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Article

## Understanding the French foreign policy towards Mongolia.

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France and Mongolia are celebrating this year the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations. On this occasion, many events are organized. A lot of speeches will be made beginning with a reference to the duration of the relationship which started back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, those elements, if they are important on a rhetorical point of view, do not permit to better understand what are the bases of the relationship between the two countries.

The French-Mongolian relationship will be tackled from a French perspective. This choice has been made for two reasons, one practical and one theoretical. The first reason is due to the fact this very article was mainly written in France, a situation that gave the author some facilities to visit French archives and to get an access to French decision-makers. The second reason is more theoretical. The analysis of a relationship between two countries is mainly made by scholars working in the field of what is now called foreign policy analysis (FPA). This field, at the junction of International Relations and Public policy, has dedicated a lot of books and papers to explain foreign policy. However, only a few have focused on the elaboration of foreign policy towards a “small state”. Thus, the study of the foreign policy implemented by France towards Mongolia could help us to make some progress on this theoretical aspect.

The French-Mongolian political relationship started to develop only in 1965 when France decided to open an embassy in Ulaanbaatar. This embassy was closed in 1983, officially due to financial constraints. It was later reopened in 2003, marking so a new French engagement in Mongolia. A recent evolution is noticeable since 2012 with a clear intensification of the bilateral relationship between the two countries and the multiplication of official visits. This evolution asks questions. It could help us to better understand how the French foreign policy towards Mongolia, more generally towards small countries, is elaborated and implemented.

France is one of the few countries in Europe that rely on a strong strategic thinking and try to elaborate its foreign policy according to its geopolitical and strategic

understanding of the world<sup>1</sup>. Because of that, the French-Mongolian policy cannot be solely understood through the prism of the bilateral relationship but should be framed within the French policy towards Asia in general. This aspect is important to understand the evolution of France foreign policy towards Mongolia (1). This historical perspective leads to the identification of some key players in the making of French policy towards Mongolia and to consider the process leading to the creation of foreign policies. Understanding this process is important to understand the specificity of the French foreign policy towards Mongolia (2). However, this analysis faces a difficulty linked to the question of ideas and agenda. This aspect is more and more considered in scholars' work but remains often difficult to operationalize on a concrete case. The case of the making of French policy towards Mongolia could help us better understand the definition of a policy towards a small state and of the necessity to go beyond a stato-centric approach to consider the importance of other actors in the making of a foreign policy (3).

## 1. FRANCE'S POLICY TOWARDS ASIA, WHAT TO LEARN FOR MONGOLIA?

The special position of France in Cold war and its characteristic diplomacy has led a lot of scholars to work on the subject. However, only a few have focused on the foreign policy of France towards Asia. This can partially be explained by the evolution and the erratic nature of the French foreign policy towards the region (A). This analysis of the evolution of French foreign policy towards the region allows a better understanding France's policy towards Mongolia (B). Starting from this historical perspective, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding the role of the actors and their importance in the making of the France's Mongolian policy (C).

### **A. French foreign policy towards Asia since the middle of the twentieth century.**

Scientific studies of the French foreign policy towards Asia are mainly found in historical literature. The vast majority of works that has been done on the subject was written by scholars mainly interested in the evolution of French foreign policy in general<sup>2</sup>. Most of them insist on the erratic nature of the French foreign policy towards

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<sup>1</sup> D. Fisher, 2013.  
Interview, May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> M. Vaïsse, 2009.

Asia. Three main periods can be identified to describe the evolution of France's foreign policy towards Asia.

The first one was marked by General De Gaulle's ambition to preserve the independence of France vis-à-vis the United States. Two main events can be highlighted: the unilateral recognition of the People's Republic of China in January 1964 and the speech delivered by General De Gaulle in Phnom-Penh on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966, in which he denounced the US intervention in Vietnam and asked for a political solution to the conflict rather than a military one. This first period was marked by the wish of General De Gaulle to restore the international status of France. However, it was not really considered a policy towards Asia but was much more linked to the policy of France towards the United States<sup>3</sup>.

The second period was more erratic and Asia slightly disappeared from the priorities of French diplomacy. Decision-makers considered at time that France no longer had the means of its global ambition. This consideration led to a large period of disinterest for a region mainly perceived through the prism of its commercial opportunities. The arrival of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to the presidency in 1974 confirmed this new economic attention of France to Asia<sup>4</sup>. This evolution was stopped by the arrival of François Mitterrand to the Presidency who showed a general lack of interest for the region<sup>5</sup>, despite some diplomatic coup, for example the Paris peace accords sign in 1991 for Cambodia. This second period was thus marked by the lack of a great aim in the French policy towards Asia. It was an intriguing factor which led some scholars to question this characteristic. As François Godement wrote in 1995, "*why does a Cartesian country marked by the search of a 'great aim' have no clear policy towards Asia-Pacific?*"<sup>6</sup>.

Things started to change in the mid-1990s due to the combination of two factors<sup>7</sup>. First, the evolution of the world, the growing economic and political importance of Asia led thinkers to reconsider the need of new strategies of France for the region. Then, the French presidency was for the first time in the fifth Republic occupied by an Asian enthusiast, Jacques Chirac, sometimes called "Chirac, the Asian"<sup>8</sup>. These two reasons led to the opening of third period in the Asian-French relations and to what some scholars called a "French pivot" towards Asia<sup>9</sup>. The evolution was continued by the successors of Jacques Chirac. However, a reinforcement and an evolution of the tendency can clearly be identified with the arrival of François Hollande to the French presidency in 2012. The number of French official visits in Asia sharply increased<sup>10</sup> and the new French President made many visits in some important countries where no French President has made any visit before (Australia, Philippines)<sup>11</sup>. The new French activism in region was led by the idea of a necessity for France to diversify its partners in the region and to cut its overreliance on China<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> F. Godement, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> M. Vaïsse, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> R. Dumas, B. Badie, G. Minassian, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> F. Godement, 1995, p. 959.

