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MONGOLIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction:

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Moderator:

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Featured Speaker:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. TALBOTT: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Strobe Talbott, and it's my great honor and pleasure to welcome you all here this afternoon for another in our series of events that we call A Statesman's Forum. This is a tradition at Brookings that is co-sponsored by two of our research programs here: the Foreign Policy Program and the Global Economy and Development Program. And this particular event today could not have taken place without the indispensable help of our Center for Northeast Asia Policy Studies.

Our guest of honor, as all of you know, is President Elbegdorj of Mongolia. And he is here with an extraordinarily distinguished and wide-ranging in its competence delegation of officials, including the Mongolian ambassador here in Washington. And we're also very pleased to have with us the ambassador of the United States of America, Tualon Batur; Jonathan Addleton, who I first met when he was already a very accomplished Foreign Service officer and I was a newcomer to diplomacy in 1993, when I made a number of trips to Central Asia. Jonathan, it's wonderful to see you again.

We are particularly honored and grateful to the President for being with us this afternoon, given his very tight schedule. He has an appointment immediately after this meeting in the Oval Office with the President of the United States, so that makes us all the more pleased that he would find a little bit of time for us.

President Elbegdorj is a paragon of the change, the transformation that has taken place in his region of the world. He knows not only his own region very well, but he knows our country as well. And in fact, his biography reflects a knowledge of a world and a period that we have left behind. His education, for example, includes a Bachelor of Arts degree from a university in a country that no longer exists, the Union of

Soviet Social Republics. Those of you with a historical memory will recall that there was once such a country. And in addition to that, he has a master's of public administration from the John F. Kennedy School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He is, of course, the democratically elected leader of a country which has an extraordinarily rich and important history, an ancient land, and indeed, an ancient empire. And it's worth recalling that the empire that was Mongolia for a very long time was not only territorially the largest in the history of the planet, it was also an early example of globalization.

It's not so well known that in the 13th century, Karakorum, which was the capital of that empire, was one of the most cosmopolitan, diversified, and tolerant cities anywhere on Earth. The 20th century was not so kind to Mongolia. For a long time, when people thought about Mongolia, which they did not do enough, they thought of it as a smaller country wedged in-between two giant countries: the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. But now, for quite a number of years, Mongolia has been coming into its own in the modern world.

And it is playing a role on the world stage. Not least, an example of that is that in two weeks Mongolia will assume the chair of the Community of Democracies, a very important initiative that goes back a number of years. And one of the driving forces in the creation of the Community of Democracies was Mort Halperin, a veteran and an alumnus of this institution who is here with us today.

In his short time with us, the President is going to speak to us on Mongolia's role in Asia, in the world, and in the 21st century. He's going to talk for about 20 minutes or so, and then he has been kind enough to set aside a little bit of time for an interchange with all of you that will be moderated by my friend and colleague, Richard

Bush, who is the director of our Center for Northeast Asia Policy Studies.

Mr. President, the microphone is yours. And you have all of our gratitude for being with us today. Please join me in welcoming. (Applause)

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: Strobe, thank you for that introduction. It is much appreciated. Thank you for making me feel so welcome and your interest in Mongolia. Needless to say, a subject very near and very dear to my heart.

You know, Mongolia was one time -- as Strobe mentioned that we built the biggest land empire that ever existed in the world. That empire actually ruled under written law called Great Yassa. It means Great Government. And had a tolerance to religion, had a tolerance to culture, had a tolerance to traditions to other nations.

During that time as a world empire, Mongolia had a responsibility for the rest of the state of the world. And Mongolia developed a great network, and we established for the first time in human history one of the biggest networks of the messenger system, like the Pony Express -- like Pony Express messenger system in the West. Actually, that system existed for 800 years. That ran from Mongolian capital Karkoram to Beijing. I think horsemen can deliver those messages from Karkoram to Beijing within seven days.

Also, you know, let Genghis Kahn and Kublai Kahn, you know those names. And during that time, Mongolia actually invented many new orders, new orders related with the state. Of course, the foreign policy was very important. During that time, we had relations with many places in Europe, in other parts of the world, also good relations.

