

Strategic Gateway: Mongolia's Perplexing Challenges

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Abstract

Mongolia, a vast country with a crowded capital, faces economic recessions, poverty, unemployment, corruption, and infrastructure deficiencies, exacerbated by extreme weather conditions owing to its geographical location. Despite its recent sovereignty, self-sufficiency remains elusive. Cultural, historical, territorial, and political ties to neighbours offer advantages but entail dependence on Russia and China. Adjacent to Russia, a regime with invading potential, Mongolia faces the risk of attacks, but the presence of China acts as a short-term protective measure. Although China recognizes Mongolia as an independent country, it has a habit of claiming historical lands. Mongolia exists as a sovereign state predominantly because both Russia and China consider it a buffer state. Changes in Russo-Chinese dynamics could lead to Mongolia's absorption into China or it becoming a battleground for warfare. Despite being landlocked, Mongolia holds strategic significance in the maritime domain as an alternative trade route to China if the Malacca Strait is ever to be choked, though with minimal economic gains. Thus, Mongolia's significance as a remedy to a chokepoint is juxtaposed with its vulnerability to regional political tensions. To strengthen its foreign policy, Mongolia has sought to balance relations and establish partnerships with global powers outside its immediate neighbourhood.

Key Words

Buffer state, Democracy, Landlocked state, COVID-19, Russia-Ukraine war, One China Policy, Third Neighbours.

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Introduction

Mongolia is the second largest landlocked country in the world with its population of 3.1 million, inhabiting 1.56 million square kilometres. About 45 percent of the country's population lives in its largest city and the country's capital, Ulaanbaatar. (Mongolian Embassy, n.d.) Situating itself at the prime location between the two autocratic regimes, China and Russia, Mongolia evolved into a multi-party democracy post-1990, boosting its economy through adaptation of a new constitution favouring foreign relations and multilateral trade agreements. It is to the country's credit that despite being surrounded by autocratic regimes, it has upheld democracy and extended its international relations through multilateral economic and diplomatic relations with foreign countries.

Mongolia is abundant in its natural resources, owing to its geographical location. Mongolia ranks 18th in coal production and 23rd in coal reserves worldwide. (Tokmak, 2023) It also has rich deposits of gold, copper, iron, zinc etc. to its advantage that it trades with the foreign countries along with agricultural product exports like livestock and cashmere. (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, 2023) These resources are also catalytic to Mongolia's relation with other countries, including neighbours near and far. Mongolia's strategic positioning between China and Russia, makes them the country's only neighbours and thus limiting its choices between the devil and the deep blue sea. Russia is its only dealer of fuel and the singular supplier of electricity in the Western part. On the other hand, China holds hegemony in the country's trade, having exim relations through Mongolian minerals and Chinese consumer products. China Briefing states that the country exported US\$ 7.63 billion worth of materials, out of which 93 percent were mining products (Interesse, 2022). However, the country, upholding a democratic outlook and independent foreign policy, aims to connect with countries beyond the region. However, possessing resources without any power over it is far worse than not having any resources at all, as it invites security threats to the country.

For several decades prior to its adoption of democracy, Mongolia was classified as a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and China. Since its democratisation, the country had refused to pursue the outlook levied by the world on it and had laid down a long-term plan of establishing an independent foreign policy and a self-reliant state. Mongolia's geographical positioning can be treated as a plus and a minus. The country is in the process of churning the

best out of the existing circumstances, by accepting multilateral relations and adopting internationalism.

The sections following positions the plight of Mongolia under certain focuses. It aims to analyse the climate change issues underlying in the country and how it is formulated into a security threat. The later sections characterise Mongolia as a buffer state between Russia and China, critiquing its strategic prominence, autonomy, problems and prospects. It also presents insight on the country's relation with India, an emerging player in the Asia-Pacific and the future that the engagement holds.