<sup>7</sup> R. Wong, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> M. Vaïsse, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> F. Godement, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> F. Godement, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, May 2015.

This historical overview of the French foreign policy towards Asia has highlighted the erratic nature of this policy and the lack of great aim. This incongruity for a country known for its global ambitions and which often likes to present itself not as an occidental nation but as the eldest of nations seems to have disappeared at the turn of the new millennium. This historical overview is however important to understand the policy of France towards Mongolia and some of its changes.

## **B. An historical approach of the French foreign policy towards Mongolia.**

Only few articles can be identified regarding the question of the relations between France and Mongolia<sup>13</sup>. The literature on the subject is mainly made of administrative papers<sup>14</sup>, parliamentary reports written on the occasion of the visits of French parliament members<sup>15</sup> in Mongolia, and even some video documentaries about the life of a French ambassador in Mongolia<sup>16</sup>. The nature and ambition of those documents do not permit to get a better understanding of the dynamic of the relations between the two countries. Due to this lack of scientific literature, this part is mainly based on the archives of the French ministry of foreign affairs regarding Mongolia. Their consultation showed a clear parallel between the French policy towards the country and the one implemented towards Asia. Here again, three main periods can be identified.

The first period of the relation was initiated by the opening of bilateral relations between Mongolia and France. The decision was taken in 1965 but it needs to be highlighted that it was a highly consensual decision. Since 1961, the Asia-Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs strongly supported the recognition of the country, the establishment of diplomatic relations but also the opening of an embassy in Ulaanbaatar<sup>17</sup>. This position was motivated by three elements: 1) the attitude of Mongolian authorities and their multiple attempts to establish contact with their French counterparts, 2) by the strategic interest of the country in the Sino-Soviet dispute but also 3) by the fact that the elements that could have led France to not recognize the People's Republic of China were considered as irrelevant for Mongolia<sup>18</sup>. This decision was delayed but the reason looks to be more logistical and organizational rather than political, even if some sources later mentioned a potential bargain between France and the USSR over Algeria<sup>19</sup>. The decision was finally taken

<sup>13</sup> A book in Mongolian language has been written on the subject but it was not possible to read it before the writing of this article.

OYUNGEREL, L., 2003, *Монгол, Францын харилцаа: XIII зуунаас эдүгээг хүртэл*, Bembi San.

<sup>14</sup> Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> P. Gélard, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> R. Genaud, M. Sanderson, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1956-1967], folder 10 bis-1.

<sup>18</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1956-1967], folder 10 bis-1.

<sup>19</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1980 – 1986], 2882TOPO, folder 3289.

in 1965 despite the negative feedbacks from the British envoy in Ulaanbaatar. Logistical and practical difficulties quickly reappeared and a first mission was sent in the summer of 1965 to study the conditions for a potential establishment of an Embassy in Ulaanbaatar. In the spring of 1966, S. E. George Perruche, the first ambassador to Mongolia, left France with four objectives which will remained at the center of preoccupation of all French ambassador in Mongolia<sup>20</sup>: 1) to get a better understanding of the country, 2) to the study the position of Mongolia in the Sino-Soviet dispute, 3) to study the possibility regarding the development of economic exchanges and 4) to develop the learning of French language and knowledge of French culture in the country. The establishment of an embassy to Mongolia however led to disappointing results. The relation was polluted by a recurrent subject of preoccupation: the finding of a building or place for the embassy.

This question was never solved and the different French ambassadors had to live and work in a room of the Ulaanbaatar hotel. The financial cost of the post<sup>21</sup>, the incapacity of both parties to find a solution for the location of the embassy, a spy affair regarding the secretary of the embassy approached by the KGB and the accusations of traffics made by Mongolian authorities against the ambassador led to the closing of the embassy in 1984<sup>22</sup>. This decision marked the opening of a new period in French-Mongolian relationship and led to the cooling of the relations between the two countries. Despite French denials, Mongolian authorities remained convinced that this decision was politically motivated. The monitoring of Mongolia was later given to the French ambassador in Soviet Union. The Mongolia's transition towards democracy marked a new element of interest between the two countries. The Mongolian President, P. Ochirbat, made its first visit in France in 1996 and had a productive meeting with the new French President, Jacques Chirac<sup>23</sup>. During their discussions, the decision was taken to reopen a permanent embassy in Ulaanbaatar. The implementation of the decision was delayed by the win of the left in the legislative election of 1997, the new prime minister, Lionel Jospin, being reluctant to this idea<sup>24</sup>. This first meeting has however led to the appointment of a non-resident ambassador based in Paris.

The defeat of the left in 2002 and the reelection of Jacques Chirac with an overwhelming majority allowed him to finally open an Embassy in Ulaanbaatar in 2003, an important step which led to the opening of a new period in the bilateral relations between the two countries<sup>25</sup>. The development of the relations take however sometimes and badly started with an abduct affair. Damiran Bekhbat, a Mongolian citizen looking for asylum in France, was kidnaped by Mongolian secret service in the city of Le Havre in 2003. He was suspected to be involved in the murder of the parliamentary member and democratic revolution hero, S. Zorig, in 1998. France asked and finally get official excuses from the Mongolian authorities but this affair was a source of difficulties for the new French ambassador just appointed in

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<sup>20</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1956-1967], folder 10 bis-1.

<sup>21</sup> The cost of the rooms rented for the embassy represented in 1982 1.5 % of the all rental spending of the ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>22</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1980 – 1986], 2882TOPO, folder 3289.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, December 2014.



