeini is regarded as the head of the Shia religion.

I visited many places and met good people, and I have that warm memory. Because of that we have that relationship, and after my visit that was constant. I actually started the Iran nuclear agreement. One thing I would like to say is that the Iran nuclear agreement is a really important one. Today's American administration and President Trump are making that a little questionable – if he takes that step, it will have a high cost in terms of credibility. Should America abort that deal, one country will be nuclear, one power, and that is something we really have to worry about. Cultural relations between Iran and Mongolia are really important, and there are museums and libraries which I visited there, some of them 60% of whose artefacts are related to our kingdom during that time. Those kinds of relations are really interesting for us.

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

I omitted something; I said that you were a student in the former Soviet Union, but you were also a student at the Kennedy School of Government, so that is a good balance, and that explains to a large extent your knowledge of English, just to say that in passing.

I have one more question on Iran. Historically speaking, do you have cultural links between Iran and Mongolia?

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

Yes, we do, and under our Presidents we have some projects to study our cultural and historical heritage in Mongolia and Iran.

**Thierry DE MONTBRIAL**

I would also like to remind you, our oldest friends who have attended the World Policy Conference since the first days, that Mongolia has expressed an interest in it since the beginning, and the former President Enkhbayar attended the first two of them before unfortunately being caught up in troubles back home. You were his Prime Minister for a while. It is interesting to notice, because I have myself discovered the interest of Mongolia from a bigger perspective at this time. That is why we are so happy to have you here.

Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ

The World Policy Conference is a kind of symphony of voices. Some people ask why the former President of Mongolia is sitting here. The beauty of this spectrum is that you can come from Mongolia, have some kind of relationship to this and bring our perspective here. This is a really great opportunity and a great platform, and we have to maintain it. Mongolia, and myself, are really committed to this great endeavour and purpose.