People think that in the West, Mongolians were ruthless, Mongolians were waging wars. I think they never waged -- never began wars without any reason.

First, they all would send their messengers to their countries and to have greater relations. Of course, they asked some tax to pay. (Laughter) Yeah.

And you know, Russia paid 300 years. We controlled the Middle East, the whole India, and for two centuries. And I think during that time, also "ambassador," some experts say that originated from the Mongolian word. *Amban said* we call it. In Mongolian we call it *amban said*. It sounds in English, ambassador. And during that time, actually our messengers, our ambassadors carried with them a big seal, calling and rooting -- and copper seals. And Mongolia had a responsibility to protect the wellbeing and tranquility during that time.

You know, the famous Silk Road? Genghis Kahn made the decision to protect all those lines related to the Silk Road, and interactions between nations. And that was our policy; that was our foreign policy during Genghis Kahn. And after that, our empire actually declined and it ended in 1700.

But one thing is very concerning, I think. It's very interesting, when our empire declined, in North America, Americans actually declared independence. And you actually heralded our heritage as a big empire. And today, we know that America has a business with the rest of the world and you have to take care of that. I think if you are strong, if you would like to be, of course, a good nation and a responsible nation, I think also there is additional burden to take care of others.

I usually say that some countries can export good wines and good cars. America's beauty, actually, exports value, freedom. The best gift that America offers humanity, that's the freedom.

I believe in the power of freedom. I think uniqueness of that power is creation. When people are free, they tend to be creative. They tend to be thoughtful

because of that peace, because of that prosperity, because of that freedom ultimately leads to the peace and the prosperity.

Twenty-two years ago in 1989, December, we actually began -- I was, yeah, with my friends. We decided to organize first demonstration on a cold December day in Mongolia. And we demanded those things during that time, which was prohibited by our constitution: multi-party system, democratic elections, right to vote, right to chose, a right to worship, a right to speak, a right to assembly, freedom of press. And within six months, actually, we achieved that.

During that time, Soviet Union was intact. And between the Republic -- the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union is small Mongolia. Making that choice, making that transition was quite challenging. But we did it without a single bloodshed, without shattering a single window.

Many people wonder how did you do that? I think we had in our hands only demands on everything in the paper. And we asked our ruling people, the ruling party, to sit down, talk, and to negotiate. And actually, we gave them space. We didn't use any violence. We knew that if we get in our hands a stone, they will get in their hands AK guns. If we take gun, they will take tanks against us. Because of that, we didn't use any violence. And we gave -- we are for the choice, for the multi-party system, for the democracy, for the freedom. Let's sit together, let's go together to the elections. You have a 70-year history -- we are talking to our ruling party -- you will win, and they won in 1990 in the election in June. Since then, we had in Mongolia five times parliamentary election, five times presidential election, five times local elections.

Today, Mongolia is becoming a regional beacon for the democratic developments. Just recently, three months ago, I received a delegation from Kyrgyzstan.

They came to study our transition and our parliamentary type of government. They were very curious. I think if there is a stable, peaceful Kyrgyzstan, that will shed light to the "-stan" countries and to Afghanistan.

Also, we have a unique relation with North Korea. We have our embassy there, we have governmental line to connect, and every year meetings, and now we are developing an exchange program. And when they come to Mongolia, they see that there is a different way of living, a different way of governance.

Because of that, I think our two countries' bond is becoming very, very unique. I think with the power of freedom, actually we talk almost equally at the equal level, at the same level with other countries even though we have only 2.8 million people in Mongolia. But that power of freedom makes Mongolia big and makes a big example.

And we would like to be -- and also one thing is very important. We, together with the United States, with the other coalition partners, we are protecting -- we are participating in protection, peace, and freedom throughout the world. More than 1,000 men and women in uniform are serving in Iraq. And I brought some representatives from those people who served in Iraq, two servicemen actually here in Washington, D.C., with me. They were on duty in Afghanistan -- in Iraq when a car full of explosives attacked their coalition compound. They fired on time and they destroyed it, and they saved thousands of lives.

