

NATO-Mongolia relations: limited in scope, but with room to grow

by Robert Helbig¹



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Research Paper

ISSN 2076 – 0949

(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Print)

ISSN 2076 – 0957

(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Online)

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A January morning with deep-blue skies and the wind blowing, and a temperature of minus 35 degrees centigrade; NATO soldiers are getting ready for the day, watching the wildlife on the frozen steppes and moving about between the green military tents, the white yurts and a statue of Genghis Khan. This is a typical scene of what the start of the day might look like when forces come together for an extreme terrain exercise at NATO's latest Partnership Training and Education Centre (PTEC) located in Mongolia, just 40 miles outside Ulaanbaatar, the coldest capital in the world.

NATO's relations with Mongolia are everything but icy. Without great international fanfare, Ulaanbaatar entered into a formal partnership with the Alliance in 2012, as a result of Mongolia's contribution to NATO missions and its desire to form stronger relations with organizations and countries beyond Russia and China – in other words, with its “Third Neighbours.”²

Considering the young age of the partnership, NATO and Mongolia have initiated substantial projects in military education, interoperability and science. The partnership, however, is limited in scope, mostly as a result of the strategic constraints Russia and China impose on Ulaanbaatar's foreign policy, which is aimed at maintaining sovereignty and ensuring economic development. Given Russia's growing assertiveness and China's rise, the partnership between

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² Term coined by then-US Secretary of State James Baker in August 1990 – Dorjjugder, Munkh-Ochir, “Mongolia's “Third Neighbor” Doctrine and North Korea,” *Brookings Institution* Paper, 28 January 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/01/28-mongolia-dorjjugder> (accessed 14 August 2014).



NATO and Mongolia will not expand; but it may be deepened, by filling the existing partnership agreements with additional substance.

Mongolia's post-cold war foreign policy

Understanding Mongolia's unique foreign policy is crucial to making sense of its relationship with NATO, because Ulaanbaatar's strategy continues to be guided by its geostrategic dependence. Sandwiched between the great powers of Russia and China, Mongolia looks back to a unique history of tilting towards one or the other. After seven decades of Soviet domination, Ulaanbaatar redefined its foreign policy at the beginning of the 1990s. Instead of betting on either Moscow or Beijing, Ulaanbaatar looked beyond its immediate borders to form partnerships with the Third Neighbours, thereby balancing its relations with Russia and China in a "strategic triangulation."³ Most recently, relations have been increasingly guided by economic interests, which is why the latter part of this paper also focuses on business relations, as part of Mongolia's strategic outlook towards NATO.

Ulaanbaatar's foreign policy has been very active over the past two decades. Mongolia has joined the Asian Development Bank, the World Trade Organization, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the International Criminal Court, the Asia Europe Meeting, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and become an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Consequently, Mongolia's international dealings are very diverse, ranging from contacts with North Korea to ties with the US, pointing to Ulaanbaatar's neutral status and readiness to deal with international actors regardless of their government. The Third Neighbor Policy was expressed in the security sector through the 2010 National Security Concept, which states that Mongolia aims to develop bi- and multilateral

defence and security relations with actors beyond its immediate neighbourhood, including the US, NATO, the EU and states of the Asia Pacific region. By maintaining friendly relations with as many international actors as possible without joining any military alliance, and by prohibiting any foreign military bases on its territory, Mongolia has been practicing a foreign policy of unlimited open access.

Evolution of Mongolia's key foreign policy elements

Ulaanbaatar's foreign policy has evolved in several stages during the past two decades. A leading Ministry of Defence official (referred to by some as "the brain" behind Mongolia's relationship with NATO), Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder, describes the evolution of Mongolia's foreign policy as marked by elements of democratization, proactive diplomacy, peacekeeping commitments and vested interests in economic growth.⁴

From the early 1990s, Mongolia was mainly concerned with political and economic reform, as well as integrating the global economy with the help of international assistance. These reforms were based on the belief that liberalizing the country would trigger economic growth and lead to international recognition, which in turn would increase Mongolia's independence from its immediate neighbours, thereby increasing its national security. The reforms can also be regarded as the basis for becoming a model democracy in the region and an attractive partner for NATO, given the latter's nature as an Alliance committed to democracy.

The second half of the 1990s was guided by proactive diplomacy. Starting with the drafting of the Foreign Policy Concept in 1994, the Mongolian government stressed the need to reach out beyond its two neighbours. Ulaanbaatar also diversified its diplomatic relations as a strategy to counterbalance

³ Sergey Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," *The Asian Forum*, 22 November 2013, <http://www.theasianforum.org/sino-russian-competition-in-mongolia/> (accessed 22 September 2014).

