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The “Big Bang” of Pax Mongolica: The Political Legacy of Chinggis Khan– Empire, State or Mega-Tribe?

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I. Man and the state

The relation between man and the state has occupied deliberations of philosophers since at least Plato and Aristotle. Man has physical substance - the state does not. So any link poses an ontological dilemma. The state consists of claims to territory and its resources, a defined population, a government, and organized instruments to preserve order and provide security. It is a consciously constructed structure, in contrast to unorganized families, clans and tribes which preceded the state by thousands of years. How and why have states emerged in the past several millennia? How have families, clans and tribes assembled to form larger organizations as states? The evolution of the medieval Mongol state, as described in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, offers a condensed narrative of state formation.

Why have humans, in contrast to other living organisms, formed states? Self-preservation is man’s foremost motivation. All men have a natural desire and right to life. Thomas Hobbes argued that to secure that right, men will surrender some of their individual freedom. Political order reduces violence and seeks balance between security and freedom. The growth of the modern Euro-American state has roughly and imperfectly followed a path of improving order, security and freedom. However, the same progress has been less evident in the non-West, except in a few countries where Western patterns were imposed or adapted. A wave of optimism occurred after the Cold War, but today global democratization has lost its aura of inevitability.

Concepts sometimes facilitate clarity, and sometimes tend to obscure. For example, the notion of security originally referred to a personal sense of comfort or safety, but for the past century the term has been applied to general organizations, like state or nation or homeland. In the early 1990s, introduction of the UNDP concept “human security” attempted to reclaim some of security’s original meaning. But I believe that human security goes only part way in its reclamation project. Human security requires states and their dependent civil societies to be the agencies of implementation. Focusing directly on “human life security” as the point of departure

can avoid such reliance. By this term, I mean the motivations and actions which Prolong Life and Postpone Death (PLPD). Survival is not a right but is an elemental motivation and obligation.

St. Augustine had observed the importance of self-preservation in the hierarchy of human motivations. 'When we see that even the most wretched "fear to die, and will rather live in such misfortune than end it by death, is it not obvious enough," he asks, "how nature shrinks from annihilation?" The desire for self-preservation is, with Augustine, an observed fact. It is not a principle sufficient to explain the whole of man's behavior.'¹

Wars, perhaps more than ideas, have been the locomotive of history, and men, not states or tribes, have started, fought and died in wars. Unilaterally declaring an end to wars and states will not have much effect on conflicts as the greatest threat to human life security. Perhaps wars can only be postponed, not eliminated. The linkage between war, personal security and order is intimate. When members of a population become peaceful among themselves, with reduction of covetousness and unresolved grievances towards their neighbors, the governors of the ordered state may feel confident to resolve external issues by force.

In the Eurasian² context, a study of the medieval Mongol state-empire helps to understand how security, order, and freedom emerged among one people. Temüjin, who later took the name Chinggis Khan, began life in a setting of disorder and insecurity, with a measure of nomadic freedom. His mother Ho'elün was kidnapped by his father Yisügei from the Merkit tribe. Years later, on returning from arranging a marriage for his son, Yisügei was poisoned by a band of Tartars, and then his surviving family was exiled from their clan and barely survived. Temüjin murdered his elder step-brother over hunting and fishing kill, and later was captured and placed in a cangue by the Tayici'ut. Aided by a servant family, he escaped back to his encampment. Rustlers stole eight of their nine horses, and nearly killed Temüjin when he tracked and retrieved them. Soon after marriage to Börte, she was captured and made the wife of a Merkit. Temüjin's alliance with his blood brother Jamuqa and his feudal lord Toghrul enabled a military campaign to retake his bride. While his early years were a string of perils and misfortune, those events were symptomatic of pre-state Mongolia. Custom, vendetta and nomadic life defined the Mongols, while agriculture, law, property and cities had little attraction for them. In this unpromising environment, Temüjin created a mega-tribe with features resembling a nation-state, with a subdued content of clan and tribe loyalty and identity. From this complex was constructed an empire which deserved the Pax Mongolica appellation.

