

Mongolia's Delicate Diplomatic Balance: Strategic Choices Between China, Russia, and the "Third Neighbor"

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Abstract: *Mongolia's distinctive geopolitical circumstances necessitate the adoption of a specialized foreign policy. Since its independence in 1921, Mongolia has consistently recalibrated its foreign policy strategies. In the latter phase of its previous administration and continuing into the present, the Mongolian People's Party has intensified political and military cooperation with the United States. While China and Russia acknowledge the strategic necessity of Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy, persistent vacillation in Mongolia's diplomatic posture may adversely affect its relations with its two neighboring powers.*

Keywords: *Mongolia, Third Neighbor, Foreign Policy, China-Mongolia Relations, Mongolia-U.S. Relations*

On June 28, 2024, Mongolia held its parliamentary election for the State Great Khural (Parliament), where the Mongolian People's Party secured 68 out of 126 seats, once again becoming the largest party in the State Great Khural.¹ After the election, although Mongolian President Khurelsukh and Foreign Minister Battsetseg attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, on July 3,² the heads of state from China, Russia, and Mongolia did not hold their customary trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit. Instead, a foreign ministers' meeting was held, attended by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and Mongolian Foreign Minister Battsetseg.³

Since 2014, China, Russia, and Mongolia have held six trilateral meetings of their heads of state, all of which took place during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits. This marks the only occasion, aside from 2017, where a meeting was not held despite the presence of all three leaders (in 2020, 2021, and 2023, Xi Jinping participated in the meetings virtually). Consequently, this situation immediately sparked speculation, with many suspecting other underlying reasons.⁴

Upon returning from Astana, Mongolia's leadership began a series of reciprocal visits with the United States: from July 21 to 23,

¹ 2024 СОНГУУЛЬ, 29 June 2024, Ikon.mn, <https://ikon.mn/elections/2024>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

² President of Mongolia Khurelsukh to Attend SCO Summit, 02 July 2024, Montsame, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/347055>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

³ О встрече Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова, Министра иностранных дел Китайской Народной Республики Ван И и Министра иностранных дел Монголии Б.Батцэцэг, 03 July 2024, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/vizity-ministra/1960689/?lang=ru. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁴ Sumiya Chuluunbaatar, Why Did China, Mongolia, and Russia Skip Their Trilateral Leaders' Summit at This Year's SCO Gathering? 16 July 2024, The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/why-did-china-mongolia-and-russia-skip-their-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-this-years-sco-gathering>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

Mongolian Foreign Minister Battsetseg visited the United States,⁵ on August 1, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made Mongolia the final stop of his Asia tour;⁶ on the same day, newly re-elected Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene visited the U.S.⁷ This series of interactions is characterized by the following: First, it marked the first visit by a U.S. Secretary of State to Mongolia in eight years. Second, it was the second consecutive year that the Mongolian Prime Minister visited the U.S. Third, the first official visit after each election often signals the primary foreign policy direction of the newly formed government.

The Evolution of Mongolia's Foreign Policy

Since its independence in 1921, Mongolia's foreign strategy has undergone three distinct phases: the "Leaning to One Side" policy, the "Multi-pillared" approach, and the "Third Neighbor Policy."

Initially, as Mongolia's independence was achieved with Soviet support, the country adopted a "Leaning to One Side" foreign policy, aligning its external security strategy exclusively with the Soviet Union. Due to the deep influence of the Soviet Union, Mongolia was even referred to as the "16th Soviet Republic."⁸ This foreign policy choice was constrained by the regional dynamics of the time, as Mongolia had no real autonomy in its decision-making and was forced to serve as a strategic buffer zone for the Soviet Union in the face of existential threats to its survival.

This was particularly evident during the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Soviet Union "deployed millions of troops (陈兵百万)⁹" along the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders in the Far East, with little regard for the consequences such a conflict might have for Mongolia. On the other hand, under Soviet assistance, Mongolia gained international recognition, joined the United Nations and other international organizations, and saw a certain level of economic development within the country.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Mongolia's geopolitical environment underwent fundamental changes. To adapt to this shift, in 1994, Mongolia's State Great Khural established an "open, non-aligned, multi-pillared" foreign policy.¹⁰ This policy

⁵ Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue between Mongolia and the United States to be Held, 23 July 2024, Montsame, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/34820>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁶ U.S. Secretary of State Arrives in Mongolia for an Official Visit, 01 August 2024, Montsame, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/348725>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁷ Prime Minister of Mongolia and Vice President of the US Hold Official Talks, 03 August 2024, Montsame, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/324161>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁸ The Mongolian sandwich, 08 October 2011, Economist, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2011/10/08/the-mongolian-sandwich>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

⁹ A figurative expression in Chinese, indicating an enormous quantity without representing an actual number.