⁴ Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder, "Same Rules, New Dimensions For Mongolia's National Security: Adapting to the New Geo-Economic Environment," *Brookings Institution*, October 2009 <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2009/10/mongolia-dorjjugder> (accessed 12 September 2014).



Russian and Chinese influence in Mongolia, with a view to furthering its own sovereignty and national security.⁵ Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder argues that Mongolia's Third Neighbour Policy is a "socio-psychological consensus"⁶ that arose from the country's identity as a small state, located between two major powers and subservient to its neighbours. Jeffrey Reeves of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies reasons that Mongolia pushes for a regional security structure that includes "as many big powers as possible, through their engagement in regional institutions and through bilateral arrangements with individual member states." The goal is to interlock the network of partners, based on the idea that "meshed interests" deter states from entering into military conflicts.⁷

After engaging diplomatically with its Third Neighbours, Ulaanbaatar added another component to the Third Neighbour Policy, by establishing a capable peacekeeping force. Based on a 1999 Memorandum of Understanding with the UN to contribute to peacekeeping operations (PKOs), Mongolia started sending peacekeeping observers to the Congo in 2002. Since then, Mongolia has contributed over 5,000 personnel to 15 UN-, NATO-, and US-led missions across the globe, including to Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Chad, Sudan, Georgia and Kosovo.

The US official Christopher Pultz argues that Mongolia has established a modern peacekeeping force – once again – to enhance its sovereignty, thereby pushing Russia and China to recognize Mongolia's emerging regional status.⁸ Mongolia also uses its participation in international operations

to promote defence diplomacy, helped by its organizing multinational exercises.⁹ Such events enable Ulaanbaatar to raise its profile within the international security community.

While Mongolia is continuing its peacekeeping efforts, its government has given greater importance to the country's economic relationships. As former National Security Advisor Migeedorj Batchimeg points out, Mongolia's most pressing security challenges stem from its lack of economic development, including its economic dependence, systemic corruption and the consequences of climate change, paired with the mineral sectors' growth.

The focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) in Mongolia's extractive resources sector, to ensure economic development, has added new components to Ulaanbaatar's relations, such as dealing with multinational corporations. Integrating business interests with doctrine, such as the precept of keeping at an equal distance from Russia, China and the Third Neighbours, has proved difficult in the light of China's economic penetration of strategic sectors of Mongolia's economy, Russia's aggressive business tactics and the legal security expectations of powerful Western corporations. In short, Mongolia has had to adjust its foreign policy strategy to the new realities of a fast-growing regional power in a delicate geostrategic situation.

This led Ulaanbaatar to revise its National Security and Foreign Policy Concept in 2010 and 2011. Similarly to the older versions, the new concepts are comprehensive, covering a wide range of security issues.¹⁰ What stands out is the emphasis on "national

⁵ Christopher Pultz, "The Role of Peacekeeping on Mongolia's Military Strategy: A New Paradigm for Security," *Asia Policy* No. 17 (January 2014), pp. 127-46, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=729> (accessed 12 September 2014), p. 143.

⁶ Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder, "Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" Doctrine and North Korea."

⁷ Jeffrey Reeves, "Mongolia's evolving security strategy: omni-enmeshment and balance of influence," *The Pacific Review* Volume Vol. 25, Issue 5, pp. 589-612, 2012, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09512748.2012.728241#U_HOcfmSySo (accessed 18 August 2014), p. 590.

⁸ Christopher Pultz, "The Role of Peacekeeping on Mongolia's Military Strategy: A New Paradigm for Security," pp. 130-138.

⁹ The peacekeeping exercise "Khan Quest" was established in 2003, as a bilateral effort of Mongolia and the US. Since 2006, it has become a multinational event and in 2013 it featured about 1,000 troops from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, India, Nepal, South Korea, Tajikistan, the UK, the US and Vietnam (China, Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan sent observers). See Jargalsaikhan, Mendee, "Mongolian Defense Diplomacy."

¹⁰ Including security of existence (sovereignty), economic-, domestic-, human, environmental-, food- and information security, as well as the need for strengthening democracy. See M. Batchimeg, "National Security of Mongolia: Past, Present & Future," *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, No. 17, pp. 12-17, 2013, <https://www.google.be/url?sa=t&vq=j&q=&src=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.mongolijol.info%2Findex.php%2FMIJA%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F79%2F79&ei=YMXXu8nRBeKn0QWd-4CABg&usq=AFQjCNGWuAVvOBXQSVZS-RKYEEpazlb2TA&bvum=bu.73231344.d.d2k&cad=rja> (accessed 17 August 2014), p. 17.



values,” referring to Mongolia’s identity, nationality, language, history, customs, heritage, as well as to the Buddhist religion and culture. The National Security Concept even features a section on genetic identity before it even mentions economic challenges. It is clear that, while economic relations have become more important, Ulaanbaatar’s concept of security also encompasses a range of concerns centring on Mongolian identity that can be traced back to the country’s changing economic environment.