China and Russia share a legacy from that empire. Conquest and rule of China by Khubilai Khan unified steppe and agraria in ways not seen since the end of the Tang dynasty, and was followed by the more centralized Ming and Qing eras. Under Mongol rule, Russia was unified by Muscovy, and Ivan IV initiated a reverse conquest of the Mongol empire.³ India, though not invaded by the the Mongol army, was conquered by his descendant Babur, founder of the Moghul dynasty. While a full Mongol empire survived only a couple of generations, it redrew the map of Eurasia, and its wealth enticed Europeans to explore ocean routes which eventually led to discovery of the New World. It is tempting to consign the Mongols to an epochal category - a phenomenon with little lasting effect. History has been rather scathing in evaluating Chinggis Khan and seeing mostly negative contributions to human progress.⁴

II. Mongol state-empire as "Big Bang"

For better or worse, creation of the Mongol state and empire was a historical “Big Bang” in the sense that it destroyed much of ancient Eurasia and cleared the landscape for emergence of new forces. The Mongol “Big Bang” also triggered a flourishing of Western Europe which received, via the Mongol empire, what Francis Bacon cited as the three inventions which transformed his world: printing, gunpowder and the magnetic compass.⁵

The “Big Bang” metaphor refers to the theory of cosmologist Steven Hawking and others who claim that a billion-sun’s worth of energy produced our universe. In a much more modest way, the Mongol conquests were a Eurasian “Big Bang” in that its genesis, effects and decline altered the course of human history from the thirteenth century onward. The cosmic theory postulates that four types of energy formed the universe. As a metaphor, it suggests an analogy with the Mongol empire, or at least a template which enables us to rethink some conventional wisdom. That wisdom tends to locate the motor of history in Divine Will (Hegel), material forces (Marx), systems of organization (Wittfogel’s hydraulic society), ecology (climate change), or even the “great man” thesis of Thomas Carlyle. A Mongol “Big Bang” theory in contrast, searches for the sources and forms of energy which propelled a relatively small and marginal group of tribes into conquerors of continents, and concentrates on self-evident characteristics which generate the energy funneled into human enterprises.

In formulating a Mongol “Big Bang” framework, we begin by postulating human individuals as the agents of action – analogous to atoms and molecules in the material world. Numerous illustrations are described in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. The cosmic⁶ metaphor helps to identify how the Mongol empire might have emerged. We can identify three forms of human energy which Chinggis Khan oriented to his project of unification and conquest. The Mongol rise to domination was an accumulation of actions propelled by recognizable human motivations in improving individual life security, and was then translated into historical transformation.

Energy source– formation of universe	Energy source - formation of State
Gravity	Will-to-Live
Electro-magnetic	Will-to-Freedom
Weak nuclear	Will-to-Power
Strong nuclear	

III. The Will-to-Live

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer identified the Will-to-Live as the essence of life:

Life is, therefore, assured to the will to live; and so long as we are filled with the will to live we need have no fear for our existence, even in the presence of death.⁷

The Will-to-Live operates almost unconsciously and is present in all complex organisms. Even a tree will try to grow anew after it is cut down. The *Secret History* contains a number of incidents describing how men chose to take actions directly expressing or affecting their Will-to-

Live. When Yisügei and his brothers attack to abduct Ho'elün from her new Merkit husband Ciledü, she implores him to flee, save his life, and seek another wife. He complies, choosing to escape, abandons her, and survives. In that moment, he decided to live rather than die honorably fighting three against one. One's life is more important than a beautiful woman. Years later, the Merkit exacted revenge by abducting the wife of Yisügei's son, Temüjin. That vendetta provided a rough rebalance of justice, but also incurred massive death and destruction for the once-wronged Merkit. The Will-to-Live was the most powerful motivation of men, and when Temüjin became Chinggis Khan, his new mobile monarchy's first order of business was to organize a complex bodyguard corps to protect his own life.