Mongolia<sup>26</sup>. On the political side, a disequilibrium can also be mentioned with some important Mongolian visits in France and almost no French visits to Mongolia. The President, N. Enkhbayar visited France in 2007 followed by the Prime minister, S. Bayar, in 2009. In the meantime, the secretary of State for foreign trade, Anne-Marie Idrac, came to Mongolia in 2010 to sign an important agreement on nuclear cooperation between the two countries. Things changed with the election of François Hollande and the Mongolian case confirmed the wish of the new president to diversify its partners in Asia. Since 2012, three important French visits in Mongolia have been organized: the agricultural secretary of state in July 2013, the ministry of Foreign affairs in autumn of the same year and the recent visit of the secretary for foreign trade in December 2014. This increasing political activism went hand in hand with reinforcement of the French embassy in Mongolia. Despite a difficult budgetary situation that has particularly impacted the ministry of Foreign affairs<sup>27</sup>, two new positions have been created at the embassy: an economic attaché and more recently a cultural counselor. Those two appointments confirmed the intensification of French engagement in Mongolia.

This historical perspective allows the drawing of a parallel between the policy of France towards Mongolia and the one towards Asia. Some similarities can be identified that highlight the importance of the context. More importantly, this comparison between the foreign policy of France towards Asia and the one implemented towards Mongolia allows to better understand the decisive elements in the relationship but also permits to draw some hypotheses regarding the making of the French foreign policy towards Mongolia.

### C. The reasons of a new French activism.

This historical evolution of the relation between the two countries and their recent intensification ask the question of the interest of France towards Mongolia and how this new activism has to be explain. Three kinds of interests can be identified.

The first one is political and is an invariant of the French foreign policy towards the country<sup>28</sup>. The geostrategic position of Mongolia makes it a stakeholder in all the crisis and stakes of the region. Three main elements can be mentioned. First, the good relation that the country managed to develop with both Koreas, an unusual characteristic. This aspect is critical because it makes Mongolia an important partner for France on highly sensitive subjects like nuclear proliferation. Also, the North Korean regime looks more and more isolated and consequently this increase the difficulty to get a clear understanding of the functioning of the key elites in the country. Within this framework, Mongolia is considered a valuable source of

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>27</sup> The budget dedicated to foreign action in the budget law of 2015 shows a decrease of 3.5 % compare to the one of 2014.

Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1980 – 1986], 2882TOPO, folder 3289.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, May 2015.

information. The evolution of the relations between Russia and China after the Ukrainian crisis is another element of interest for France. The rapprochement between the two countries and how far it could go remains unanswered. Even if France maintains a clear line of non-interference in the relations established by Mongolia with both of its neighbors<sup>29</sup>, Mongolia is still considered an important place from where one can observe this rapprochement. Lastly, the nature of the Mongolian regime leads French diplomats and decision makers to consider it as a country that shares a lot of important common values with France. This aspect is important for France and acts as a facilitator for the cooperation between both countries in international organizations like the United Nations (UN) or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The second element of interest is more evident and is related to the economy. If France does not appear as one of the biggest trade partners or one of the biggest investors in Mongolia, a lot French companies have started to look for opportunities and contracts, AREVA being the oldest one. This element is another key to understand the new French activism. The quest of “big contracts” is one of the characteristics of the French diplomacy in supporting its national companies to go abroad. The minister of Foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, has identified business as one of his top priorities by popularizing the concept of “economic diplomacy”<sup>30</sup>. The fact that some big contracts seem close to reach maturity (GDF Suez, AREVA) could make Mongolia a success story for this new approach, as the minister likes to emphasize during some of his speeches<sup>31</sup>. To sum up, the economic interest of France for Mongolia is due to the opportunity of the market itself but most especially to the diversity of the cooperation that could be implemented, a cooperation which could go from strategic questions like satellites, uranium and energy to more practical ones like agriculture, tourism and the pharmaceutical industry<sup>32</sup>.

The third major part of the relation between France and Mongolia is related to the defense sector. This cooperation is mainly a consequence of the military policy of Mongolia and of its implication in the peacekeeping operations initiated under the umbrella of the United Nations. France is playing an important role in those operations, in the writing of procedures and resolutions. The cooperation with one important contributor is an obligation and mainly explained the defense ties between the two countries<sup>33</sup>.

Other elements could also be mentioned, for example the fruitful scientific cooperation. For example, a lots of financial resources has been allocated on archeological research after the meeting between President Chirac and President Enkhbayar in 2007. All those elements play a big part in structuring the foreign policy of France towards Mongolia. However, they neither explain how this policy is conceived nor the post-2012 blooming in the relationship between the two countries. To better understand this evolution, it is required to go beyond a simple description of interests to study the roots and the process in the making of this foreign policy.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview, July 2015.

<sup>30</sup> J. L. Carrère, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> R. Dumas, B. Badie, G. Minassian, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, May 2015.



## 2. AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH OF FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS MONGOLIA.

The descriptive approach of the French-Mongolian relationship does not permit to understand the reasons why France foreign policy started to focus more aggressively on Mongolia after 2012. This problem clearly shows the difficulty to explain Foreign policy only through the prism of the realist approach of international relations (A). An institutional approach seems more efficient mainly because it makes the identification of key actors possible. However, it still isn't enough to fully explain this policy (B). This approach is interesting because it asks new questions on the process leading to definition and implementation of a foreign policy. This leads to the formulation of a hypothesis regarding a specificity in the making of foreign policy towards a "small state" (C).

### A. The failure of realism and the necessity of an institutional approach.

The previous part has been mainly descriptive and consequently has failed to explain the blooming in the relations between France and Mongolia. To understand this case, it is necessary to come back to the rich scientific literature written about the foreign policy- making. This field of study is historically rooted in international relations. The amount of studies, the growing questions about the assumptions used by scholars, and the inability to find concrete examples to explain and sometimes foresee countries' diplomatic activities lead to the rapprochement between the study of foreign policy and of public policy.