Mongolia’s perception of a rising China

While not mentioned as a threat in the policy concepts, in view of Ulaanbaatar’s wide-ranging notion of security, China has become one of Mongolia’s greatest security challenges because its rising economic influence as Mongolia’s main trading partner and investor is perceived as a threat to political sovereignty and to Mongolian identity. This threat perception is widely shared in Mongolian society, as only 1.2 percent of Mongolians believe that China is a desirable partner.¹¹

Mongolians are especially worried that China’s economic penetration could lead to political manipulation. Beijing demonstrated its power over Ulaanbaatar when it closed off its border and thus denied access to its port in Tianjin – Mongolia’s main transit to the Pacific – for “technical reasons” that coincided with a visit by the Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 2002.¹²

Beyond these individual events that reveal Beijing’s readiness to flex its economic muscle as a political instrument, Mongolians worry that China has gained structural power in Ulaanbaatar’s domestic institutions. The Chinese already dominate FDI, trade, lending and parts of the labour market.

Coupled with Ulaanbaatar’s political weakness, this dependence limits the degree to which Mongolia can steer its own economic development.

Vast parts of the population also worry that Chinese economic power may affect Mongolian identity. China has already suppressed Mongolian culture in Inner Mongolia (an autonomous region of the People’s Republic of China), forcing children to speak Mandarin instead of Mongolian.¹³ The perceived threat to the Mongolian gene pool caused by Chinese guest workers intermarrying with the local population has caused additional anger.

Ulaanbaatar’s direct response to the perceived Chinese threat was the attempt to limit Chinese investments by diversifying Mongolia’s trade portfolio. The 2010 National Security Concept mandates the Mongolian authorities to “[d]esign a strategy whereby the investment of any foreign country does not exceed one third of overall foreign investment in Mongolia.”¹⁴ Mongolia’s November 2013 investment law specifies that the FDI of one country should be limited to one third in strategic industries (minerals, communication and financial sectors). That does not necessarily mean that Ulaanbaatar aims to decrease Chinese investment, but that it is striving to access more investment from other sources. In this way, Ulaanbaatar is attempting to counter the Chinese socio-economic threat at the roots, through economic engagement with Russia and the Third Neighbours.

Reeves regards these measures as an indication that the Third Neighbour Policy is not sufficient to offset China. As China’s economic influence grows, Ulaanbaatar also has to balance Beijing on the domestic front.¹⁵ Questions remain as to what extent Mongolia can diversify its economic relations, given the country’s geographic situation and China’s hunger for raw materials.

¹¹ Jeffrey Reeves, “Sino-Mongolian relations and Mongolia’s non-traditional security,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 175-188, March 2013, www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02634937.2013.771980 (accessed 30 September 2014), p. 179.

¹² Jeffrey Reeves, “Mongolia’s evolving security strategy: omni-enmeshment and balance of influence,” p. 594.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 182.

¹⁴ Government of Mongolia, “National Security Concept of Mongolia,” Article 3.2.2.2.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Reeves, “Mongolia’s Strategic Calculus,” *The Diplomat*, 15 October 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/10/mongolia-and-the-us-pivot-ulaanbaatars-perspective/> (accessed 14 August 2014).



Russia's aims to regain influence

To the north, Mongolia faces different issues. As Moscow lost most of its influence in the process of political decolonization and cultural de-Russification after the Cold War, bilateral relations also collapsed on the economic front.¹⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin has attempted to rebuild the relationship with Mongolia, laying the ground for restoring bilateral ties in the 2000 Ulaanbaatar Declaration.¹⁷ He made several concessions towards Ulaanbaatar in order to defend Russian interests, because unlike China, Russia does not have the “luxury of just waiting for the ripe fruit to fall into his hands.”¹⁸ For example, Putin's administration waived nearly 98 percent of the Soviet-era debt (\$11.4 billion) in 2003 in exchange for \$250 million of Mongolian government bonds. This is extraordinary, considering that Soviet debt accounted for about 17 times the Mongolian GDP at the time, a situation many Mongolians viewed as a result of structural iniquity.¹⁹

