The Great Plan the way it was originally conceived and articulated by the Roerichs in 1922–1923 was nothing but their vision of the future, a blueprint of some cardinal events predicted by the Masters to take place within a decade and a half that would shake the world to its foundations. Yet plans made by visionaries, as often happens, come to a collision with life’s realities and break down. The political situation in post-war Europe and in Asia was changing so rapidly, so dramatically and unpredictably that Nikolai and Elena had to alter their plans all the time – with due approval of their Master of course – to keep up with the changes. Thus they were unable to enter Tibet from northern India which frustrated Morya’s initial scheme for their grand return to New Russia through India and Tibet; they did not dispatch Yuri to Chicherin from Xinjiang as they wanted to, nor could they get in touch with the Panchen Lama to let him in on the mahatmas’ version of the Shambhala War.

By the time the Roerichs arrived in Moscow the Soviets had already availed themselves with some of the latest information on them and their movements in Asia received from their diplomatic agents in Kashgar and Urumchi, Dumpis and Bystrov, as well as their military intelligence service in Middle Asia, the former Russian Turkestan. Thus the Intelligence Department of the Headquarters of the Middle-Asian District in Tashkent reported that:

In the month of May Urumchi was visited by the painter Roerich who calls himself an American and who had been to India and Little Tibet. He has some relation to the Buddhist world and is allegedly commissioned to establish connections between the Buddhists of Soviet Russia and India. His conversations constantly revolved about this, and he pointed out that some active work was going on among Buddhists towards a unification of Mongols from Transbaikalia to Khotan and Tibet into one Great Mongolia. He has taken carefully some steps to establish contacts
with the Sinkiang Mongols, though the latter were rather wary, being scared of Chinese espionage.¹

The Soviet leaders as those of Comintern were monitoring closely the political developments in the whole of Asia, especially in Central Asia, separating Soviet Russia from the frontiers of British India, “the stronghold of world imperialism”. For the time being (by 1926) it was only the situation in the neighboring Outer Mongolia that filled them with some considerable optimism from the perspective of the World Revolution. In 1924, after its theocratic ruler Bogdo-Gegen’s death, the hitherto autonomous Outer Mongolia was proclaimed the Mongolian People’s Republic, with the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party at its head. The country was completely under Soviet control despite the fact that in the same year Moscow signed an agreement with Peking whereby it formally recognized China’s sovereignty in Outer Mongolia, being formerly one of the outer territories of the Manchus’ Middle Kingdom. A program of “sovietization” of Mongolia on the Russian model was recently launched, which deprived the Mongolian hereditary rulers or khans, and lamas of political power. However the lamas did not want to give up their privileges and were already looking for Bogdo’s new incarnation to take place in Mongolia, not in Tibet as before.

At the same time the Chinese Republic which emerged in 1911 after the downfall of the Manchu dynasty was seized by civil strife and was actually broken up. Manchuria and other northern provinces were controlled by warlords, the most powerful of which were Generals Chang Tso-lin, Wu Pei-fu (both of pro-Japanese orientation) and Feng Yu-hsiang. The latter allied himself with the Soviets in 1925 and consequently received large quantities of arms and ammunition from the USSR. Having won some battles against his adversaries, he gained control in 1926 over several provinces in Central China and made plans for separating these from the rest of the country under his own rule. Yet the best hopes for a nationwide revolution in China the Soviets linked with the Canton-based Nationalist government, being an alliance of the Kuomingtang (People’s) Party and Communists, to which Moscow also provided its military assistance. In May – July 1926 the Canton leaders were actively making preparations for launching a campaign, under Chiang Kai-shek, then a Soviet protégé, assisted by Soviet advisors, against the allied forces of northern warlords, the Northern Expedition, with the ultimate aim of uniting China. A vague reflection of the revolutionary ferment in the country can be found in Roerich’s travelogue:

¹ Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), f. 25895, op. 1, d. 832, p. 454 (Situation in Sinkiang, 15 May 1926–1 August 1926, a dispatch by Goncharenko).