¹⁰ МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ГАДААД БОДЛОГЫН ҮЗЭЛ БАРИМТЛАЛ, Монгол Улсын Их Хурлын 1994 оны 56 дугаар тогтоолын 2 дугаар хавсралт, legalinfo.mn,

emphasized that building friendly relations with China and Russia would become the primary focus of Mongolia's foreign relations, while also prioritizing the development of cooperative and friendly relations with Western countries, developing nations, and international organizations. This approach completely transformed the previously passive, all-encompassing alliance with the Soviet Union, marking a shift toward an independent foreign policy strategy based on Mongolia's geopolitical realities and its own defense capabilities.

In 2011, while retaining the original elements of its foreign policy framework, the State Great Khural formally incorporated the "Third Neighbor" policy through legislation. This policy outlined that Mongolia would, within this framework, foster partnerships and cooperation with countries such as the United States, Japan, the European Union, India, South Korea, and Turkey, among other Western, Eastern, and relevant nations.¹¹ The formulation of this policy had a clear focus on China and Russia. On the one hand, it aimed to prevent Mongolia's fate from being solely dictated by its two neighbors, China and Russia. On the other hand, by introducing the influence of the U.S., a common strategic competitor of both China and Russia, into Mongolia, it could enhance Mongolia's diplomatic standing with its two neighbors, thereby gaining more leverage in negotiations with both countries. From the perspective of international politics and diplomacy, both China and Russia can understand the rationale and necessity behind Mongolia's formulation of the "Third Neighbor" policy. As long as Mongolia avoids engaging in substantive strategic security cooperation with the United States, it will not cross the fundamental red lines of either China or Russia. This is especially true for China, as there are no unresolved major political issues or territorial disputes between China and Mongolia. Moreover, since 1999, China has consistently been Mongolia's largest investor and trading partner.

In addition, in 2015, Mongolia explored the possibility of becoming a permanently neutral country. The then-President of Mongolia, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj from the Democratic Party of Mongolia, formally announced at the United Nations General Assembly that Mongolia intended to become a permanently neutral state.¹² On October 20, 2015, the President's legal advisor submitted a draft law on Mongolia's permanent neutrality to the State Great

<https://legalinfo.mn/mn/detail?lawId=203088>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

¹¹ МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ГАДААД БОДЛОГЫН ҮЗЭЛ, Улсын Их Хурлын 2011 оны дугаар тогтоолын хавсралт, <https://nda.gov.mn/backend/f/2xkJuDj148.pdf>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

¹² Tsakhiagiin ELBEGDORJ, MONGOLIA – NEUTRALITY, 10 September 2015, Permanent Mission of Mongolia to the United Nations, <https://www.un.int/mongolia/news/mongolia-neutrality>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

Khural.¹³ However, after the Mongolian People's Party came to power in 2016, the draft was withdrawn on the grounds that "the external environment has changed and further study is required."¹⁴

The Elbegdorj administration's proposal for permanent neutrality reflected its perception of direct or indirect threats facing Mongolia at the time. On one hand, the Ukraine crisis that erupted in 2014 rapidly deteriorated U.S.-Russia relations; on the other hand, the U.S.'s "Pivot to Asia" strategy led to increased tensions between China and the U.S. These two factors made it difficult for Mongolia to engage in extensive interactions with the U.S. under its "Third Neighbor" foreign policy, as doing so would inevitably force Mongolia to take sides. Choosing either side would have posed significant challenges and unfavorable consequences for Mongolia.

The Substance of Mongolia-U.S. Relations

From Obama's "Pivot to Asia" to Trump's "Indo-Pacific Strategy", although the terminology differed, the core objective remained the same: to ensure the continued presence of U.S. power in the Asia-Pacific region, prevent Russia's resurgence, and counter China's growing international influence. Mongolia's geographical location, bordering both China and Russia, aligns with U.S. strategic objectives, making it a key focus for Washington, which has sought to position Mongolia as a strategic foothold in Northeast Asia to curb the influence and development of both China and Russia in the region.