Research Methodology

The work had relied on secondary data sources wherein contents from published literature including reports and reviews especially from online sources have been utilised. Data has been also sourced from tertiary sources who have conducted independent studies of market conditions with respect to the political arena. Further keen observation of the contemporary geopolitics and analysis from the literature has also helped the author in categorising her thoughts. News reports and articles are referred to as research materials to proceed with the research. The concept of buffer state is studied to contextualise the case of Mongolia. Further, sources are explored to study the trends and implications of the country's development. The qualitative secondary data collected has been thematically arranged and dissected further. Triangulation method of research has helped the paper in the effort of putting forth its points meticulously.

Climate Change Issues

As much as Mongolia is fertile in terms of its nature, it comes along with political and ecological inferences. On the one hand it is the resources factor that makes the country attractive to its neighbours, China and Russia; on the other, it is these very factors that are on the decline, leading to environmental threats and national security issues. Mongolia is hit with extremes, dire droughts and harsh winters accompanied by winter storms or dzuds. The Tsaikir Valley witnesses one of the world's cruellest winters, with temperatures falling below -50 celsius (-58F) every year (Cavanaugh, 2022). The drought wiped out grass covers in the steppe, making it extremely hard to pursue animal husbandry. The change however, is opined to be observed hardly from over a generation ago.

The Asian Development Bank reported in 2021 that there has been a decrease in rainfall since 1940, and that Mongolia is facing global warming on a higher average than the rest of the world. Climate catastrophes span from chronic droughts, dust storms, heat waves, river floods and related loss of ecosystems. Mongolia also lacks proper disaster management bodies to minimise the effect of calamities which essentially hits the poor more gravely. Raising concerns about food security, the country's agricultural yield has stagnated. (World Bank Group & Asian Development Bank, 2021)

Climate change also implies that it needs economic costs to manage the disasters. To rebuild the destructed infrastructure, restock agricultural stocks, and to have power backup, Ulaanbaatar needs to be more adaptive, after conducting a cost-benefit analysis. For a nomadic country like Mongolia, the estrangement from the normal climate pattern meant that the rural population would migrate to the already populated capital for job security.

Added to the climate change issue is the gross mismanagement of available resources, intensifying the possibility of scarcity of resources. Since 2013, Mongolian customs have failed to register approximately 6.4 million tonnes of coal, valued at \$1.8 billion, that was documented by Chinese customs (Wintour, 2022).

All sources agree that the intensity and frequency of climate change and the disasters are expected to increase in the coming years. Measures have been undertaken by the country to resist climate change. Mongolia had signed the Paris Agreement in 2016, promising to mitigate GHG emissions. However, there is a need to establish well-equipped disaster risk reduction bodies to cope with the climate change catastrophes and to have a grip over the loss of lives and resources and the pollution effects. The "One Billion Tree" initiative, launched by the Mongolian government aims at catching up to the damages caused by deforestation and making the land carbon-rich. The country also advocates a 'loss and damage fund', in which the largest greenhouse gases emitters will compensate the countries most affected by it (Cavanough, 2022).

Mongolia's Neighbours- Near and Far

Since the country became democratic, it has been open to various relations. Having major relations with its neighbours, Mongolia deems China and Russia as its strategic partners. Through the revamping of the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation in 1994, Mongolia invites the most share of trade and investment from China. Russia, on the other hand, has

historical alliances with Mongolia, deepened by the Soviet Union recognising Mongolia in the 1945 Yalta Conference. In 2019, Putin and his counterpart Battulga had signed the “Permanent Treaty of Friendship.” It has also extended its hands to the US and other NATO countries outside its neighbour circle. Mongolia treats India as a partner in the international politics arena. The following sections delve further into multiple dimensions of Mongolia’s international relations.

Mongolia: A Democratic Powerhouse

Mongolia has engaged with the world by enforcing independent foreign policy after the democratisation process. According to Freedom House’s “Freedom in the World 2022” report, Mongolia ranks 84 out of the 100 countries chosen, and was labelled as a “free” country with scores of 36 out of 40 in political rights and 48 out of 60 in civil liberties. They also note that elections are generally fair and follow a bi-party system. (Freedom House, 2022). To have democracy in a state compressed between two autocratic territories is commendable. Mongolia’s balance of relations between the Chinese and the Russian sovereignties can be inferred with respect to its maintenance of peaceful foreign policy with its immediate neighbours. Popularly termed as an “oasis of democracy” Mongolia, since the disintegration of the USSR, developed a military to back the UN peacekeeping force and became a global partner to NATO in 2012, thereby marking its individual existence divorced from its left-wing neighbours.