Over the past years, as Moscow has tried to close deals with Ulaanbaatar to regain a stronghold on Mongolia's resources sector, the Kremlin has offered further gifts to develop Mongolia's industry. In 2009, the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation announced a \$285 million grant for Mongolia's economic development, \$188 million of which were earmarked for upgrading the trans-Mongolian railroad. To counter the US stake in Mongolia's railroad – traditionally a stronghold of Russian economic influence – Moscow offered \$250 million for a new joint investment venture in the Mongolian railroad and a \$300 million agricultural credit. Shortly thereafter, Moscow even

underwrote the funds for Ulaanbaatar's 50% share in the new Mongolian railroad venture.²⁰ These measures coincide with Russia's success in forcing the Canadian company Khan Resources out of the Mongolian uranium business, while preventing the company from selling its shares to China.²¹

Contrary to the Kremlin's calculations, Russia's generosity did not lead Ulaanbaatar to neglect the interests of its other partners. In fact, major business deals were awarded to the Third Neighbours and China despite further Russian concessions, including additional debt relief. However, Russia's influence remains, through the supply of petroleum products and electricity, as well as in Mongolia's defence sector.

It is clear that Mongolia's relationship with Russia is of a very different nature from its relationship with China. Russia's initiatives in the 2000s earned Moscow a critical stake in Mongolia's political, economic and security landscape. Contrary to China, Mongolians do not seem overly concerned by infiltration from Russian culture. After all, Russia maintained a strong presence during Mongolia's communist period, which is often associated with the development of the country. Memories of cruel Soviet human rights violations against monks at a time of revival of the Buddhist culture still linger, but not to the extent that they constitute a serious issue in the relationship between Mongolian and Russian societies.

¹⁶ While in 1989, Mongolia's trade with Russia accounted for 92 percent of Ulaanbaatar's trade portfolio, exports to Russia fell to 10 percent and Russian imports to 34 percent by 2002. See Morris Rossabi, “Modern Mongolia – From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists,” University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2005, p. 202; Tsedendamba Batbayar, “Mongolian Russian Relations in the Past Decade,” *Asian Survey* Vol. 43, No. 6, pp. 951-970, November/December 2003, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2003.43.6.951> (accessed 30 September 2014), p. 955.

¹⁷ Roger McDermott, “Russian-Mongolian Defense Cooperation and Selanga 2011,” *The Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 8, Issue 172, 20 September 2011 www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38426&no_cache=1#.VCJ3hPmSySp (accessed 24 September 2014).

¹⁸ Radchenko, op. cit.

¹⁹ Morris Rossabi, “*Modern Mongolia – From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists*,” University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 200.

²⁰ Radchenko, op. cit.

²¹ Alan M. Wachman, “Suffering What It Must? Mongolia and the Power of the ‘Weak’,” *Orbis* Vol. 54, Issue 4, pp. 583-602, September 2001. www.researchgate.net/publication/248543523_Suffering_What_It_Must_Mongolia_and_the_Power_of_the_Weak (accessed 30 September 2014), pp. 600-1.



Trends in Mongolia's relationship with Third Neighbours

Since Mongolia's commodity boom started with the run-up to the exploration of new copper, gold and coal deposits in 2010, the country has placed greater emphasis on diversifying its FDI through economic relations with Third Neighbours. Investments by companies from Third Neighbours, most prominently Canadian Ivanhoe Mines backed by the British-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, have boosted Mongolia to become the fastest-growing economy in the world, with about 17.5 percent growth in 2011 (though significantly less in real terms, because of 10 percent inflation the same year).²²

Third Neighbours' investments are mostly guided by business interests, rather than foreign policy considerations. However, the beginning of the boom has been followed by a decline in investments as a result of corrupt practices. Mongolian foreign policy expert Mendee Jargalsaikhainy points out that competition between different political and economic factions, the influence of populist politicians, growing environmental concerns, as well as the aggressive business tactics of Russian and Chinese state-owned enterprises have turned away Western investors. In January 2013, the US Embassy in Mongolia described the regulatory environment for foreign investment in Mongolia as "extremely chaotic, characterized by abrupt, non-transparent attempts to change laws."²³

Out of fear that the Mongolian authorities might not honour agreements, large investments have been withdrawn from Mongolia and mining projects have come to a halt, leading to an economic crisis and negative real GDP growth in 2012 (12 percent GDP growth, 15 percent inflation).²⁴ FDI decreased

by 54 percent in 2013 alone.²⁵

As a result of the decrease in foreign investments, the Mongolian government has granted greater rights to foreign companies, including the removal of restrictions, as well as investment guarantees and tax stabilization.²⁶ Finally, after a two-year dispute between Rio Tinto and the Mongolian government over tax and royalty payments, the parties reached a deal in May 2015 to continue the development of the Oyu Tolgoi copper and gold mine. This does not change the situation that mining companies remain wary of the investment environment and that many venture capital firms have left Ulaanbaatar. As a Mongolian senior diplomat put it: "The Mongolian leadership has gambled away a whole generation of prosperity through its corrupt practices."²⁷

While the latest measures indicate Ulaanbaatar's recognition that diversifying FDI away from China will depend on macroeconomic stability and governance reform, it remains uncertain whether the Mongolian government can win back the trust of Western investors, or whether Ulaanbaatar will become increasingly dependent on China and Russia.