Although, although the "Third Neighbor" policy remains Mongolia's primary foreign policy approach, the direction of Mongolia-U.S. relations has largely been shaped by American interests. The U.S. has consistently taken the lead in determining the trajectory of bilateral relations, with Mongolia playing a more reactive role.

Firstly, the concept of the "Third Neighbor" was originally proposed by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker during his visit to Mongolia in August 1990. Baker expressed that the United States was willing to serve as Mongolia's "third neighbor."¹⁵ At that time, Mongolia was in the midst of its democratic revolution, and Baker's statement undoubtedly presented Mongolia's newly formed government and its people with an unprecedented option. It indicated that Mongolia's foreign policy orientation was not limited to its two neighbors, China and Russia, but that the U.S. could offer a viable alternative—a path that could lead them toward the democratic world they aspired to join. This concept was repeatedly

¹³ Bill on permanent neutrality status submitted, 20 October 2015, Montsame, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/120977>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

¹⁴ Khurelbaatar S. 中立战略与蒙古国对外安全战略选择[J]. 当代亚太, 2017, (02), P74.

¹⁵ Densmaa, Oyuntssetseg & Kaliinaa, Gerelchimeg & Nanzad, Norovsuren & Otgonbayar, Tsogzolboo. (2021). MONGOLIA'S "THIRD NEIGHBOR POLICY". Proceedings of the XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference, 10.31435/rsglobal_conf/25012021/7365.

mentioned during high-level exchanges between the two countries, and in 2011, Mongolia officially incorporated it into its "Foreign Policy Concept" and granted it legal status.

Secondly, the development of Mongolia-U.S. relations has been determined by the degree of the U.S.'s strategic need for Mongolia. In the early 21st century, as the U.S. conducted military operations globally with counterterrorism as its strategic objective, Mongolia openly expressed its support and actively deployed troops to participate, laying a critical foundation for the development of military relations between the two countries. During Obama's presidency, driven by the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, the U.S. established stronger bilateral ties with Mongolia.

In June 2019, under the Trump administration, Mongolia was listed as an important partner in the "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report", and the two countries established a strategic partnership.¹⁶ Since Joe Biden took office in 2021, the U.S., motivated by its trade war with China and its sanctions against Russia following the Ukraine invasion, has continued to emphasize its role as Mongolia's "third neighbor." Furthermore, the U.S. has expanded its military cooperation with Mongolia and increased high-level diplomatic exchanges.

Moreover, there is a significant imbalance in the political, economic, and military cooperation between Mongolia and the United States. In the political realm, it has been 19 years since a U.S. president last visited Mongolia (George W. Bush in 2005), and 13 years since a U.S. vice president visited (Joe Biden in 2011). The highest-ranking U.S. officials to visit Mongolia since then have been Secretaries of State. In contrast, the President of Mongolia visited the U.S. twice, in 2011 and 2019, and the Prime Minister has visited the U.S. in both 2023 and 2024.

In the economic realm, although the U.S. has become Mongolia's fifth-largest trading partner, the trade volume is predominantly driven by Mongolian imports from the U.S., and there is a significant imbalance in the trade relationship.¹⁷ In the military cooperation field, U.S.-Mongolia collaboration primarily involves the U.S. providing funding, technology, equipment, and personnel training to Mongolia, which means that the U.S. maintains absolute control over the content and terms of cooperation.

In summary, while the U.S. appears to play a role in the partnership that aligns with Mongolia's diplomatic strategy, in reality, Mongolia's position in the relationship is heavily dictated by U.S. global strategy. The asymmetry in their cooperation leaves Mongolia at a constant disadvantage, preventing it from fully

¹⁶ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, The Department of Defense of U.S., 01 June 2019. P30.

¹⁷ Source: World Bank, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MNG/Year/LTST/Summary>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

realizing the expected outcomes of its "Third Neighbor" policy.

The U.S. Pursuit of Military Presence in Eurasia

In 2021, the United States sought to establish military bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to address counterterrorism needs arising from the changing situation in Afghanistan, but both countries rejected the request.¹⁸ Kyrgyzstan, after closing the Manas Air Base in 2014, also explicitly stated that it would no longer welcome a U.S. military presence. Kazakhstan has similarly reiterated multiple times that it will not allow the stationing of foreign troops on its soil.¹⁹

Many external observers attribute the rise of ISIS to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the U.S.'s renewed efforts to establish overseas military bases in Central Asia are ostensibly justified by counterterrorism needs. However, military bases in allied countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia are more than sufficient to address these stated needs. The continued lobbying for a military presence in Central Asia reveals a broader strategic intent beyond just counterterrorism.