It is the nightguards that watch over my golden life. When I go falconing or hunting, they toil with me; being charged with the administration of the Palace, whether this is moving or stationary, they look after the carts. Is it an easy thing to spend the night watching over my person? Is it an easy thing to look after the tentcarts when the main base camp is in movement or settled? .⁸

He also rewarded those who had faithfully protected him from death during military campaigns. He supplemented his Will-to-Live with extensive security arrangements and extolled those who demonstrated loyalty to his survival. This Will-to-Live also became the organizational principle of the Mongol army. Every member of a fighting unit was mutually responsible for the lives of his comrades. Warriors were judged on battlefield merit, and rewarded generously so that motivation in war adhered to a universal wish to survive and do one's utmost within the security needs of the unit.

This Will-to-Live, from the Khan down to the lowest warrior, fuelled destruction of the enemy. A foe must never be allowed to recover, and steppe justice inspired elimination of those who had wronged or opposed or betrayed the Mongols. Survivors were assimilated as combat fodder, slaves, concubines or servants, while a few became advisors, or adopted children. The genius of Chinggis Khan was to take Will-to-Live as the organizational principle of the Mongol nation. To suggest another metaphor, he took the Mongol people as scattered iron pellets, melted them into an iron bar, and made it into a magnet, with all the molecules aligned in a single direction for the sake of survival, unity, and domination.

IV. The Will-to-Freedom

The Will-to-Live was shared by all men and aligned by Chinggis Khan into a common Mongol purpose. The second form of human life energy, Will-to-Freedom, is also universal among humans⁹, but more rarely expressed in action. It has been historically expressed in group rebellion against oppressors. Before it reaches a threshold of collective action, human individuals must decide to act. If the Will-to-Live is weak, the Will-to-Freedom has little chance of seeing daylight. It finds expression in physical action as well as in cognitive quest. When an individual's Will-to-Freedom rises to the level of consciousness, it is generally in response to a condition of unfreedom, and to carry it out entails risk which challenges the Will-to-Live.

After killing his elder step-brother Bekter, Temüjin was captured by the Tayici'ut and moved daily from camp to camp. Enslavement or execution was to be his fate, so he seized an opportunity, struck his young guard and escaped, floating face up in the river, then hiding among a servant family, and finally riding a borrowed horse back to his family encampment. Prisoner status was intolerable servitude and endangered his vital Will-to-Live. In choosing to escape, he risked

life and limb. In success he restored his freedom. Another example was when eight geldings were stolen from his family. Temüjin went in pursuit and was joined by Bo'orcu, a young man who abandoned his milking bucket, parents and herds to help out. Bo'orcu's decision was also an activation of his Will-to-Freedom, an exchange of filial subordination for the less-than-equal companionship of Temüjin, but still a step up to greater freedom. The warriors who joined Temüjin were motivated by a desire for longer and better life. Their Will-to-Live and Will-to-Freedom detached them from normal herding and hunting occupations. Pledging their lives to an auspicious leader offered an existence of opportunity and acquisition, though hardly risk-free.

V. Will-to-Power

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Will-to-Power (*Wille zur Macht*) were inspired by Schopenhauer's ideas. The Over-man is characterized by exceptionally strong Will and his numbers necessarily remain small. That Will depends upon existence of the other two Wills as energizing forms. The man whose Will-to-Live is weak does not easily take risks attached to the Will-to-Freedom, and cannot understand that power is necessary for greatest security of life and freedom.