And my first stop was at Arlington Cemetery. I served in the Mongolian Army. I studied in the Soviet Union in a military academy, and I know how important service is. I am one of the sons of eight sons of my family. I have seven brothers. I was born in (inaudible) and all my brothers served in the army. My father served in the army. And you know, my nation has a great respect for the service.

After that, I visited the Walter Reed Hospital to greet, to encourage wounded warriors, wounded soldiers there. It was quite touching. Yeah, I talked to my children, I am going to visit the United States of America. I will visit the Walter Reed Hospital where they get treatments, those wounded soldiers. My children actually made drawings, and they wrote that, you know, get well and best wishes. Those are the common things. I think fight for freedom is common.

I think from the burst, everyone in every heart, actually God has planted the desire to live free. The desire to live in dignity. And sometimes, tyranny can make them crushed, but it will rise again.

In the coming months, Mongolia is going to be sharing that community of democracy. Twenty years we had a North Korea-like political system. Today, we are going to share the democracy. After this meeting, I am going to meet one of the powerful free nations' leaders, great leader, President Barack Obama. I think it actually is a tribute to our freedoms and democracy that our nations are cherished.

And during this visit, now we are actually reaching, expanding our relations. Today we signed a deal with Boeing, and General Electric is going to invest in Mongolia. Peabody is going to invest into Mongolia. Mongolia is now one of the 10 richest countries in the world by mineral wealth. That's a great opportunity, but causes some challenges.

We know that if there is a lot of money -- if there is bad governance, the country is in trouble. Because of that, I launched a very ambitious plan to make my country more transparent, more open, and fight the red tape and corruption in bureaucracy. I think we will succeed with that.

I served in my country two times as prime minister. My first priority

during that time was -- every time -- was cleaning the government and making the service real for the people. Government is -- government, I think -- because of the government, government is there because of our people. We have only duty to serve them, but not to make their lives difficult. Because of that, I fought against corruption, and two times our parliament actually ousted me out of office as prime minister. And I told to my people, saying that if you support me now, if you choose me as your president, yeah, you will be behind me and I will make my country more prosperous, more clean, more open, more transparent, a good place to live, a good place to make business.

And regarding the foreign policy, we have multi-approach -- multiple. You know, Mongolia is a peaceful place. We have a peaceful foreign policy. And I feel that Mongolia is like -- you know, we have a neighborhood, big neighborhood, some call it a tough neighborhood, you know, but we existed next to each other for centuries, and we know how to deal, get along with the People's Republic of China, with the Russian Federation. Just 10 days ago, I was in Russia and I met Medvedev and Putin. We had a very extensive talk about our relations. Our prime minister is now visiting the People's Republic of China.

I think one thing is quite attractive being between China and Russia. I think we share longest border, fastest-growing economy in the world. Some people, some nations have some kind of caution and some fear from growing China. But I think we will benefit from that, Mongolia. Because of that wealth, because of that need in Chinese market, I think we will improve our status. We have no big issues between our two countries, not issues that are unthinkable to solve. I think we -- because of that, we will maintain very good relations with our neighbors.

But there is one great connection with the other world, that's the value

connection. We have that connection. And because of that, I usually say that if there is more third-party investment into Mongolia, there will be more opportunity to do business with Mongolia; also Russia, also for the China.

You know, there are few countries have two neighbors. Mongolia has two neighbors, the United States of America has two neighbors. And also, few countries have a third neighbor policy, and my country has a third neighbor policy. When Secretary of State Jim Baker visit first time in 1990 Mongolia, he used that expression. The United States of America wants to be your third neighbor, and we liked that expression. And now we use that like our -- one of the main priorities of the foreign policy. And we regard the United States of America our first third neighbor, and we would like to improve that relationship.

I really don't know what's happening with my time, and I would like to leave the rest of the time for your questions. And I am very happy to interact with you here. And thank you.

I didn't read those big pages and sorry for that. (Laughter and applause)

MR. BUSH: Is the mic on? I think it is. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for those insightful and moving remarks. The floor is now open for your questions. Once I call on you, would you please wait for the mic and then identify yourself so that the President knows who is speaking to him. I see a gentleman back in the back.

SPEAKER: President Elbegdorj, it's a wonderful opportunity. I was actually one of the first Peace Corps volunteers in the early-'90s. I now work with a coalbed methane project development company.