The close link between International Relations and the study of foreign policy led to the transposition of one of its major schools of thought: realism<sup>34</sup>. This approach is based on three main assumptions<sup>35</sup>: 1) a country's foreign policy is led by the Prince, the Head of state, 2) he is rational and implements a costs-benefits calculus to make a decision and 3) the policy elaborated as one objective: power. Within this framework, a state can be considered a rational actor and it is possible to adopt a structural perspective, as proposed by Kenneth Waltz<sup>36</sup>. Such an approach is still widely used in geopolitics<sup>37</sup> and expert reports even if its limits have already been clearly identified

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<sup>34</sup> D. Battistella, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> K. Waltz, 1979.

<sup>36</sup> K. Waltz, 1979

<sup>37</sup> A. Chauprade, 2007.

by many scholars, the main critics being its over-reductionist tendency and the fact that the Prince is considered as omnipotent and omniscient<sup>38</sup>.

Those limits are confirmed by the French-Mongolian relationship case study. The identification of the interests of France in Mongolia is not sufficient to understand the blooming of relations after 2012 and the different historical phases previously identified. Moreover realism tells nothing of the elaboration of the country's foreign policy and failed to consider the role played by different actors. This critic explains the development of other approaches based on the assumption that foreign policy should not only be analyzed as an output but also as a process where institutions matter<sup>39</sup>. The importance of those different dimensions has been clearly highlighted by the work of Graham Allison on the Cuban missile crisis<sup>40</sup>.

This evolution in the scientific understanding of foreign policy has called into question one of the strongest assumptions of realism: the assumption of a clear cut between domestic and international policy. This has also led to a rapprochement between public policy and the study of Foreign policy, some authors mentioning the necessity to build a public policy analysis of foreign policy<sup>41</sup>. The evolution has some implications to understand the Mongolian case. It shows the necessity to not only identify the interests of France in Mongolia but also to analyze the process leading to the definition and implementation of France's Mongolian policy.

## **B. The French decision-making process towards Mongolia.**

The scientific literature about the French foreign policy towards Asia shows the necessity to take into consideration the institutional organization. This literature identifies three key actors in the definition and implementation of the foreign policy of France towards Asia. Archives and interviews made about French-Mongolian relations confirmed the role and influence of those three actors: the French President, the ministry of Foreign affairs' administration also in charge of foreign trade, and the ambassador of France to Mongolia.

The role of the President is traditionally presented as central in the making of Foreign policy, which remains a "regalian power". Scholars who wrote on the Asian policy of France have clearly highlighted this element<sup>42</sup>. François Godement made of the role of the President one of its two key variables to explain the erratic nature of French policy towards Asia<sup>43</sup>. He basically says that no President until 1995 had a good knowledge of the region and, consequently, that French foreign policy towards the region was deeply affected. This hypothesis was later confirmed by the former French minister of Foreign affairs, Roland Dumas<sup>44</sup>. The Mongolian case also offered

<sup>38</sup> D. Battistella, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> R. Snyder & al., 2002.

<sup>40</sup> G. Allison, P. Zelikow, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> M. C. Kessler, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> M. Vaïsse, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> F. Godement, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> R. Dumas, B. Badie, G. Minassian, 2013.

an illustration of this hypothesis. The decision to reopen an embassy in Mongolia was taken by Jacques Chirac in 1996 after his meeting with his Mongolian counterpart, P. Ochirbat<sup>45</sup>. The decision was later explained by some of the actors involved at time as the result of his personal leaning towards Mongolia. They mentioned in particular a visit he made in Karakorum upon his official visit to Irkutsk in the 1970s<sup>46</sup>. The influence of the President remains however limited because of the amount and diversity of subjects that he has to tackle. His influence can be perceived as sporadic, depending on his personal tendencies as with Jacques Chirac, but also as structuring because he is establishing the general framework within which the French diplomats will have to work. Two examples can be mentioned here to illustrate this fact. First, the lack of interest of François Mitterrand for Asia did not help to preserve the embassy at the beginning of the 1980s<sup>47</sup>. Second, François Hollande's wish to balance the French policy towards Asia and to make it less dependent to China has clearly given more space for the intensification of the French diplomacy in Mongolia<sup>48</sup>.

Within the general framework defined by the President, the ministry of Foreign affairs plays a central role in the implementation of the French foreign policy. His centrality was reinforced by the decision taken by the government in early 2014 to transfer the monitoring of foreign trade from the ministry of economy and finance to the ministry of Foreign affairs<sup>49</sup>. It was an important decision because the elaboration and implementation of the foreign policy was traditionally marked by a competition between the ministry of Foreign affairs and the direction for external economic relations<sup>50</sup> affiliated to Bercy, the ministry of economy and finances. François Godement has highlighted the negative impact of this competition on the elaboration of the general policy towards Asia<sup>51</sup>. The unification of the French external action under the ministry of Foreign affairs has solved, for the moment, this problem and consequently gave more importance to the ministry of Foreign affairs. Regarding the policy of France towards Mongolia, two key actors needs to be mentioned: the minister, Laurent Fabius, who personally gives a lot of importance to the Mongolian case since his visit in October 2013<sup>52</sup> ; and the director for the Asian and Pacific desk who has always played an important role in the implementation and definition of the French foreign policy towards Asia<sup>53</sup>. One example that can be mentioned to highlight his influence is the decision to establish an embassy in Mongolia in 1965. It was backed by the Asian director of those times, Etienne Manac'h, against the opinion of the French envoy and French ambassador in Moscow<sup>54</sup>. His role seems central because he occupied a hinge position within the administrative structure, between Mongolia experts of the ministry (ambassador, country supervisor) and the political decision makers (the cabinet of the Minister and the minister himself). This central role played

<sup>45</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, December 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Decree n° 2014-400, 16/04/2014.