Temüjin had two main rivals for power over the Mongol tribes. Toghrul was Khan of the Kereyit and his position had been restored with the help of Yisügei. He needed a chieftain's power to survive and to pass on power to his son, Senggüm. Blood-brother Jamuqa was a proud leader who felt entitled to be Khan of the Mongols. He coordinated the Triple Alliance against the Merkit, and later changed from companion to enemy of Temüjin. Prior to 1206, Temüjin was content to remain a nominal vassal of Toghrul. A close collegial relationship with Jamuqa persisted in the aftermath of the Merkit campaign, but a few words on where would be their next encampment led to a break in what had been intimate cooperation. Advised by mother and wife, Temüjin concluded that to accede to a command disguised as a suggestion would subordinate him to Jamuqa. Temüjin's murder of Bekter and his decision to separate from Jamuqa were clear expressions of young Chinggis Khan's Will-to-Power.

VI. Conclusion

A reading of the *Secret History* reveals that life survival was the primary purpose of action. Individual life security was reinforced by clan and tribe (organic society), and further strengthened by formalization of the Genghis state which reduced clan and tribe power while strengthening the nuclear family. The Khan portrayed in the *Secret History* harnessed three forms of human will and channeled them into the military state which expanded into the Mongol empire. Locating that genesis and dynamic in the biography of Chinggis Khan was implied in the *Secret History*. Its chapters of narratives and quasi-parables provided lessons in statecraft to successors of Chinggis Khan and the new Mongol aristocracy. The book can be interpreted as

- a hidden constitution for the Mongol state,
- a catalog of principles which had brought success to Chinggis Khan in unification of the Mongol clans and tribes,
- an outline of values, processes and institutions to maintain the state, and

- an implicit plan for expanding the state into empire.

Throughout, the objective of much action was to protect the life of the Khan, and in doing this, improve life chances for his loyal followers and subjects by establishing and maintaining political order. A notion of security precipitates out of these narratives, but very different from the concept applied to modern states. Rather it is a goal recognizing the preeminence of human life, its fragility, and its indispensability to other lives. In short, the *Secret History* is instruction in life security as prolonging life, postponing death.

Chinggis Khan amalgamated the Mongol tribes into a unified state by 1206, and then restructured the various tribal armies into a single organization subdivided into decimal units. When Chinggis Khan died in 1227, the Mongol tribes were solidly united, the Tungus and Jürchid empires in the process of conquest and destruction, and the Muslim empire of Khwarazm defeated. Succession of Ögedei to paramouncy had been settled several years before, though not without dispute. Genghis had transformed a scattered and impoverished people into a formidable army and scourge of all Eurasia. His reforms established a territorial empire encompassing much of present-day Asia and Europe. The organizations, kinships and content of sovereignty indicated that as Khan of the Mongols, Genghis had created a mega-tribe, state and empire – faithful to its origins and customs, not wed to any particular religion, and joining East and West as never before.

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Notes:

¹ Waltz, K. N.. *Man, the State, and War*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 22.

² An alternative term for those lands where Mongol armies fought could be "Asiatica" – the lands from Japan and Southeast Asia to the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas. "Eurasia " implies a primacy of Europe and its equality with Asia – a phenomenon which only had validity in the past two centuries.

³ "The rise of Muscovy to a pre-eminent position among the several Russian states was due in large measure to the opportunism of its princes, who made themselves the allies and collaborators of the steppe khanate. Mongol support secured them the title of grand prince after Mongol power drove back the rival Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the powerful West Russian state, Catholicized in the 1370s and linked in a union with Catholic Poland. Moscow earned the support of the Orthodox Church - a vital religious and cultural ally - through its influence with the Mongols and its leadership against Catholic Lithuania."
J. Darwin. *After Tamerlane*. (London: Penguin Books/Bloomington, 2007), 66.

⁴ A Soviet perspective considered the Mongols as entirely destructive and as condemning Russia to backwardness. "The political unification of Mongolia: in a single state could have helped towards a further advance in the country's productive resources and its economic and cultural progress. The obstacle to this, however, _was the aggressive policy of the Mongol feudal leaders headed by Chinggis Khan, who turned the people into warriors and the country into a military camp. The aggressive campaigns of Chinggis Khan and his successors against the peoples of China, Iran, Russia and other countries were a supreme disaster, since they held up for a long time the progressive development of those peoples. During these campaigns enormous material and cultural assets were destroyed and tens of thousands of people were wiped out. The aggressive wars of the Mongol feudal leaders also had the effect of halting the growth of the productive forces and culture of Mongolia itself and brought the Mongolian people nothing but sufferings."
USSR. *History of the Mongolian People's Republic*. (Moscow: "Nauka" Publishing House, Central Department of Oriental Literature, 1973), 98.