One of my questions goes back to -- started in the early '90s and it

probably extends today, is the challenges of working with China. I'd like to get your thoughts in terms of Mongolia's policy and the realities of China and the amazing amount of capital that's flowing into Mongolia from China, and how you manage the sorts of concerns over the natural resource curse that could result with Chinese investment.

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: You know, when you mentioned Peace Corps, actually Mongolia has the largest contingent of Peace Corps per GDP. We have now 500 -- more than 500 Peace Corps volunteers serving today in Mongolia. I think that's great.

And your question related with China, and we today maintain a good, neighborly relations with China. And because I think the rise of China and Chinese economic need our wealth in Mongolia, our natural wealth actually attracting a good number of investments from many countries. And maybe 10 years ago it was very hard to meet someone who might be interested in investing in Mongolia. Today, it's very hard to make my schedule, you know, to meet those people who are interested to invest in Mongolia. That's, I think, a very good thing.

The other thing, yeah, I think the world is expecting seeing that China will be a responsible power. And also, next year I think there is going to be change in leadership. And I think China has a great tradition -- 1,000 years of tradition of management of the statehood. I think in China everything will be smooth, and I think Chinese rights and those steps responsible -- steps will make our world, our globe make more -- yeah. Good place, better place to live and work and to make a business. Yeah.

MR. BUSH: Okay, thank you. I hope that future questioners will follow the model of the first one, to keep your questions brief.

David Caprara, who is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings

Institution.

MR. CAPRARA: Mr. President, thank you for your comment about Peace Corps. When President Obama was campaigning, he called for Americans serving side-by-side with people from other nations. And Brookings has been working with Clinton and Bush officials and Obama officials on the idea of regionalized or multilateral Peace Corps. What would your thoughts be?

I know you're a big proponent of peace and security in Northeast Asia, of seeing young people from these various nations -- China, Russia, North and South Korea -- eventually work with our Peace Corps, work with your -- I know you have a great civil society program with Ms. Sormo, we've been advising. And whether it's Green Asia or that effort of Communities of Democracy, could this play a role?

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: I think we always encourage people to come to Mongolia and to have exchange programs between our institutions, NGOs, and universities and companies. And I think Mongolia is the place if you would like to see -- get real lifetime experience of transition, real lifetime experience how to run democratic governance, how to live freely, I think come to Mongolia.

If you like a cold place, come to Mongolia. (Laughter) If you like warm places, come to Mongolia. We have four sharp seasonal climates there. If you like hospitality, come to Mongolia. If you like to see exotic culture and if you like to ride horses, come to Mongolia. You know, there are many things to offer.

And today we signed with Boeing. We will purchase three new Boeings and there will be more opportunities to fly to Mongolia. And really, we would like to see you in our countries. And Mongolians say that we -- one day we meet and we can be a thousand days friends. Because of that, I think in terms of the modern nation, in terms of

the history, I think my country, my nation is very much -- will be a very attractive place. Mongolia was one of the biggest exporters of history, I think, in the human civilization.

Today, it still is an interesting spot to go to see, and to enjoy. Yeah.

Thank you.

MR. BUSH: Okay. The gentleman in the gray suit.

MR. RU: My name is Tung Tsi Ru. I'm a retired American foreign service officer from USAID. And I'm very pleased to hear the President. You have spoken up to the body of America, the beauty of America: explore the freedom, democracy, and (inaudible). And I hope Mongolia is also, too.

My question to you is, today I read a very good *Washington Post*, you know. I quote, the Ambassador Addleton sometimes say, you know, American economic assistance to Mongolia is higher -- it has been very highly effective, not for another, but he said that if or when Mongolia moves from economic assistance relations with the United States to commercial relationship.

My question to you is, how do you see in the future what the potential of the commercial relationship with America?

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: You know, since 1990 our GDP actually tripled. And 21 years ago, 98 percent of our GDP actually produced by state. Now, more than 80 percent, actually, produced by the private corporations.