Of late, there has been strong distrust in the governance system. Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, representing the Mongolian People’s Party (MPP), stepped down from the position of prime minister in January 2021, reportedly amidst COVID-19-related demonstrations, although was nominated for June elections. The income disparity between the rich and the poor has forced the youth to question the nature of democracy in the country. To the country’s concern, it also struggles with rampant corruption, which requires that it rely more on its neighbours for resources. On the forefront, scandals such as, over the coal exports to China and misappropriation of education loans by politicians, define the lack of governance in the country. Young politicians unravel the gross dissatisfaction over reserving public funds and enterprises for individual benefit by political entities. There have been instances of protests in the capital city, led by young politicians, demanding justice for corruption of over 30 years, like the June 2022 agitations. (Wintour, 2023). A range of amends are in demand for the country’s prosperity and to establish anti-corruption practices. The magnitude of ongoing

reforms in areas such as anti-embezzlement policy, whistleblower legislation, enhanced data transparency, and restructuring of state-owned enterprises is considerable. With over 400 indicators, Mongolia's anti-corruption strategy reflects the comprehensive nature of these efforts. However, the justice minister acknowledges that merely having a well-crafted strategy is insufficient; robust enforcement requires an active civil society to ensure effective implementation of these laws. It is also moving towards a sort of mixed electoral system.

Mongolia: A Buffer State

Mongolia's official foreign policy has charted and upheld a feeling of camaraderie towards both the bear and the dragon. Both the nations share autonomy over the Mongolian market, essentially navigating the course of interest rates and other economic decisions. Sino-Russian neighbours aim at the mineral riches, transportation infrastructure, exports and economic investments. Although through adopting democratic governance and by refocusing its foreign policy internationally, the country tried to leave its footprint as an individual state, it has a long stride to cover towards becoming free of regional pressures and self-reliant.

In the Cold War days, Mongolia was viewed as committed to the Soviet bloc, which shrunk its growth as a separate entity. After its liberal transition, both the states have tried to persuade Mongolia from the cusps of the West. They have been supportive of Mongolia's military development and training in attempts to push the country towards their immediate neighbours. China has proposed closer collaboration with Mongolia in the realm of peacekeeping missions in Africa, alongside Russia, as a means to reduce Western influence in Mongolia. Despite these overtures, Ulaanbaatar has steadfastly resisted, preserving its ability to pursue independent policy objectives. Mongolia distinguishes itself by utilising its military for diplomatic influence rather than coercion, earning support and contributing to its success as a democratic nation. Notably, Mongolia's military diplomacy approach has garnered friendships, aiding in the country's pursuit of self-determination on the global stage. Mongolia cannot afford to be leveraging western interest in the state, as to an extent it doesn't make Mongolia any less of a buffer state. China's expansionist mentality is an ever-looming concern for Mongolia. Russian invasion of Ukraine has also pointed towards insecurity in the mutual trust in their relations.

In an event of skirmish, it is almost implied that the confrontations will take place on the Mongolian desolutes, be it between China and Russia or between one of these giants and Mongolia. While it is true that there is hardly any border disputes with either of the states

(Mongolia also adheres to the One China policy), the neighbours stand in advantage in terms of population. The set of third neighbours, mentioned elsewhere in the work, that maintain relations with the country may probably come in the aid of the country in an event of war, due to their stakes in liberal policies. If such a point comes, China and Russia can easily defeat the Mongolian military, due to lack of human population but the cost of annexure hardly makes up for the country's win. Besides, China has been inclusive of Inner Mongolia since Northern Mongolia's independence, which is much richer in minerals than the country of Mongolia. China's advancements will not be well received by the Russian forces and vice-versa. Such a move from either side, especially if it's China, would put China under international radar. Mongolia has reportedly been anxious about a new cold war and of being wedged between the giants to the point where it views both the entities as one (Bluth, 2023). The heaviness of sanctions however hardly make up to the worth of the acquisition. Due to the geographic placement between its neighbours, it can also be viewed that Mongolia is not prone to any other country invading.