<sup>50</sup> This direction is now known as the treasury direction.

<sup>51</sup> F. Godement, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, July 2014.

<sup>53</sup> M. Vaïsse, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1956-1967], folder 10 bis-1.

by the regional director looks also true for all the ministries and administration which have to deal with Mongolia<sup>55</sup>.

The last key actors in the implementation the French policy towards Mongolia is the ambassador of France to Mongolia. The role of the ambassador is not often highlighted in the scientific literature about the French policy towards Asia. However, the role of an ambassador is even more important in a “small country” like Mongolia than it is in other “big countries”. The role of the ambassadors in the making of the French foreign policy was recently studied by Marie-Christine Kessler<sup>56</sup>. The author has shown the diversity of their role and their increasing importance in the making of French foreign policy. Their role encompasses diverse functions like representation, negotiation, management or information. Their presence in a small country like Mongolia is perhaps more important than anywhere else for two reasons: first of all, they play a key role in framing the understanding of the French state towards the country, being often the only real source of information on the evolution of the country<sup>57</sup> ; second, this monopoly of expertise gives them more freedom in the definition of their objectives and strategy for the country. Because of this situation, the ambassador plays a key role in the elaboration of the French policy towards Mongolia but also in its implementation and the evaluation of its results<sup>58</sup>. The decision of closing the embassy in 1983 offers a clear example of this situation. The disappointed tone<sup>59</sup> used by the new ambassador appointed in 1982, S. E. Philippe Legrain, contrasted with the enthusiasm of his predecessor and probably played an important role in the French decision to close the embassy. Another recent example is the activism deployed by Mongolian-speaking current ambassador in Mongolia, S. E. Yves Delaunay, seems to have played a big role in the decision of the ministry to allocate more human resources to the French embassy in Mongolia<sup>60</sup>. The ambassador consequently plays a central role not only because of the fact that he is in charge of the daily work of the bilateral relation but also because he plays a central role in the framing of the perceptions of decision-makers towards Mongolia. This role is central as a lot of scholars have already insisted on the importance of perceptions and, sometimes, misperceptions in the elaboration of a Foreign policy<sup>61</sup>.

This descriptive approach of the key players involved in the elaboration of the French foreign policy allows to draw some hypotheses regarding the specificities of the French foreign policy towards Mongolia and the consequences of one of its characteristics highlighted at the beginning of this paper, that is the influence of Mongolia’s “small state” status on the implementation of the France’s Mongolian policy.

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<sup>55</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>56</sup> M. C. Kessler, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> This characteristic leads to interesting strategies implemented by the ambassadors regarding the tone used to speak to Paris and information that has to be transmitted or not.

M. C. Kessler, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> M. C. Kessler, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Asked about his action plan for Mongolia in February 1983, S. E. Philippe Legrain answered that *"the only action plan of an ambassador of France in Mongolia is limited because of the circumstances to hibernate, to survive and to look for a new decent building for a definitive installation"*.

Archives of the Asia Oceania direction of the ministry of Foreign affairs [1980 – 1986], 2882TOPO, folder 3289.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, July 2014.

<sup>61</sup> R. Jervis, 1976.

### C. Some specificities in the decision-making process in the French policy towards Mongolia.

The identification of the key actors in the decision-making process allows the identification of some of the specificities of the French policy towards Mongolia. Two main characteristics need to be highlighted: the shortness of the hierarchical line and the lack of preconception of the actors who deal with the subject. This leads to a key question often neglected in the literature about foreign policy<sup>62</sup>: the way the agenda is set and, for the Mongolian case, the reason why Mongolia held a position on the French diplomatic agenda when so many small states hardly appear. All those elements are linked to the fact that Mongolia can be considered as a “small country” and this status has strong implications in the elaboration of the French policy towards Mongolia.

The question of the size of the state and of the influence of this variable on the study of international relations has been a highly debated subject. Contrary to the realist approach that postulates that small states have no real Foreign policy and no other option than bandwagoning with the dominant power of the area, a lot of scholars now insist on the specificities and ingenuity of the diplomacy implemented by small states<sup>63</sup>. The definition used by those authors is changeable, some referring to concrete elements<sup>64</sup> (GDP size, population etc.) when others prefer to define a small state as one which face difficulties to influence its external environment<sup>65</sup>. Most of them however agree on the difficulty to find a good and relevant definition because of the relativity of the concept<sup>66</sup>. Those definitions are not really relevant to understand the case of French diplomacy towards Mongolia because no article, as far as we know, has focused on the hypothesis of a possible specificity in the making of Foreign policy towards “small state”. To tackle and justify this theoretical approach of the problem, two specificities can be identified from the previous description of the key actors in the French decision making process towards Mongolia.

The first specificity can be drawn from the description of the role of the ambassador in the bilateral relationship. It has been mentioned that the role of the ambassador is perhaps more important in small countries than in big countries because he plays a central role in the framing of decision-makers’ perceptions towards his residential country. This aspect is due to the fact that usually, the only source of information concerning Mongolia, or in a broader sense, a small country, originated from the embassy. Most of the directors, decision makers, or advisors, have rarely heard about Mongolia anywhere else than in the diplomatic notes produced by the embassy. As mentioned before, a lot of scholars have shown the importance of perceptions and misperceptions to understand the international relations and foreign policy<sup>67</sup>. Robert Jervis based his theoretical conception on the observation that “*people’s beliefs are*

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<sup>62</sup> M. C. Kessler, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> C. Lechervy, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> B. Tonra, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> D. Vital, 1971.

<sup>66</sup> B. Tonra, 2002.