I think in the coming 10 years, Mongolian economy will grow -- average. Experts say the growth will average 10 percent. I think when there is a prosperous place, I regard my country -- my country can be a hub, a financial hub. My country can be infrastructural hub. My country can be an air hub. My country can be a technology hub.

You know, we have a unique lifestyle. I am the son of a herdsman. I

know that -- I encourage to continue our nomadic style of living. That's very friendly, very friendly and very eco-friendly, environmentally friendly. When we move, we use camels. We don't use the cars. If we use the cars in our fragile Gobi, you know, those lands will be hurt. When you use the camel, the camel never hurts the land. And when we go to take the water, we usually wash everything. When we go from one place to another place, we clean every hour, you know. It's a very, very interesting lifestyle.

Because of that, I think also quite independent. Mongolian nomads can live with their herds for months without interacting with anyone, you know. From the milk taken, produce more than 20 types or products. And from the -- everything, they can make very good products. And I think with America, economic relations is very important. And I see today big corporations of America are interested to invest in Mongolia.

Behind that, I think that's an advantage. American corporations tend to be -- have great corporate responsibility. Also tend to have high technology, good management, and we hope that those will bring into our country corporate culture -- new. I think that will raise our requirements to other investors. That will help to raise Mongolia in a speedy manner.

I really have a great hope for our economic and our trade cooperation between our two countries.

MR. BUSH: Thank you. The woman in the lime-colored suit, and then Ambassador Lee, and then I'll come back to you.

MS. GATI: Thank you, Toby Gati, Akin Gump.

Mr. President, you have given a speech that's very attractive in its themes for Americans, but you're surrounded by countries that have chosen very different paths. I have a general question. If you were to give the same speech in China

or Russia, what do you think the reaction would be? That's my first question.

My second is more specific. Your debt was forgiven by Russia, but the Chinese have decided to give an awful lot of -- make an awful lot of investment. On a practical level, how do you decide, for example -- since you're going to have to make one of them unhappy, which railroad gage to choose? Because that, in effect, will determine a lot about your -- the direction of your trade for the next many, many decades.

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: You know, when I visited China, also last time visited Russian Federation, a journalist asked me why you talk about freedom and democracy? Is freedom your value? Is democracy an American value? I think it is a Western value, they say. And my answer, you know, that's not a Western value.

During the Socialist time, my parents -- they served for the Soviet-type of kolkhoz system. During that time, our herds were the properties of that Soviet type of coldhas. After transition, when we privatized those herds to herdsmen, those herds now have a right. You know, during Socialist time even if you slaughter one sheep, one goat, you have to get permission from the chief of the coldhas. Now, my father, my parents, if they need to slaughter, they make that without any permission. That's our democracy, that's our freedom. You know?

When my mother go to sleep, when she pray for Buddha, Buddha teachings, that's her freedom. That's not America's freedom. That's with us. That's nothing to do with America, with the West, you know? I think every human being from their birth, I think they're entitled to live in dignity and to live free.

Because of that, I see in that way -- because of that I really support those people who are trying to rid of those tyranny. I know that from my experience, no authoritarian government, no military regime can stand against the collective will of the

people who determine to be free. And we see that from the Middle East and other countries.

And one thing I related with the debt. Yeah, there was an old debt issue with Russia, with the Soviet Union, and we settled down that. But there are other commercial kinds of debt issues. Of course, we will -- Mongolia is incapable to pay those things. Like getting loans, and we will pay that. I think Mongolia's rating is every year, actually, the rating AA, BB, and those ratings from this and that pool and others, actually, improving its state of economy. And because of that, I think that's not a big issue for us.

In terms of the railroad, you know we have only one rail line that runs through Mongolia. It's called the Trans-Siberian rail line. Many people take that to go to Mongolia, to Russia, to China. That's, I think, a very good way to visit those three countries. Now, we have a railroad policy determined, and our main rails will be with the wide gauge. And -- but rails from mining to China will be maybe not our gauge -- not maybe, almost certain. (Laughter) And I think we will use -- we will combine those two kind of gauges, because we have two neighbors and we have to have good business with them. Yeah. We are quite flexible with that. (Laughter)

MR. BUSH: Ambassador Ho-Jin Lee, he's a retired ambassador from South Korea who is here at Brookings right now.