While Mongolia benefits from its cultural, historical, territorial, and political ties with neighbouring nations, there are inherent drawbacks. The nation's economic dependence on Russia and China positions it as a crucial intermediary between these major powers, offering significant advantages but also coming with associated costs. Situated adjacent to Russia, a potentially invasive entity, Mongolia faces security risks, although the presence of China serves as a temporary protective measure. Even though China had recognised Mongolia's sovereignty from the times of Mao, its territorial claims reinforce Mongolia's position in the regional dynamics. Any alteration in the dynamics between these nations could have severe repercussions for Mongolia. Reconciliation might lead to Mongolia's absorption by China, while further estrangement could escalate into warfare spilling over into Mongolian territory.

Despite being landlocked, Mongolia holds strategic importance as a potential alternative trade route to China if the Malacca Strait were to be obstructed, albeit with limited economic benefits for Mongolia itself. Therefore, Mongolia's geopolitical significance is contrasted with its vulnerability to regional political tensions. To enhance its foreign policy, Mongolia has pursued a balanced approach to relations and sought partnerships with global powers beyond its immediate vicinity. This strategic approach aims to safeguard Mongolia's interests while navigating the complex dynamics of regional geopolitics.

To strengthen its say in the region and to avoid overdependence on either of the Communist giants, Mongolia, as a democratic regime has carved its path through linking itself with a set of third neighbours such as agreeing to strategic partnership with United States in 2019, who has been a partaker in the Khaan Quest military exercises since 2003 or having dialogue with Japan to initiate Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in 2012 (Dlerkes, 2022; Ganbold, 2013).

Yet, there is no doubt that being a buffer state is what gives Mongolia its space for negotiations with Russia, China, the West and others and that its buffer state status is its bargaining currency.

Between Pandemic China and War-waging Russia

As a friendly neighbour, Mongolia's trust in Russia was cemented by the financial assistance, which stands questioned due to the Ukraine invasion. The country relies on Russia for ninety percent of its energy needs, which makes it vulnerable during the conflict (Gantulga, 2023). Despite the growing economic relations with China, Beijing had annexed a part of Mongolia during the Qing Dynasty, leading to mistrust in their acquaintance. The contemporary challenges have placed Mongolia in a confused deluge as to who the real ally is. While COVID-19 induced human isolation, and the Russia-Ukraine war forced some countries attempting to isolate Russia, as the wedged neighbour of both, Mongolia was isolated by both. With its two largest investors and trading countries no longer actively involved in its economy, the country faced decelerated trade, recession and a crash in the economy. During the pandemic in 2020, Mongolia's GDP growth rate was -4.56 percent, the decline from 2019 being 10.16 percent (Macrotrends, 2024). The Russia-Ukraine war has resulted in fuel price rises in Mongolia by 68 percent and that of consumer goods by 15.7 percent (Noble, 2023).

Economic inflation leads to soaring transportation costs, leading to increased prices of consumer goods such as oil and wheat. The Chinese agenda of Zero-COVID and other pandemic policies lead to a rising inflation of 16.1 percent in June 2022. Within a span of ten months in 2022, Mongolian foreign exchange reserves fell by 7.7 percent and the currency value crashed by 20.1 percent (Davaakhuu & Batdelger, 2023). The pandemic also destabilised the progress made by the country over time, accelerating the proportion of population in poverty. Mongolia singles out as the only nation in the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region to make a slow bounce back from the 2020 decline. The stagnation can be attributed to the trade barriers China imposed on exports well into 2022. (Mikhnev, Uochi & Kim, 2022). The most

gruesome after effect of the pandemic was the food insecurity escalating throughout 2022. The population leading rustic life, earning low incomes were pushed into poverty. The closing of domestic businesses, travels and trade with China and other measures taken to curtail the spread of COVID implemented gradually from the end of 2019 was reflected on the same. Mongolia efficiently managed to control the pandemic right during its outbreak but was however criticised for curbing social and civil liberties. The political implication of this were protests and aggression due to human rights violations associated with medical treatments. The political unrest even lead to resignation of officials, including the Prime Minister Khurelsukh Ukhnaa in 2021 (Reuters, 2021)