<sup>67</sup> R. Jervis, 1976.

*determined more by their general worldviews, predispositions and ideologies than they are by the sort of specific evidence that can be pieced together by intelligence*”<sup>68</sup>. The beliefs, predispositions and ideologies are less relevant in the Mongolian case. One diplomat mentioned during an interview that everybody in the ministry has a personal idea and opinion about China, which is not the case about Mongolia or other small countries<sup>69</sup>.

This lack of preconception leads to the second specificity of the decision-making process towards Mongolia: the length of the hierarchical line regarding Mongolia in the Ministry of Foreign affairs<sup>70</sup>. If everybody has an opinion about China, everybody would like to share his own inputs in the decision-making process or in the validation process of documents regarding China. It is not the case for Mongolia and the relation between administrative actors, if they are more sporadic, are also less formal and more direct. This situation leans towards more interpersonal contacts and a more reactive decision-making process. Therefore, the difference is perhaps not a difference of nature in the decision-making process but rather a difference of implication of the different actors. Within this framework, personal affinities can play an important role in the acceleration of the decision-making process and in the shortening of the hierarchical line<sup>71</sup>.

The other side of the coin is the difficulty for the actor to get an access to key decision-makers who are usually not really aware of Mongolia. The example of the director for Asia and Pacific is an indicator of this difficulty. As director of Asia, the place of China in his daily work is quite important (70 % of his time according to some sources)<sup>72</sup>. This aspect only left little space for the other countries of the region, including important ones like Japan or South Korea. Because of that, only a few countries appear regularly in the folder passed to decision-makers but it seems that Mongolia is one of them<sup>73</sup>. This characteristic asks a question that is well-known in the study of public policy but less in the study of foreign policy: the question of competition between problems for political attention and how some of them can succeed to be put at the top of the agenda. If a lot of works have been done on this topic for public policy, only a few have taken this problem into consideration in the analysis of foreign policy<sup>74</sup>.

To better understand this aspect, it is necessary to broaden the scope of the approach and to abandon a reductionist vision where the state and its actors would be the only relevant actors to study in order to understand foreign policy. To understand why Mongolia managed to become one of the important topic on the French diplomatic agenda, it is necessary to consider the involvement of other actors and to link their attitude and actions to the characteristic of the decision-making process previously identified.

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<sup>68</sup> R. Jervis, 2010, p. 171.

<sup>69</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>74</sup> M. C. Kessler, 1999.



### 3. AGENDA-SETTING AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE MAKING OF FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS MONGOLIA.

The understanding of the making of French foreign policy towards Mongolia cannot be limited to the analysis of its interests towards the country or to the organizational structure of the diplomatic apparatus. The agenda-setting problem needs to be solved to understand the interest of France towards Mongolia and to see if it only shows an episodic interest or a more durable engagement. Few works have already been done on this problem in foreign policy analysis and works made in public policy field are not relevant to really understand this problem (A). However, two main elements can be mentioned to explain why Mongolia appeared in the French diplomatic agenda last years. The first one is due to the fact that Mongolia is a non-neutral actor on a lot of sensitive subjects (B). The second one leads to consider the role of non-state actors who play a big role in enhancing the position of Mongolia on the French diplomatic agenda (C).

#### A. Agenda setting in Foreign policy analysis.

The agenda-setting question has been mainly analyzed through the prism of public policy analysis. Consequently, this field is mostly focused on the domestic sphere and on how some social movements can managed to impose a problem on the political agenda. All those approaches are concentrated on micro-policy and not macro-policy. To sum up, they focused on how a problem appears at the top of the political agenda. This is a weakness in the operationalization of those approaches for the Mongolian case but it needs to be put into perspective with the decision-making process which seems to be dominated by “crisis-management” approach.

One of the best-known approach was developed by Roger Cobb and Charles Elder at the beginning of the 1970s<sup>75</sup>. They made the distinction between two kinds of agendas: a systematic agenda and an institutional one. The first refers to the ability of some groups to transform a problem into a political one and to catch public, and so, political attention. The second is defined by the author as the “*set of items explicitly up for active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers*”<sup>76</sup>. Few applications of the concept have been made in the analysis of foreign policy<sup>77</sup> despite the necessity underlined by some researcher to make more research on those specific

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<sup>75</sup> R. Cobb, C. Elder, 1971.

<sup>76</sup> R. Cobb, C. Elder, 1971, p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> D. Wood, J. Peak, March 1998.

topics<sup>78</sup>. One of the difficulties is linked to one of its core characteristics, the fact that he is fundamentally associated to the identification of a problem by decision-makers. The six conditions identified by Roger Cobb and Charles Elder are an indicator of this tendency<sup>79</sup>. This makes the approach really relevant to understand how a state can tackle some specific problems but makes things harder in the analysis of a macro-policy like foreign policy. However, this theoretical difficulties needs to be put into perspective with the nature of decision-making in the French diplomatic apparatus.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand what kind of elements allow Mongolia to appear on the French diplomatic agenda. The explanation of a special activism of the ambassador cannot be the only explanatory variable. Marie-Christine Kessler has shown in her book on diplomats the importance of those actors in framing Paris' attention towards their residential country<sup>80</sup>. She has identified some strategies used by the ambassadors depending on the context of their residential country. The filter on the information that goes to Paris is one of most common strategies but is used by the ambassadors to protect their capacity to act and to maintain a certain level of interest towards their country. This strategy seems particularly relevant for Mongolia<sup>81</sup> for two reasons: first because the embassy is often the only channel of information regarding the country and secondly because of the democratic exception of Mongolia and common values that France share with Mongolia. The fact that Mongolian diplomats are mainly considered friendly, a recurrent element in the archives of the French ministry or in the interviews made for this paper<sup>82</sup>, tends to reinforce this characteristic.