⁵ Thubron. *Shadow of the Silk Road*: (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 78.

⁶ From the Greek word *kosmos* meaning "order".

⁷ Schopenhauer, A. *World as Will and Ideal*, 355.

⁸ Rachewiltz, I. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 161.

⁹ Sharansky, N. *The Case for Democracy*: (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), xi.



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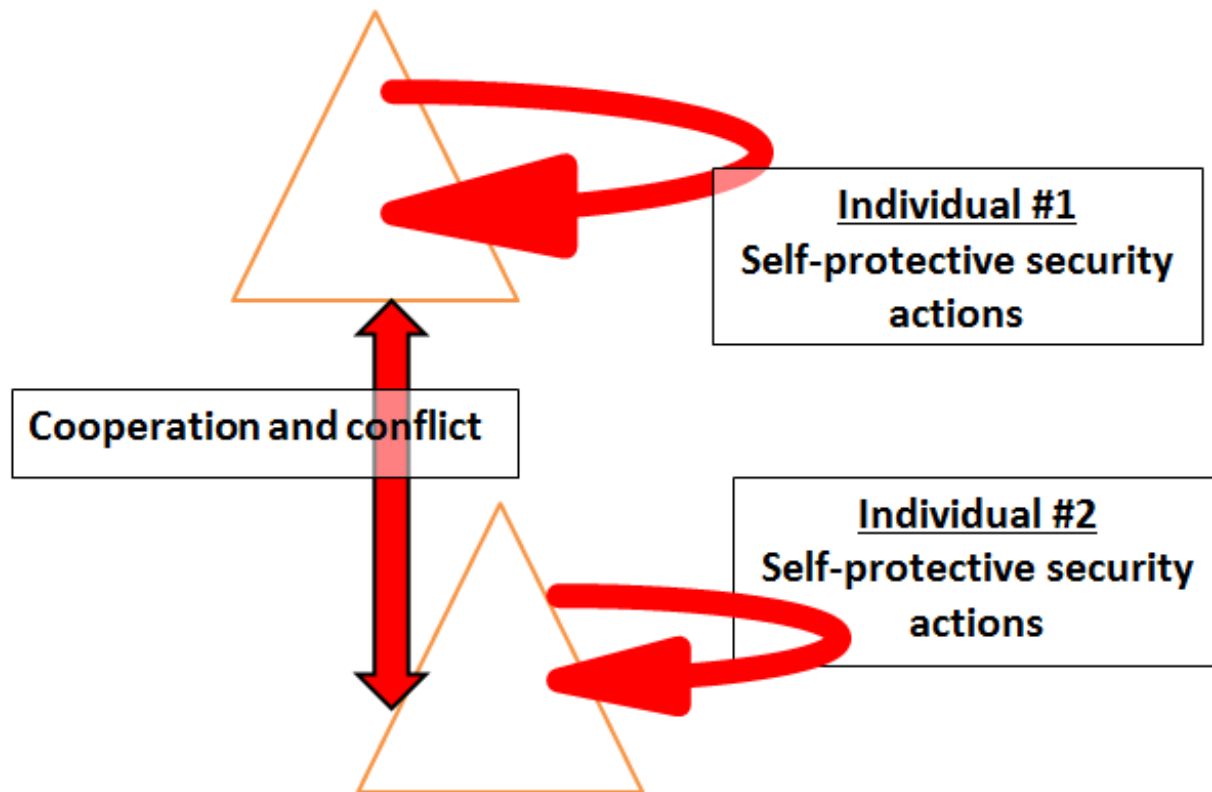
“Big Bang” Template for Analysis