According to Davaakhuu and Batdelger, Mongolia imports 28 percent of its goods and almost 100 percent of its petroleum products from Russia. The international sanctions aimed at limiting Russian trade relations in the geopolitics inversely affected the country. To counterbalance the pressure of embargoes on Russia in its economy, Mongolia cut down excise duty on diesel. Eventually, the authorities agreed on a stable import of petroleum products from Russia till 2027. On the welfare front, the amount for the Child Money Program (CMP) which pays to families with offsprings was hiked five times (from 20,000 MNT to 100,000 MNT) which accounted for about 3 percent of GDP (Mikhnev, Uochi & Kim, 2022). But most of all, the war has shaken the sense of security amongst the Mongolian public. Ulaanbaatar has historical and cultural relations with both the countries-in-animosity, identifying with Ukraine in its struggle for independence and in its essence identifying as a former Soviet Union counterpart. The country, thus due to understandable reasons, had refused to be vocal for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly and has adopted a neutrality in its stance, hesitating to oppose Russia.

The Mongolian population, arrested between the pandemic and the war, were hit by national insecurity. Welfare schemes stopped being effective and households earning minimum wages were disturbed more than the higher income citizens. The wages, salaries and pension schemes remain static despite needing an economic revamp. Farmers are compelled to borrow, to fend for their failing livelihood and to manage the cost of raw materials. Businesses across the country, especially small and medium sized entrepreneurships, face goods-deficit and lack of workers.

India as a Third Neighbour

Many countries emerged as ‘third neighbours’ to help bear the country balance in maintaining equidistant relations. Through high-level visits, these countries have enforced the ‘multi-pillar’ policy of Mongolia since February 2022 (Luguusharav, 2022). It has diversified its foreign policy interests to countries like and beyond Japan, the U.S, Turkey, South Korea, Australia and countries of Europe. As part of its liberal policy, it was involved in bilateral and multidimensional foreign policy with far neighbours and invited the membership of World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1997; ASEAN in 1998 and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2012. It also is involved with G77, the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Mongolia carefully is handpicking the best possible counterforce to resist overdependence on China, which sees Mongolia as its extension by all means. It is testing its options with the European Union, European countries and powerful allies from NATO. Ulaanbaatar also pins hopes on Washington and Tokyo to be its protective belt over security threats. It also ropes in India for weighing the pros and cons.

“We proudly call India our third neighbour,” Ambassador H.E. Baasanjav Ganbold of Mongolia to Korea had said. (Ganbold, 2013) Mongolia’s attempt to extend diplomacy with India is evident from the choice of promoting Buddhism from India over Confucianism from China. How both the countries perceive China and their nature as developing countries bring them further closer? As China’s presence in Central Asia keeps accelerating, economically encroaching regions including the Southeast and South Asia, India turns to a partner of similar stature. Mongolia’s resistance in its governing composition, with non-Chinese (rather than anti-Chinese) interests and its historical USSR relations converges with Indian interests and history, strengthening their base for a bond. As a growing economy, Mongolia also has favours to reap from Indo-Mongolian relations, possibly replacing a good share of trade to and from China with India and other third neighbours. Ulaanbaatar has been engaging in trade deals from India’s IT sector and has potential to extend to energy cooperation. Their bilateral ties are also strengthened by their democratic governance and their cautious relation with neighbours. Going as far to Genghis Khan, Mongols and Indians share cultural and diplomatic ties (Miliate, 2009)