NATO-Mongolia relations in the light of Mongolian foreign policy

Mongolia's rationale for partnering with NATO is clearly guided by its Third Neighbour Policy, proving to Moscow and Beijing that the Mongolians are valued Global Partners of the Alliance. Mongolian policy planners who pushed for the partnership with NATO as early as the 1990s considered this step as a means to support Mongolia's independence and sovereignty from Russia and China, through

²² World Bank, "Mongolia," 2014, data.worldbank.org/country/mongolia (accessed 30 September 2014).

²³ Lawrence, p. 8.

²⁴ World Bank, "Mongolia."

²⁵ Michael Kohn, "Mongolia Considers Changing Laws to Stimulate Mining Investment." *Bloomberg*, 21 April 2014 www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-21/mongolia-eyes-changing-laws-to-stimulate-mining-investment.html (accessed 30 September 2014).

²⁶ Allens, "Focus: Mongolia's new investment law," *Asia*, 21 October 2013, www.allens.com.au/pubs/asia/foasia21oct13.htm (accessed 30 September 2014).

²⁷ Interview with Mongolian official in Ulaanbaatar, 19 May 2014.



diversification in the defence sector.²⁸

Beyond strategic foreign policy considerations, engagement with NATO has also given the Mongolian forces the chance to become internationally renowned for their peacekeeping efforts, demonstrating Mongolia's self-confidence as a strong and courageous nation. Mongolians take pride in their country's contribution to international security. In addition to recognition for this, Mongolia's participation in NATO-led missions has further enhanced the Mongolian forces' capacity for peacekeeping, counterterrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, as well as their ability to maintain combat readiness in peace time.

Of course, Mongolia's partnership with NATO is a two-way street. For NATO, Mongolia serves as a model partner that has not been a traditional NATO or US ally. As a former Soviet satellite state that has undergone tremendous reforms and developed into a model democracy or regional standards (with the exception of corruption) in its region, NATO has a natural interest in establishing relations because of the Alliance's democratic nature and because non-Western partners add legitimacy to NATO's missions.

NATO's most tangible gains from the partnership with Mongolia have been troop contributions, numbering 72 to the 2005-2007 Kosovo Force (KFOR) and 120 to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (from 2003 to 2014, Mongolia contributed a total of 1,108 troops and 351 trainers through nine rotations in Afghanistan, which includes its contribution to the US-led mission Operation Enduring Freedom – OEF)²⁹. Not only does Ulaanbaatar send an impressive number of personnel in relation to its very small population (less than 3 million) and GDP (\$11.5 billion, less

than 1 percent of the GDP generated by New York City); the Mongolian Armed Forces also perform very demanding tasks, such as protecting bases and conducting patrols in dangerous terrain. Therefore, Mongolia is generally considered a net contributor to international security, making the country interesting for NATO, which is seeking such capabilities through partners.

Development of the partnership

Starting from the 1990s, Mongolia had expressed its interest in partnering with the Alliance through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.³⁰ At the time, individual NATO member states expressed their opposition to including Mongolia, because of its distant geographic location. The US, for example, would have preferred Mongolia to integrate into the Northeast Asian – rather than Central Asian – security structure, which is why Mongolia was placed within the purview of the US Pacific Command, falling outside the scope of the PfP programme. In addition, NATO states were concerned about irritating Russia and China by reaching too far into their traditional sphere of influence immediately after the end of the Cold War.³¹

Only after Mongolia contributed troops to NATO-led combat, training and capacity-building operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan did the Alliance recognize the value of cooperating with Ulaanbaatar. In 2001 Mongolia became a NATO Contact Country and, in 2010, it was acknowledged as a troop-contributing country.³² When NATO outlined its new partnership policy in 2011, the Mongolian Embassy in Brussels was successfully tasked to establish Mongolia as a "Partner across the Globe." Brussels and Ulaanbaatar signed the

²⁸ Assessment based on interview with a dozen of official in Ulaanbaatar, May 2014.

²⁹ Lawrence, pg. 12; NATO. "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures", ISAF September 3, 2014 www.isaf.nato.int/images/media/PDFs/140904placemat.pdf (accessed 30 September 2014). NATO, "Resolute Support Mission." May 2015, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_f2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_05/20150508_1505-RSM-Placemat.pdf (accessed 17 June 2015).