The firm stance of Central Asian countries is due, in part, to concerns that the democratic values promoted by the U.S. could negatively impact social stability. Even Kyrgyzstan, often referred to as Central Asia's "island of democracy," is reluctant to allow the return of U.S. military forces. Additionally, these countries are well aware that their security can be safeguarded by China and Russia, as well as through the regional security mechanisms they share. For instance, the Russian 201st Military Base is still stationed along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border,²⁰ and China has been actively cooperating with Central Asian countries on counterterrorism initiatives within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), including regular military exercises.

Allowing a U.S. military presence would not enhance their security; instead, it could introduce instability into an otherwise stable regional environment.

After facing obstacles in Central Asia, the U.S. is likely to turn its attention to Mongolia in Northeast Asia. As a strategic pivot in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, Mongolia's significance to the U.S.

¹⁸ Кабулов: Таджикистан и Узбекистан не будут размещать в своих странах американские войска, 24 May 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11450929>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

¹⁹ Астана вновь заявляет, что военных баз США на Каспии нет, 9 July 2018, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-russia-caspian-sea-us-base/29352734.html>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

Строительство базы США в Казахстане не обсуждается – Токаев, 03 June 2020, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/stroitelstvo-bazyi-ssha-v-kazahstane-ne-obsujdaetsya-tokaev-404236. Accessed October 26, 2024.

²⁰ На российской военной базе в Таджикистане прошла проверка боевой готовности, Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности, 31 January 2024, <https://paodkb.org/events/na-rossiyskoy-voennoy-baze-v-tadzhikistane-proshla>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

extends far beyond economic and security cooperation, with military collaboration being particularly prominent.

Since 2003, Mongolia and the U.S. have conducted the “Khaan Quest” joint military exercises, which have been held approximately 20 times. These exercises aim to strengthen Mongolia’s military capabilities and promote international cooperation. At the opening ceremony, the Deputy Commanding General of U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) has almost annually emphasized that the purpose of the exercise is to “prepare participants for UN peacekeeping missions.”²¹ The exercises regularly invite delegations from over 20 countries, with Russia participating in several of the exercises and China joining in recent years.

However, in practice, the “Khaan Quest” exercises are co-hosted by the U.S. Army Pacific Command, and while other countries may participate, they are not permanent partners. The essence of these exercises remains primarily a platform for military cooperation between Mongolia and the United States.

Additionally, the U.S. Pacific Command and the Mongolian military co-host other joint exercises such as “Gobi Wolf (Говийн Чоно)”, “Balance Magic (Баланс Мэйжик)”, and “Peaceful Winter (Энхийн Өвөл)”. While each of these exercises focuses on different aspects, their content has expanded over time, forming a stable mechanism for military cooperation between Mongolia and the U.S. Since the 21st century, the two countries have conducted more than 40 joint military exercises, a frequency that can be considered quite high for any region in the world.

It is clear that Mongolia, bordered only by the two major powers of China and Russia, would never agree to the establishment of a U.S. military base on its territory, as this is explicitly prohibited by the Mongolian constitution. In 2014, then-President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj reaffirmed this position, stating that Mongolia would never allow the U.S. to set up a military base.²² Conversely, the U.S. has no strategic goal of establishing a military base in Mongolia. As a landlocked country surrounded by China and Russia, U.S. forces participating in military exercises in Mongolia must pass through Chinese airspace. If the U.S. were to station troops in Mongolia, it would not only lack guaranteed freedom of movement for its forces but also risk destabilizing the security situation in Northeast Asia—an outcome that China, Russia, Mongolia, and even the U.S. would prefer to avoid.

However, the U.S. can ensure a military presence in Mongolia

²¹ US Army Pacific Kicks off Khaan Quest 23 in Mongolia, Strengthening International Cooperation, 19 June 2023, https://mn.usembassy.gov/khaan-quest-2023/?_ga=2.41250983.409614484.1724005748-958996022.1719315221. Accessed October 26, 2024.