Energy source– formation of universe	Energy source - formation of State
Gravity	Will-to-Live
Electro-magnetic	Will-to-Freedom
Weak nuclear	Will-to-Power
Strong nuclear	

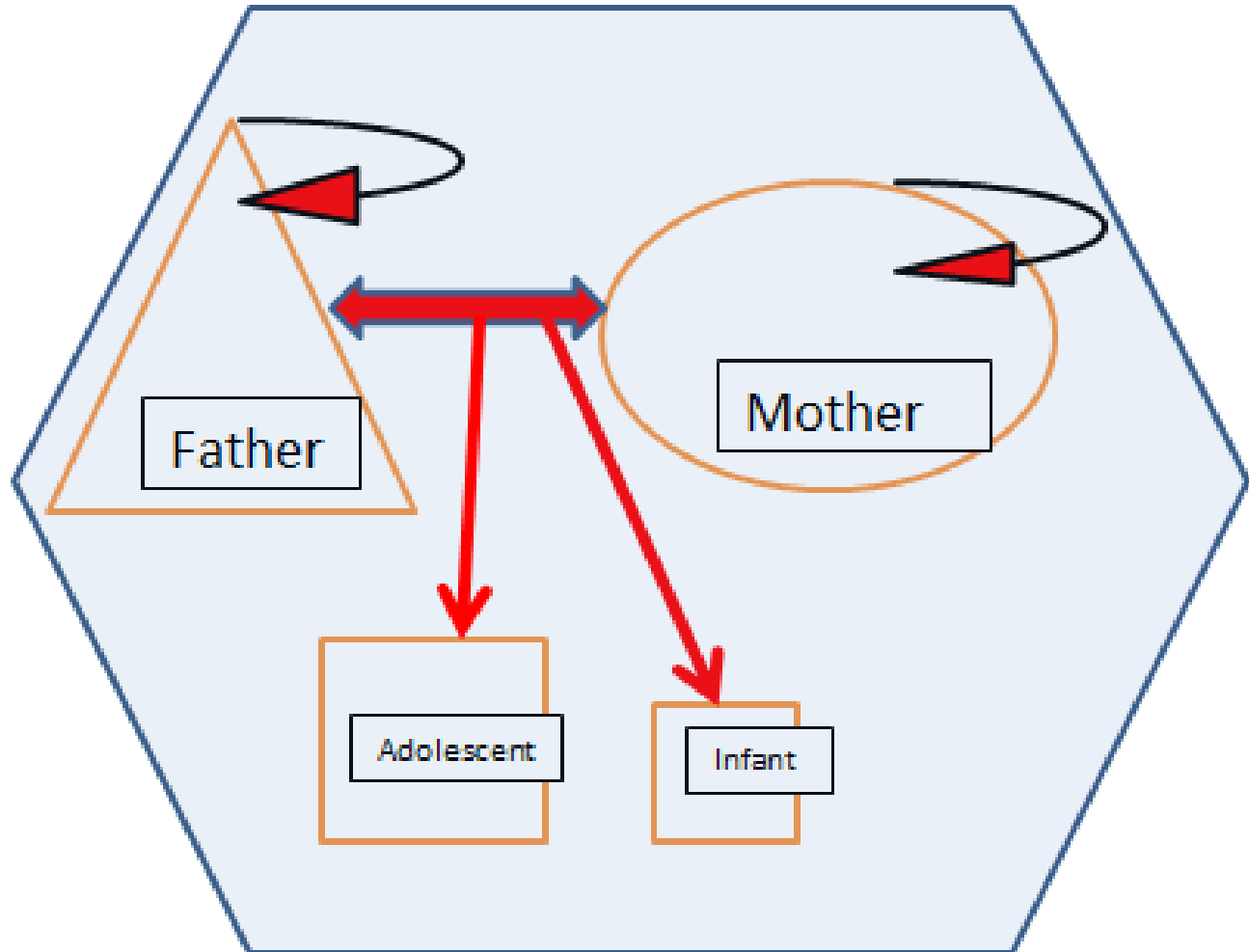
Definitions

- **Human individual** = source and objective of security actions
- **Organic society** = pre-state society