³⁰ Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "Finally A New Era in NATO-Mongolia Relations," The George Washington University, *Voices From Central Asia*, No. 1 June 2012 http://037eabf.netsohost.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Voices_from_CA_1_June_2012.pdf (accessed 30 September 2014), p. 2.

³¹ Mashbat Otgonbayar Sarlagtay, "Mongolia's Immediate Security Challenges: Implication to Defense Sector and The Regional Cooperation," p. 111.

³² Jargalsaikhan, p. 4.



Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme in 2012.

While those who are sceptical of NATO's engagement with Mongolia claim that this was a geopolitical strategy to counter Russia and China, the Alliance had actually been hesitant to enter into a partnership with Mongolia because of its sensitive geopolitical position. This indicates that NATO's partnership policy is often more cautious than is claimed by third parties, such as Russia. Since Mongolia entered into a partnership with NATO in 2012, the Alliance has given Russia and China no serious reason to fear that it will use Mongolia as a strategic partner for stationing forces in the region.³³

Of course, NATO and Mongolia are pursuing defence cooperation on a lower level. As part of the military-to-military engagement, Mongolia takes part in NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), which includes language, curriculum, and faculty training. Mongolia has also adjusted its "Five Hills" Peace Support Operations Training Centre to NATO standards, to become NATO's 29th PTEC, and the first among the Alliance's Global Partners.

On the civilian side, NATO is implementing two Science for Peace and Security (SPS) projects in Mongolia. One is focused on the restoration of former Soviet military bases; the other is aimed at helping to upgrade government IT infrastructure.³⁴ By financing science projects, NATO's civilian arm also seeks to have a positive impact on Mongolia's security.

NATO and Mongolia also *cooperate* through political consultations. In February 2014, Mongolia sent a high-level delegation to NATO Headquarters to

discuss Mongolia's foreign policy, its expectations of the partnership with NATO, its relations with Russia and China, security in Asia, as well as humanitarian assistance and emergency management. In addition, political consultations occur regularly on a 28+1 basis (NATO's 28 member states + Mongolia) with Mongolia's Defence Attaché in Brussels, and during NATO summits – for example, most recently in Wales, when Mongolia was represented at ministerial level.

According to Mongolian and NATO officials, both parties are satisfied with the relationship and intend to remain active in shaping it. Mongolia has engaged mostly through its Ministry of Defence, especially Vice Minister and former Ambassador to Brussels Avirmed Battur. However, NATO also hopes to develop the partnership on the civilian side because of the Alliance's political character.

Limitations of the partnership

The complex balancing act of entangled interests

Ulaanbaatar's foreign policy towards NATO is greatly affected by Russia's and China's perception of Mongolia's engagement with the Alliance. Mongolia designed its Third Neighbour Policy to increase its independence and capitalize on mutual tolerance between the actors in the resulting strategic triangulation,³⁵ which Ulaanbaatar tries to maintain by avoiding the perception of having an exclusive relationship with any of them. Therefore, to gain maximum benefit from the relationship with NATO, Mongolia must know its limits; otherwise it risks upsetting the balance between Russia, China and the Third Neighbours.³⁶

³³ As Mongolia's constitution forbids Ulaanbaatar to enter into a military alliance and to station foreign troops on its territory, the possibility of a NATO base was ruled out even before the parties started dealing with each other.

³⁴ NATO, "Launch of Two SPS Projects in Mongolia," *News*, 13 March 2013, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_99089.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 30 September 2014).

³⁵ Wachman, pp. 585 and 588.

³⁶ One may wonder whether Mongolia has a balanced relationship with its partners in the first place, and whether it is even possible to balance partnerships, considering the structural dependency on one or the other in critical economic sectors and the defence industry. It is important to note that while Ulaanbaatar's relationships within specific foreign policy areas are clearly oriented in one direction or another, Mongolia's overall foreign policy is perceived as balanced. Thus, Ulaanbaatar is very careful not to change the status quo in any specific field, because this could lead to suspicion among its partners.



Maintaining the status quo has become much harder as business and government interests have become intertwined, thus further complicating already complex relationships. For example, the Kremlin's eagerness to maintain a stronghold in Mongolia's business sector has led Russia to buy shares in Rio Tinto. At the same time, China has initiated an information campaign to scare off Mongolians from Russian businesses.³⁷

In addition to covert actions in the business sector, both China and Russia react with diplomatic measures and incentives to prevent Ulaanbaatar from engaging too much with anyone else. When Mongolia joined the US-led coalition of the willing in Iraq, Russia offered an extensive military assistance package and increased defence cooperation through high-level meetings and annual exercises, while delaying air clearances for NATO aircraft to fly Mongolian ammunition to Iraq.³⁸ Moscow also supposedly dissuaded Mongolia from participating in the French-supported Lebanon mission.³⁹ Most recently, when US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited Ulaanbaatar in April 2014 to sign a "joint vision" statement to expand military cooperation, Russia held Vice-Ministerial meetings in Moscow with Mongolian officials to agree on a visit by President Putin to Mongolia for the 75th anniversary of the Soviet-Mongolian victory over Japan in World War Two.⁴⁰ These examples provide albeit limited insight into the tug of war to secure individual interests, and the balancing act that this entails for Ulaanbaatar's foreign policy makers.