However, it is not enough to explain the special attention of France towards Mongolia. First, this kind of strategy can be implemented by other embassies in the region and the competition to get credits and political attention seems harsh. Secondly, because of the nature of the agenda-setting process which is being described by actors involved as based on crisis or problem solving model<sup>83</sup>. This characteristic finds resonance with weaknesses of agenda-setting theories previously identified. The multiplication of 'problems' or events that need to be solved are important elements to explain why Mongolia appears regularly on the French diplomatic agenda. This is particularly true for small countries. A director for Asian affairs will hear about China almost every day. However, he will probably hear about Mongolia only when specific problems emerge in the relationship between the two countries.

This aspect confirms the challenge that exists for a 'small country' to get an access to the agenda. Within this framework, two elements can play an important role in promoting Mongolia on the diplomatic agenda of France: a crisis or event and the lobbying action implemented by other actors involved in the bilateral relationship.

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<sup>78</sup> M. C. Kessler, 1999.

<sup>79</sup> R. Cobb, C. Elder, 1971.

<sup>80</sup> M. C. Kessler, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, July 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Interviews, July 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Interview, May 2015.

## B. The sensitivity of the position of Mongolia.

The first elements that have to be mentioned to explain these Mongolian specificities in the French diplomacy is the geostrategic place of the country and its foreign policy's specificities.

Mongolia is a stakeholder in a lot of sensitive questions. The North Korean situation has already been mentioned. It seems as a strategic niche that does not make Mongolia a key stakeholder but still an important one. The peninsula being often subjected to tensions, each crisis has an impact on French diplomacy because of its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. Each time that a new crisis happened, the name of Mongolia tends to appear in the decision-making process of key decision-makers. Within this framework, Mongolia is not considered a neutral stakeholder, but an actor which can potentially play a role in a moment of crisis, regarding information or even for potential actions<sup>84</sup>. The international crisis in Ukraine is another example. The rapprochement between Russia and China should even reinforce the importance of Mongolia as a stakeholder in the evolution of the geopolitical game in the region<sup>85</sup>. Another element is the engagement of Mongolia in the UN peacekeeping missions. Mongolia is recognized as an important contributor and France, because of its role, needs to maintain a good contact with Mongolia on the defense side. This aspect is not a guarantee that the name of Mongolia will appear on the agenda of key decision-makers but allows a continual interoperation between the two administrative structures because it involves the ministry of defense but also, usually, the ministry of foreign Affairs.

The next element that plays a major part in the positioning of Mongolia on the French diplomatic agenda is the large number of official visits that have been exchanged since the middle of the 1990s and more especially since 2012. Those visits are central for the interconnection of the two administrative structures. They also play an important role in the definition of the French strategy towards Mongolia. On the occasion of those visits, ministers or directors who come to France or who go to Mongolia will prepare their meetings and ask for some information and notes to the administrative structure. Consequently, each time that an official visit is scheduled, the administrative apparatus has to produce notes and reports for the decision-makers<sup>86</sup>. The redaction of those notes and official documents offers an occasion to engage the administrative structure over Mongolia and consequently puts Mongolia at the center of attention for a few days before the visit, from the lowest level to the upper level of the decision-making structure. This aspect is true for the ministry of Foreign affairs but also for all the administrative structures concerned by the official visit.

Those visits play also a specific role in definition and elaboration of the strategic policy of France towards Mongolia. It has been previously mentioned that the decision-making structure is based on a "crisis management" model. This characteristic is a clear difficulty to implement a strategic policy towards a region or a

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<sup>84</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, May 2015.

country. One characteristic of strategy needs here to be underlined: strategy does not exist by itself, a strategy is efficient only when it manages to put some coherence in the way of dealing with a large number of tactical moments<sup>87</sup>. This characteristic finds some resonance in the French strategy towards Mongolia. If official visits are considered tactical moments within the broader strategy of France towards the country, they are also moments when the strategy, the goals, and interests of French foreign policy towards Mongolia are identified and operationalized<sup>88</sup>. On the occasion of official visits, the administrative structure has to produce synthesis on the evolution of the bilateral relationship, evaluation of the measures already implemented, strategy pursued and talking points for decision makers. Therefore, those moments are important because they put Mongolia on the French agenda but also and mainly because they are many occasions to identify, define, and implement the strategy of France for Mongolia and lead to the activation of the whole hierarchical line, from the lowest to the highest level.

The definition of a strategy, as it has been previously defined, mainly rests on the input given by the ambassador. The usual lack of preconceptions regarding the country in the hierarchical line gives him a lot of latitude to influence the strategy of France towards Mongolia. If those inputs are important, it is also necessary to take into consideration the inputs of other actors who also play a key role in the framing of the Mongolian subject for French decision makers but also in putting Mongolia on the French diplomatic agenda.

### **C. The importance of non-state actors.**

The key variable does not seem to be directly linked with the strategic preoccupations of France towards Mongolia. On the contrary, it is needed to widen the approach and to consider non-state actors, mainly French companies which can be identified as an important variable in the position occupied by Mongolia on the agenda of the French diplomacy. Three main elements have to be mentioned to explain the key role played by companies in the agenda setting of the French foreign policy: (i) economic diplomacy, (ii) important contracts have reached maturity and (iii) the lobbying activities implemented by those companies towards the French bureaucratic apparatus and key decision-makers.

It has been previously mentioned that the minister of Foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, has framed a new concept after his arrival at the head of the ministry: “economic diplomacy”. He wants to make the ministry of Foreign affairs the ministry of peace of security but also of companies<sup>89</sup>. Within this framework, Mongolia quickly became an example of the success generated by this new approach, a success personified by the first visit of a French ministry of Foreign affairs to Mongolia in October 2013. However, the economic diplomacy implemented by the French

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<sup>87</sup> H. Minzberg, 1999.