- **State** = Human organization of territory, defined population, physical resources, defenses, and government.
- **Civil society** = Post-state society
- **Security** = Protection individuals and organizations
- **Human security** = Safety of individuals
- **Human life security** = Human actions that Prolong Life, Postpone Death

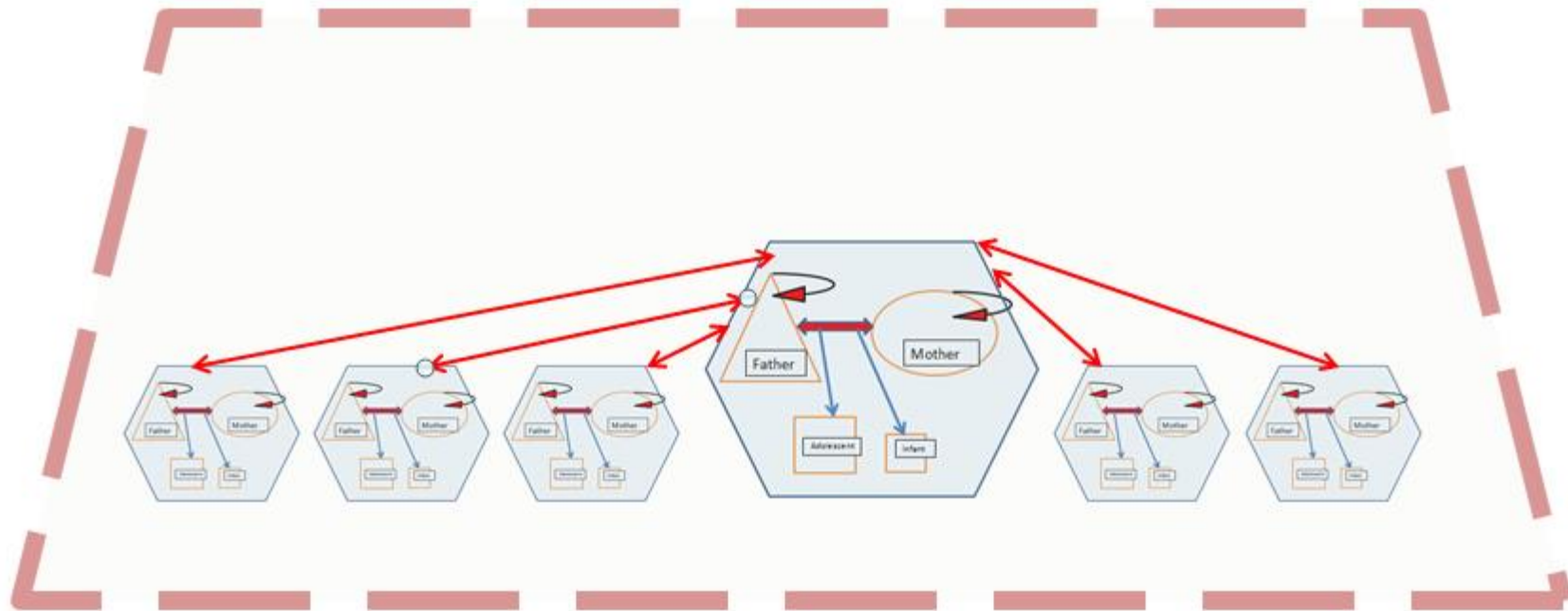
State of Nature – Security relationship between two individuals