Implications of current events

The partnership is also affected by current events that do not have direct repercussions for Ulaanbaatar, but do impact NATO's relations with Russia and China. Since the start of the crisis in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014, Russia-NATO relations have sharply deteriorated. Unlike Ukraine, possible Mongolian membership of NATO has never been a distinct prospect (and would actually be out of the question, given Mongolia's constitutional obligation not to join a military alliance,⁴¹ and NATO's to accept only European states as future members⁴²). However, as Putin aims to win back influence in former Soviet-controlled regions, Russia's opinion about Ulaanbaatar's partnership with NATO has changed. At first, the Kremlin did not resist Mongolia's cooperation with NATO as long as it would not negatively affect Moscow's bilateral relations with Ulaanbaatar. The rationale for such a view is the tradition of considering Mongolia as a geopolitical buffer against China, without strategic implications for Russia's relations with the West. Today, the Kremlin seems more sensitive to NATO's actions in the former Soviet sphere of influence. Ulaanbaatar has therefore become more careful in handling its relations with Third Neighbours, even abstaining from the UN vote of censure against Russia's annexation of Crimea⁴³ and staying publically quiet on the matter.⁴⁴

China has largely kept its own counsel about Ulaanbaatar's multilateral engagement, but shown concern about Mongolia's relationship with

³⁷ Interview with Mongolian official in Ulaanbaatar, May 20, 2014.

³⁸ Jargalsaikhan, p. 3.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Alicia J. Campi, "Mongolia Hosts Brief Visit From US Defense Secretary," *The Jamestown Foundation Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, Issue 75, 23 April 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42257&no_cache=1#.VCnFxlYxFlI (accessed 29 September 2014).

⁴¹ Government of Mongolia, "Concept of Foreign Policy of Mongolia."

⁴² NATO "The North Atlantic Treaty," *Official Texts* http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm, 4 April 1949 (accessed 30 September 2014), Article X.

⁴³ Alicia J. Campi, "Mongolia Makes Moves to Reach out to Russia in reaction to Ukraine Crisis," *The Jamestown Foundation Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, Issue 101, 30 May 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42449&no_cache=1#.VCpuHfmSySo (accessed 30 September 2014).

⁴⁴ Alicia Campi of the Mongolia Society speculates that these political considerations are also driven by economic interests, for example the attempt to establish a new transportation route through Russia to bypass China when trying to reach other Asia-Pacific partners with mineral exports. See Campi, Alicia J., "Mongolia Hosts Brief Visit From US Defense Secretary."



individual states, including the US and India.⁴⁵ Beijing is especially concerned over US engagement in Mongolia for geopolitical reasons, fearing that Mongolia is a pawn on the US chessboard in the Pacific region.⁴⁶ These concerns could lead China to enact measures to limit NATO's relations with partners in its immediate neighbourhood, including Mongolia.

Mongolia's reluctance

Mongolia has reiterated its readiness to step up the partnership, but has not followed up with concrete action.⁴⁷ This could indicate its satisfaction with the status quo, as it has reached the symbolic goal of forming a partnership with NATO. Other explanations may be that Mongolia fears to take the partnership to another level because of Russian opposition, or that it does not have the resources to follow through with specific commitments.

In addition, the Mongolian government is reluctant to initiate a public debate about its partnership with NATO, limiting relations to expert-level cooperation. Ulaanbaatar also prefers not to publicize related documents, such as the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which makes it hard for civil society to gain information about what the partnership entails. This lack of transparency, partly intended to avoid attracting too much attention from foreign and domestic critics of the partnership, limits prospects of deeper relations in the near future as it demonstrates that Mongolia is not ready to fully engage in the democratic process.