India’s Act East Policy (AEP) and India’s interest in the East Asian region converge with Mongolia’s interests in third neighbours. The Indo-Mongolian diplomatic relations were

laid out in 1955, with India being the first country that was not in the Eastern bloc to engage with Mongolia. The countries have kept involvement with each other since 1973, continuing through 1994, 2001 and 2004. (Pradhan, 2021). In recent years, both countries have made significant bilateral progress. In April-May 2016, they conducted a joint military exercise with a focus on counterinsurgency. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a historic visit to Mongolia on May 17th, 2015, marking the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the country. This visit inaugurated a new chapter in India-Mongolia relations. India aims to overcome the agenda of Chinese BRI in an attempt to build networks encircling China, with the alliances of Central Asian countries. India extended a credit of US\$ 1 billion towards the construction of the Mongol Petrochemical refinery project (Pradhan, 2021). The oil refinery constructed under the initiative of Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, the President, with India's support in Dornogovi province of 1.5 million tonnes of crude oil per year, will attend to the country's own necessities. (BBC News, 2023) India is planning to assist further in infrastructure development in Mongolia, including roads, railways, and power lines for the refinery. During the 12th India-Mongolia Joint Working Group meeting in May 2024, the countries had talks on defence cooperation, industrial sector and future areas of engagement (Siddiqui, 2024). Additionally, India is leading initiatives in solar power tapping and the development of the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Mongolia has expressed interest in joining the ISA in response to India's invitation.

Conclusion

To sum up, Mongolia's major problem is rooted in a Vajpayee quote, "One can change friends, but not neighbours." Its geography is its boon and bane. International communities' interest in Mongolia's resources elevated its economic and diplomatic game, yet since the past decade there has been strain on the ecology of the country, owing to climate change. Its predicaments thus, are as international as they are domestic. Mongolia needs an international revamp, with regional relations taking a backseat, letting the nation find its feat on its own.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict seems to show no sign of halting. The uncertainty looms above Mongolian economy, questioning its stability. To decrease the economic burden on the poor, the country needs to lay out clear-cut policies, mostly farmer-oriented. There is a need to troubleshoot the economic distress amongst Mongolian families and it should begin with assisting the poorest and the weakest of the largely agro-based country, sheltering them from the inflation and economic recession. On a positive note, Mongolia's strategic positioning

blessees it with bargaining power in various China and Russia related conflicts. In the Ukraine-Russia war, Mongolia has the potential to be the 'third plane' where the negotiations can take place.

The uncertainty over Chinese expansion and Russian intentions, although are valid threats, Mongolian politics need to counterbalance the Beijing and Moscow regimes between each other and individually. The liberalisation and democratisation process was a significant stride towards this goal, essentially pulling in external sources of trade, export and investment, as well as defence connections. Mongolia has brilliantly associated itself with the West and Japan in an attempt to strengthen its ground. Besides, at the event of attack and annexation, Mongolia will face a similar fate as it did fighting the Qing Dynasty, when it could only free the Northern part of Mongolia, sacrificing the Inner Mongolia to present-day China. Russia had sent its help towards this task, however such an action would need much more deliberation and analysis in the contemporary scenario. A new conflict will displace many ethnic communities, becoming a region of communal violence more difficult to manage than Tibet or Xinjiang. It is anticipated that the Chinese are most likely to not exercise any physical force over Mongolia, as the Chinese are already exercising control over the Mongolian economy. The country's exports are hegemonized by China. Hence, China enjoys autonomy of the country and power of setting the course of policy, not having to govern another region domestically. Mongolia and China recognising each other officially also helps the cause.

Mongolians at this juncture, concerned about the self-sufficiency and independent existence divorced from China and Russia are seeking multiple sources of connections. Their economic requirements getting trampled over due to restrictions in China and sanctions on Russia posits Ulaanbaatar at a possible dynamic point. The revolutionary groups, often seen taking sides against Russia or praising neutrality urge for a distinct identity and stance of its own. Although Mongolia is a buffer zone between nations, more so for Russia, the country has its own identity, ethnic culture, language and sovereign identity that seems to be gaining momentum under the democratic rule. By having neutral relations with all of its neighbours, the present Mongolia is able to remark its own identity, even amidst hiccups and concerns.

Mongolia's acquaintance with India, results in connectivity advantages for India to counter China's BRI and a partner-in-need for Mongolia. It not only ensures more access to trade and in the global supply chain, the relation guarantees Mongolia safe returns, unlike the case with China. India, unlike China, is not a country that pursues only its own peace and

advantages. India's reputation as a trustworthy friend and a reliable upholder of Global South qualifies well for Mongolia to consider the country as a genuine third neighbour.

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