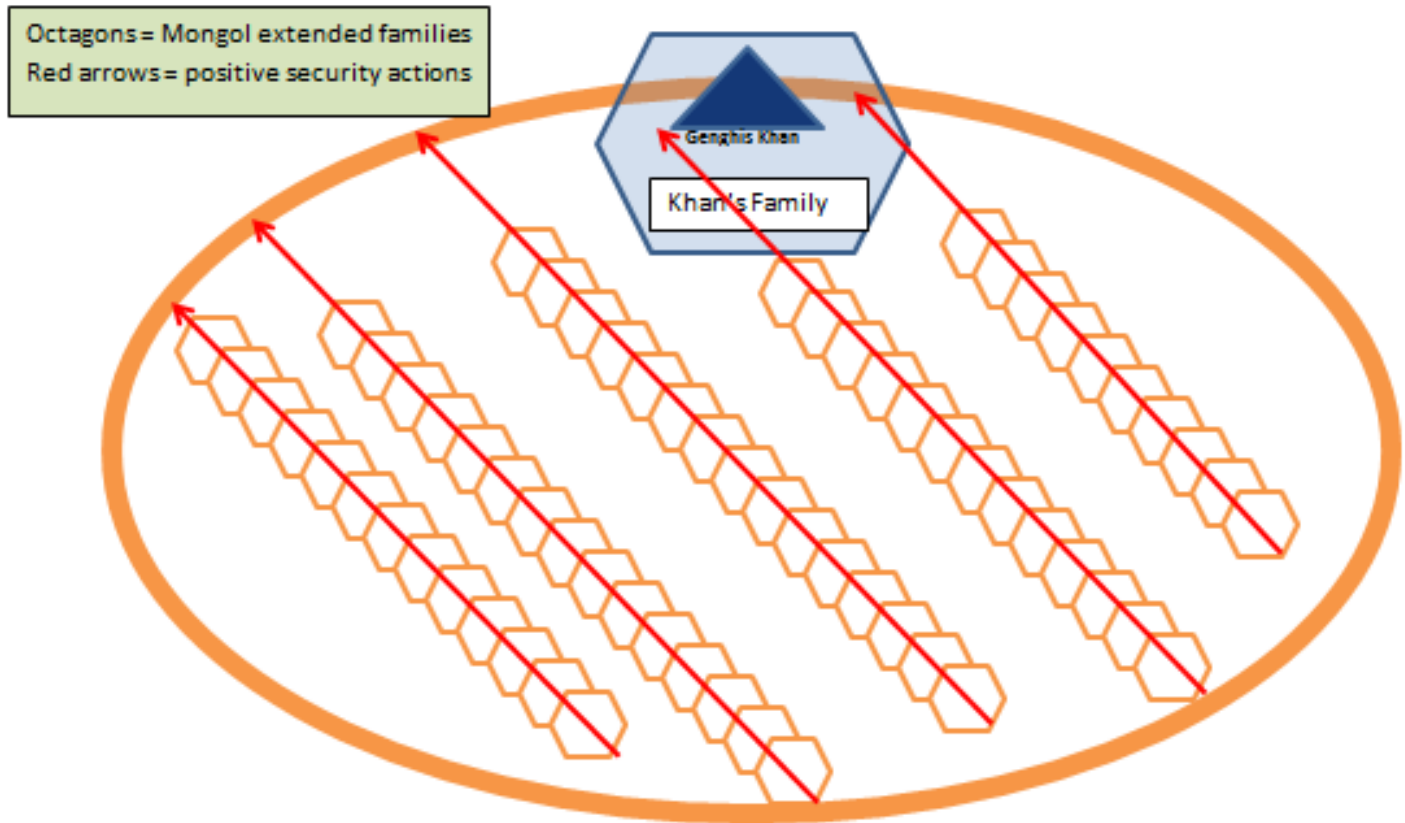
Security in the nuclear family



Tribal security – family cooperation for mutual security



The Mongol nation-state



**The Mongol State = strong families, weak
clans and tribes**

The modern totalitarian state: Structure