Future of the partnership

Despite the limits of NATO's partnership with Mongolia, there is room for development within the existing framework outlined in the IPCP, focusing

on practical and non-controversial measures in the military and civilian sector:

1. upgrading Ulaanbaatar's service personnel hospital. Mongolia has already requested equipment to modernize the hospital. However, NATO does not have the mechanisms to provide this kind of support to partner countries, which is understandable considering the potential ramifications for the Alliance if dozens of partner states were suddenly to request similar assistance. What NATO can do, however, is to fund projects that aim to provide medical expertise. Another possibility would be to assist Mongolia in setting up field hospitals which may be used by NATO forces, and thus directly contribute to the Alliance, as was the case with upgrading the Five Hills PTEC, which can be used by Mongolia, NATO and other states;
2. enhancing the training and education of forces, including increased attendance of Mongolian personnel at the many courses offered by NATO, including at the NATO Defense College, and cooperation in further exercises in addition to "Khan Quest";
3. expanding cooperation on cyber security. According to a Mongolian Ministry of Defence official, the administration has suffered several cyber attacks, including one that was traced back to a Chinese graduate student. NATO could help harden Ulaanbaatar's cyber infrastructure by sharing best practices through its Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia, or even by funding further hardware as the organization has been doing on a limited scale through its

⁴⁵ Jargalsaikhan, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Wachman, p. 594.

⁴⁷ For example, Mongolia has not participated in military certification programs that bring forces up to NATO standards in terms of training, doctrine and equipment, possibly because Ulaanbaatar is hesitant to interface more extensively with NATO's military structure. Instead, Mongolia seems to prefer ad hoc cooperation, for example through assistance in the defence planning process.



Science for Peace and Security Programme;

4. making the partnership genuinely public, to counter suspicion of NATO in Russia, in China and also within Mongolia itself. This would require Ulaanbaatar to be more transparent, beyond expert-level contacts. NATO would not need to go as far as setting up a NATO information centre. It would be a good start simply to organize public diplomacy events through the embassy of its contact nation (currently Turkey, which traditionally has strong relations with Mongolia), for example by focusing on civilian cooperation through NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme or the defence education programmes at Mongolia's National Defence University. NATO could also gain attention by sending a high-level official to Mongolia for the first time. Another step could be to publicize the partnership agreement on Mongolian government websites. Showing that NATO has nothing to hide would reassure Russia and China of the Alliance's intentions, which might provide greater leeway for Ulaanbaatar to expand cooperation with Brussels. It would also provide the public with the opportunity to shape (or start) the debate about where Mongolia's relationship with NATO is going, thereby enhancing transparency, trust in the government and, as a result, social stability;

5. appointing a military liaison officer at NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), to ensure continued political dialogue and the enhancement of military-to-military cooperation. A contact point beyond Ulaanbaatar's Defence Attaché would help Mongolia to gain greater knowledge of the Alliance's military structure and civilian programmes, which would allow Mongolia to take better advantage of NATO courses and civilian grants. While not considered in NATO's current grant portfolio, the

Alliance could encourage Mongolia to send a liaison officer by establishing a fund to support the position financially.

Conclusion

The challenges outlined above clearly limit the scope of possible cooperation. In the foreseeable future, NATO's partnership with Mongolia will not develop to the same level as relations with other partners in the Far East, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

However, the partnership will continue to be of practical value to the security interests of both sides. NATO provides training to Mongolian soldiers, while Mongolia allows NATO forces to train at its Five Hills Peace Support Operations Training Centre. NATO helps Mongolia to harden its cyber infrastructure and to de-contaminate former Soviet military bases, while Ulaanbaatar provides NATO with the opportunity to highlight its legitimacy by partnering with another Asian democracy.

But it would be a quantum leap for the relationship to reach the next level, for example with permanent Mongolian commitments to NATO. After all, the relationship may have a different value for the two sides: while Mongolia may have already achieved its primary objective of adding a credible pillar to its Third Neighbour Policy by cooperating with NATO, the Alliance may be seeking significant further force contributions to NATO-led operations.

The future of the partnership will depend not only on Mongolia's and NATO's interests (symbolism vs. manpower), but also on external factors that shape Mongolia's strategic environment, including business interests, Russia's expansionist policies, and China's continuing rise. Questions remain regarding the extent to which Ulaanbaatar can use its Third Neighbour Policy – and thus its engagement with NATO – to counter China's growing economic influence, which might result in further domestic balancing instead of building closer ties with Third Neighbours. Single actions may also help to drive or hinder further cooperation, for example Mongolia's



contribution to NATO's post-ISAF Afghanistan engagement.

When asked about the partnership, NATO officials argue that they did not invite Russia's and China's opinion about the Alliance's partnership with Mongolia. While it remains an important principle for NATO's partnerships not to be guided by third parties, it is also realistic to recognize that geopolitical power games impact the scope of NATO's out-of-area commitment. NATO and Mongolia should use the fresh momentum to fill the partnership agreement with life. Otherwise, they will inevitably have to fear that the Kremlin will try to corrupt the partnership politically, or that Beijing's growing economic weight may completely overturn Mongolia's foreign policy calculus.