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Mongolian Foreign Relations Surge Indicates New Activist Agenda for 2014

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Alicia Campi, President of the US-Mongolia Advisory Group, explains that “It is quite evident that in 2014 Mongolian President Elbegdorj, who labels himself the ‘President to Bridge Mongolia to the World,’ will continue his diplomatic offensive and overseas travels.”

2013 was a year when Mongolian foreign policy initiatives expanded the visibility of mineral-rich Mongolia throughout Northeast Asia and the world. This was not just a happenstance, but a well-thought out concept of Mongolian President Tsakhia Elbegdorj and his pro-active Foreign Minister, Lu Bold, to raise the profile of the country on the international stage. Using the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Mongolia’s contemporary diplomatic service as the rationale for its new activism, the Mongolian government proclaimed it would be guided by a “one-window” foreign relations policy. This new initiative, which emphasizes coherence of national foreign policy and actions through active dissemination of upbeat information about Mongolia’s stability and transparent environment for foreign investors, was most certainly an attempt to counter the dramatic 43 percent decline in foreign investment in the country during the first half of 2013 and a barrage of pessimistic commentary in the international media.

To increase Mongolia’s global visibility, new embassies and consulates were opened in Brazil, Indonesia, Istanbul and Bishkek. In addition, the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) publicly announced in its 2012-2013 action plan its intention to establish diplomatic relations with all member states in the United Nations. In 2013 alone, bilateral relations were established with 11 nations, mainly in the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, and Africa, bringing to 179 the number of countries with which Mongolia now has diplomatic relations.

Perhaps the most dramatic move by the Mongols was their outreach to promote cooperation with the World Economic Forum of Davos, Switzerland by signing a memorandum with the Forum to assist in “shaping the development strategy of Mongolia and making a great stride in the promotion of Mongolia at the international level.” Last September the Forum coordinated a mini-dialogue in Ulaanbaatar on potential Mongolian developmental scenarios, especially connected to mining, which were further discussed in January at the World Economic Forum at Davos.

Mongolia took advantage of US support for its two-year term as chair of the Community of Democracies (COD) since 2011 to develop its profile as a global model of democracy. Former US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in July 2012 participated in the COD Governing Council meeting and its International Women’s Leadership Forum to promote women’s entrepreneurship, access to natural resources, and leadership in the private sector. At that time she famously stated: “I say to democracy doubters to come to Mongolia.” When Mongolia concluded its term as chair by hosting the 7th COD Ministerial Conference in Ulaanbaatar in April 2013, some 800 delegates from 103 countries attended, including US Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, attesting to Mongolia’s success in expanding its international profile.

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During 2013, Mongolian officials paid 14 high-level visits to foreign countries. President Elbegdorj traveled extensively throughout the year, including an October visit to Chicago to open an Honorary Consulate, after his participation in the 68th United Nations General Assembly in New York. He made working visits to Japan and Kyrgyzstan and state visits to Norway, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, and North Korea. His four-day visit to North Korea in October as part of the 45th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations was among the most widely-reported events of the year in Northeast Asia. Although a variety of cooperative agreements were signed there, an expected summit meeting with new leader Kim Jong-un did not materialize. However, this disappointment has not unduly affected the growing closeness of the relationship, and Mongolia is publicly suggesting it should be included in any resumption of Six-Party talks.

The Mongols in 2013 hosted 21 major foreign leaders, including US Vice President Joe Biden in August. Two heads of states—the President of Poland and the Governor General of Canada—visited Mongolia, and the country celebrated the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Britain with the visit of Foreign Secretary William Hague in mid-October—the first in 17 years. A month prior, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was in the country to sign a one-year agreement with the Mongolian government for advisory services on education, health, mortgage loans, and foreign investment. It is widely speculated that he is involved in the complicated negotiations between the Mongols and Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto over the management and expansion of the copper and gold deposit at Oyu Tolgoi in the Gobi desert, southern Mongolia.

Mongolia signed 63 bilateral and international agreements in 2013, including agreements with the United States, the European Union, Japan, and China. No agreements were signed with Russia, a situation that the Putin government must view as a worrisome sign of the continuing fragility of Russo-Mongolian relations. Meanwhile, last year Mongolia indicated its intention of becoming a more significant actor in Asia and the global community through the launch of a number of its own initiatives. These include the International Cooperation Fund (IFC), a project through which Mongolia utilizes its soft power diplomacy to develop bilateral cooperation by sharing its experience in democratic transition with other emerging democracies. It should be expected that under this rubric Mongolia will continue to be active in North Korean diplomatic efforts.

Last October the country also proclaimed the “Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security” to strengthen strategic stability and develop Northeast Asia security cooperation and confidence building, and in December it hosted the first tripartite Mongolian-Russian-Chinese Northern Railway Corridor consultative meeting with the goal of developing a comprehensive plan for a new northeast rail transport corridor in the first quarter of 2014.

It is quite evident that in 2014 Mongolian President Elbegdorj, who labels himself the “President to Bridge Mongolia to the World,” will continue his diplomatic offensive and overseas travels. In 2014 his first foreign visit was to Davos, Switzerland in January where he discussed at the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting how to more effectively integrate Mongolia into the complexity and interconnectivity of the globalized economy. His proposal was accepted for Mongolia to host the Forum’s annual East Asian Summit in 2016. Since this year will commemorate the 65th anniversary of Sino-Mongolian ties, it will be a significant year for that all important relationship with numerous cultural exchanges, investment forums, and round table scholarly discussions planned.

The Mongols remain hopeful that there will be a high-ranking US official visit this year, which will be another visible sign of continuing American interest in Mongolia and provide some balance to all the Sino-centric activities. All these indicators point to an acceleration of Mongolian activism in the Asian region and beyond in 2014.

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