²² Mongolia will never host US military base – president, 14 October 2014, <https://tass.com/world/754200>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

through other means. The 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade (5th SFAB), part of the U.S. Army, was specifically created to implement the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, which emphasizes "expanding the competitive space" and "strengthening alliances and attracting new partners."²³ Since early 2021, the 5th SFAB has maintained a close partnership with the Mongolian Armed Forces. In October 2022, two advisor teams from the 2nd Battalion of the 5th SFAB were stationed in Mongolia for cooperative exercises and military training, a deployment that lasted until the summer of 2023.²⁴

This form of military cooperation differs from joint exercises, as the deep engagement and mutual understanding between the two militaries during this process is akin to long-term stationing. In effect, it allows the U.S. to achieve the objectives outlined in its National Defense Strategy under the watchful eyes of China and Russia, without provoking excessive concern from either of the two neighboring powers.

The Impact of Mongolia's Diplomatic Actions on Relations with China and Russia

Mongolia's foreign policy choices essentially boil down to two options. The first is to maintain relations with its "third neighbors," which could enable a balancing strategy to avoid potential threats. The second is to prioritize friendly relations with China and Russia under all circumstances, considering them more important than ties with third countries.

Former President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj's proposal for a "neutral country" law suggests that during the Democratic Party's time in power, the preference was for the first strategy. In contrast, the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) returned the draft, signaling that they likely viewed relations with China and Russia as more critical than relations with third neighbors.

However, from the final phase of the MPP's previous term (2023) through the beginning of its new term (as of August 2024), the party appears to be shifting toward a strategy more inclined to develop ties with third neighbors. Decisions such as the sale of rare earth to the United States and the disregard of invitations from China and Russia to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member appear to be testing the limits of its two neighbors. This situation mirrors the backdrop of Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj's 2015 "neutral country" proposal, where Mongolia, in response to heightened tensions between its two neighbors and the United States, adopted a more balanced

²³ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America", United States Department of Defense.

²⁴ US Army Advisors Strengthen Partnership in Mongolia, 10 April 2023, <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/Our-Story/Our-News/Article-Display/Article/3357637/us-army-advisors-strengthen-partnership-in-mongolia>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

diplomatic approach. By doing so, Mongolia aimed to avoid taking sides among the three powers and alleviate its sense of perceived threat.

In contrast, while the current administration has continued to deepen its engagement with the United States, it appears to have also taken into account the sensitivities of both China and Russia. For instance, just before the Khaan Quest military exercises in late April, Mongolia invited China to participate in the first-ever bilateral joint military exercise held on Mongolian soil.²⁵ Then, on August 12, following the conclusion of Khaan Quest, Mongolia invited Russian forces for bilateral military exercises.²⁶ These actions underscore Mongolia's strong desire during this period to "offend no one," a sentiment more pronounced than ever before.

In fact, as early as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Mongolia's donation of 30,000 sheep to China caused a massive sensation on Chinese social media, and relations between the two countries, especially at the popular level, reached unprecedented heights. In 2022, Mongolia, alongside China, abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, choosing not to betray Russia during a moment of crisis.

For both China and Russia, maintaining long-term, stable bilateral diplomatic relations with Mongolia is crucial. Both countries need a stable neighbor and are willing to make efforts to ensure this stability.

China understands Mongolia's diplomatic strategy, that under its unique geopolitical conditions, the "Third Neighbor" policy is an inevitable choice. However, the relationships between neighboring countries are permanent; no matter how Mongolia develops relations with other countries, China and Russia will always remain the most closely connected to Mongolia. "Balanced diplomacy" does not equate to "counterbalance diplomacy," and sacrificing the interests of its two neighbors for the sake of the "Third Neighbor" policy may ultimately prove counterproductive.

China and Russia hope to bring Mongolia into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member state, and through providing sufficient security, secure a more stable diplomatic focus from Mongolia. However, as things currently stand, Mongolia's policy fluctuations should not be excessive; excessive testing of boundaries may risk undermining the original intent behind Mongolia's foreign policy formulation.

²⁵ 中国与蒙古国将举行“草原伙伴-2024”陆军联合训练，中华人民共和国国防部，2024年4月29日。
<http://www.mod.gov.cn/qfbw/qwfb/16304603.html>. Accessed October 26, 2024.

²⁶ Россия и Монголия начинают масштабные учения «Селенга-2024», Первый канал, 19 August 2024, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2024-08-19/483569-rossiya_i_monqoliya_nachinayut_masshtabnye_ucheniya_selenga_2024. Accessed October 26, 2024.

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