MR. LEE: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. President. I'm sure all of us should have been -- have been very much inspired by your eloquent speech. Particularly we are inspired by your peaceful fight for freedom, peaceful fight for independence. And on top of that, you have a very proud third neighbor of foreign policy.

I think one of your close neighbors, North Korea, can be eligible to be a partner. And how do you talk to North Koreans about your peaceful fight for freedom and

independence?

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: I think we really want to keep that connection with North Korea, that channel open. Some nations may stress on North Korea, make pressure, close those relations. But we will keep that channel open. And we really value our relations with North Korea. And I think, also, North Koreans value their relations with us.

And we are happy to share our experiences. And we are happy to show them, you know, there is a different way of living and, I say it, governance. In 1998, I actually visited North Korea, and I met many leaders there. I met many people there. And I told them, you know, eight years ago, nine years ago, we had a similar system, but we changed that. Now, from that we are actually -- my country and my nation is good, better off from that change.

I think they are really interested in our changes. Also, I see that the status quo -- today's status quo with North Korea will remain for a while. Yeah.

MR. BUSH: Right here. Please.

MS. CAMPI: Alicia Campi, president of the Mongolia Society. Welcome, President Elbegdorj. Good to see you.

This year is the Mongolia Society's 50th anniversary. So you've had 50 years of friends in the United States who have tried to build friendly relations with Mongolia. But this year also is the 100th anniversary of Mongolian independence in the modern era, and this is really the first big celebration of this momentous event. And I would like to ask you if you could summarize what this 100th anniversary means to you and to the country.

PRESIDENT ELBEGDORJ: Yeah. Fifty years of friendship in America is

amazing, yeah. Alicia, I signed on decree to decorate you with our order. And on 50 years -- on autumn, in July, you will receive that. Order called the Polar Star. That's amazing.

This year, in Mongolia we have quite a year: 2,220 years of the establishment of the Mongolian statehood. You know, the Hun Empire, that was the first establishment of the Mongolian statehood. And we will celebrate 100 years of regaining our independence and freedom and 90 years of the People's Revolution; 50 years membership to the United Nations; 50 years friendship society with America; you know, 30 years flying to the space. And there are many, many reasons to celebrate this year.

But 100 years of regaining our independence and freedom is really a special date for Mongolia. And since then, we experienced roughly independence. And after that Mongolia became the second Communist country, and we went through that for 70 years. And one conclusion that we can change our political system, economic system, one thing is quite challenging to change the mindset of people.

When you remain under that kind of ideology system, I think that fabric -- social fabric, actually very much damaged. And the way of thinking, people's, I think, way of thinking, also, some damage. But recovering from that actually requires very hard work.

Today, I see joyful demonstrations in the streets in the Middle East. I think they will go through very hard times for 10 years, maybe 20 years to achieve today's maybe level of Mongolia. I think everything when teaching is good, lectures is good. But we learn when we make mistakes.

I think the beauty of the freedom, there is always space to correct your mistakes. But in Communism or in another authoritarian regime, I think that might be our

last mistake. There is no space. Because of that, I think our governments today make bad decisions. But I think when there is criticism from people, from the public, we are forced to change that. We are forced to make that better decision. Because of that, I think the nation and our country is better off. Because of that, I think we are advancing.

Democracy is not a 1-day or 1-week, 1-year, 20-year issue. I think you have to care for that every morning, like changing the diapers, you know, for the baby. But I think we will advance. Also, our people's choices gain more power to the people, give more opportunity to participate and more opportunity to make decisions by our people. And we are now working on that.

Yeah.

MR. BUSH: I feel a special responsibility as moderator. I don't want to be the one that made the President late for his meeting with President Obama, so I'm going to bring this session to a close, regrettably.

I would only say by way of conclusion that what has happened in Mongolia over the last 20+ years is very important for the United States. We, I think, take for granted what freedom means, both the rights that come with it and the responsibilities. So when a country like Mongolia reminds us how important freedom is, it's very meaningful.

So, thank you very much for spending this special time with us and reminding us of that gift. Please join me in thanking President Elbegdorj. (Applause)

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