<sup>88</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>89</sup> Les Echos, 23/08/2012.

administration is often presented as a tool to help French companies abroad, this concept hasn't been seen as a one-sided approach. Two main elements can be identified: the involvement of the French state to support its domestic companies abroad but also the strategy developed by those French companies towards the state.

French companies which have invested in Mongolia or plan to do so are located on strategic sector for the French industry. In the meanwhile, the French ministry of Foreign affairs seems to be eager to look for big contracts. The announcement of good news about big contracts, is often considered a symbol of the success of the strategy implemented by the minister, thus a mean to reinforce his political credit, but also a necessity regarding public opinion demands<sup>90</sup>. The hasty announcement made by the former President, Nicolas Sarkozy, regarding the signature of an important contract with Brazil for the first export of the French fighter plane, the Rafale, clearly demonstrated the political pressure of public opinion regarding those contracts. Within this framework, the diplomatic apparatus is looking for the announcement of "good news" and the fact that some important contracts have reached maturity in Mongolia can be a part of the explanation of the new French activism towards Mongolia and of the high position of Mongolia on France's diplomatic agenda.

However, if a large number of projects developed in Mongolia by France have reached maturity, the question of the influence of those state visits remain difficult to measure even if it can be considered that those visits are an accelerator for these projects. The influence of French companies should also be considered from the role they played in influencing the agenda setting of the French diplomacy. Those companies are usually well-structured and managed to have good relations with the French state. Those good relations are based on the industrial activities of those companies in France but most assuredly on the large number of collaboration that those companies have already deployed on other markets. Those companies consequently enjoyed a direct connection with key decision-makers which allow them to promote Mongolia into the French administrative structure through the prism of their projects in the country. The role of those companies should not be neglected because it often comes hand in hand with business introducers and other actors who also have personal connections with key decision-makers and who own a strong ability to influence the agenda-setting process through their own personal networks<sup>91</sup>.

This example clearly shows the necessity to go beyond a realist or a bureaucratic approach to focus more on the role of non-state actors in the agenda-setting process, a key element to understand French policy towards Mongolia. The French policy towards Mongolia cannot be only understood through the sole prism of the state but has also to consider other actors, not directly related to the state, but which played an important role in the agenda-setting process of the French diplomacy.

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<sup>90</sup> Interview, May 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Interview, May 2015.

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This short study has highlighted the need to go beyond traditional approaches to understand French policy towards Mongolia. The traditional realist approach based on the sole identification of interests and rationality of the state does not allow to get a proper understanding. On the contrary, this paper has tried to show the relevance of an institutional approach which allows the opening of the ‘black box’ postulated by realist scholars. However, the institutional approach cannot be self-sufficient because it does not take into consideration the relative importance of different actors and the crucial question of the agenda-setting process. The question seems central to understand the French foreign policy towards Mongolia and more generally towards a small state.

Within this approach, the influence of official visits and non-state actors, companies here, appears to play a key role in the agenda-setting process and how a small country like Mongolia has become one of the priorities of the French foreign policy. Here again, this conclusion goes against the assumption of realist thinkers who mainly consider that the only relevant actor to consider in the study of foreign policy is the state.

Regarding the question asked at the beginning of this paper on the specificity of small state in French diplomacy, the question of the agenda appears to be central in the making of a Foreign policy towards a “small state”. This paper has also highlighted a specificity in the decision making process with a hierarchical line which appears to be shorter. All those characteristics have an influence on the attitude and influence of the actors involved, states and non-state actors.

Another element needs to be mentioned: the fear that small countries often feel towards the risk of the instability and erratic nature of the foreign policy implemented by big powers with regards to their own security. The erratic nature of the foreign policy implemented by France since 1965 seems to confirm that this fear is not groundless. Consequently, the durability of the new French activism towards Mongolia can legitimately be questioned. Three elements however argue in favor of the hypothesis of a durable involvement of France in Mongolia. First of all, the geostrategic position of the country is a guarantee of its importance for any nation with global ambition. Second, there is a strong friendly feeling towards Mongolia which is noticeable with almost all the actors met during this research, those who are working or those who have worked on Mongolia, but also in the telegrams and notes that can be found in the archives of the ministry. This aspect can be explained by the personal relations that those actors have developed but is also due to the feeling of a shared values and shared vision of the world. The democratic nature of Mongolia seems here to play a big role and act in contrast with the rest of the region. A lot of actors mentioned their personal pleasure when they have to work on Mongolia, to visit the country or to receive Mongolian counterparts. It is difficult to know if this aspect is linked to common values, to a sort of new orientalism, or more simply to the friendliness of their



Mongolian counterparts. However, this aspect and what could be call a “friendly French community” towards Mongolia seems to play an important role even if the influence of such kind of characteristic is difficult to measure. The third aspect is the durable presence of important French companies in the country. Those companies are known to play an important role in France and manage to have close relations with the state and the diplomatic apparatus in particular. The influence of the non-state actors previously identified shows that this characteristic also argues in favor of the hypothesis of a durable French engagement towards Mongolia.

Regarding Mongolia itself, the conclusions of this research seem to confirm the conclusion of scholars who have worked on the security strategy of “small states”. Most of the approaches agree with the hypothesis elaborated by Maria Papadakis and Harvey Starr who say that the security strategy and foreign policy of small states are not dependent on their attributes but more on the relations that those small states managed to have developed with others<sup>92</sup>. The diplomacy of France towards Mongolia clearly shows the importance of those relations, which go through various intermediaries, but are central in the positioning of Mongolia in the agenda-setting process of the French diplomacy.

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<sup>92</sup> M. Papadakis, H. Starr, 1987.

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