

## Mongolia and the Coronavirus Outbreak--Rethinking Strategies for Regional Integration

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### Introduction

On January 26, 2020 Mongolia's Cabinet led by President Khaltmaa Battulga held an emergency meeting to discuss emergency measures to implement in order to protect Mongolia and its citizens from the spread of the highly infectious coronavirus (2019-nCoV or COVID-19). Unprecedented actions were authorized, including restrictions on transiting the Mongolian-Chinese border, authorization of forced isolation of potential carriers of the disease, evacuation and repatriation of Mongolian citizens especially students from the Chinese quarantine zone, closing schools from kindergartens to all universities, higher educational institutions, vocational training centers, and the international children camp Nairamdal, and cancellation of all kinds of public gatherings from January 27, 2020 to March 2, 2020. At the time that the President and Cabinet took these emergency action, there was no confirmed case of coronavirus in the country.

This new situation was not only an immediate challenge for the National Center for Communicable Diseases of Mongolia (NCCD), but exposed the negative aspects of linking Mongolia's educational, tourist, and economic sectors so closely to the Northeast Asian region and Eurasian continent. According to Andrei Mikhnev, World Bank Country Manager for Mongolia, "Mongolia was one of the first countries to face the economic impacts of COVID-19 due to its close linkage with the Chinese economy, particularly in trade, tourism and foreign investments. Fitch Ratings on February 19, 2020 announced that exposure to economic disruption from the COVID-19 virus outbreak was highest in Hong Kong and Mongolia because of strong economic linkages to China.<sup>1</sup> Since late January 2020, the government has enacted necessary and stringent measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which have brought the local economy to a standstill."<sup>2</sup> When on July 1st, health inspections at transport checkpoints

1 "Mongolia, Hong Kong Most Exposed in North Asia to Coronavirus Economic Fallout," *Fitch Ratings*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/mongolia-hong-kong-most-exposed-in-north-asia-to-coronavirus-economic-fallout-19-02-2020>, accessed September 1, 2020.

2 B. Batchimeg, "World Bank to help alleviate burden for the self-employed in the face of COVID-19," *Montsame*, May 18, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225780>, accessed May 22, 2020.

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in cities and towns were discontinued, these 24-hour health inspection sites had operated continuously from February 7 until June 30, with over 4,000 health workers mobilized for the inspections. The Mongolian government proclaimed that through August 2020 there have been no local human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 and no deaths inside the country. According to an article in the esteemed international medical journal, *The Lancet*, “The Mongolian case shows that with robust preventive systems, an effective response to a pandemic can be mounted in a low-income or middle-income country.”<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that Mongolia’s strong and early actions were unique among nations and proved remarkably effective. Nevertheless, this pandemic situation, particularly if it lingers and causes severe harm to the national economy into 2021, will compel Mongolia to re-examine its Eurasian integration developmental strategy in favor of concentrating more financial assets on expanding its domestic industries. In the past decades of democracy, the advantages of connectivity

across Eurasia and with the entire global marketplace were emphasized by Mongolian policymakers. The recent pandemic has exposed the fissures within the linkages and proved that the country, despite its best efforts, cannot easily isolate itself from the serious issues confronting nations within its greater geospace. As noted by Professor Chris Miller of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the backlash trend against globalization did not begin with the COVID-19 virus; rather “the virus simply accelerated trends that were already underway...”<sup>4</sup> The pandemic has revealed the risks of outsourcing supply chains to other countries, especially China. Some believe the world’s COVID-19 situation is proof that borders matter, control over supply chains matter, and China cannot be trusted. On the other hand, the pandemic also may motivate Mongolian policymakers and citizens to recognize that some crises can only be overcome by deeper cooperation on a regional or even global scale. Both arguments already have been heard in Mongolia.

### **Pre-COVID-19: Choosing Connectivity over Isolation as a Foreign Policy Strategy**

Mongolia’s landlocked geographical location makes external transport links via China and Russia very significant in terms of determining Mongolia’s trade partners. In the democratic era

since 1990, Mongolia has utilized the Chinese port of Tianjin for almost all of its overseas imports and exports, although there also has been some small movement by rail to and from Europe through

3 Ryenchindorj Erkhembayar, Emma Dickinson, Darmaa Badarch, Indermohan Narula, David Warburton, Graham Neil Thomas, et al., “Early policy actions and emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Mongolia: experiences and challenges,” *The Lancet*, Vol. 8, Issue 9, July 23, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30295-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30295-3/fulltext). Accessible August 26, 2020.

4 Chris Miller, “Will COVID-19 Sink Globalization?,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 22, 2020, [https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/will-covid-19-sink-globalization/?utm\\_source=FPRI+E-Mails&utm\\_campaign=0d0c324342-, EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_22\\_12\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_e8d0f13be2-0d0c324342-179121645](https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/will-covid-19-sink-globalization/?utm_source=FPRI+E-Mails&utm_campaign=0d0c324342-, EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_22_12_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e8d0f13be2-0d0c324342-179121645), accessed April 24, 2020.

Russia and from Russian Pacific ports for freight traffic with Japan and North America. Since the 2014 international sanctions placed upon Russia after its entrance into Ukraine, the Russian ports, such as Vladivostok, and the Trans-Siberian rail route have been even further cut off, so Mongolia urgently has been seeking other transportation alternatives.

Mongolia in past centuries saw its landlocked position as a national security protective wall and developed political and economic mechanisms to play its two geographical neighbors against each other. This bandwagoning strategy, while in many respects essential to secure cultural and national independence, resigned the country to isolation, poverty, and a reactive foreign policy. During recent decades, Mongolia recognized that, if it were to attain maximum economic benefit from its rich mineral resources and not be marginalized politically by Russia and China as happened in previous eras, it must proactively utilize its geographical position to become a significant and cost effective economic corridor between its neighbors by capitalizing on Mongolia's Ulaanbaatar Railway (UR) network, which is the sole line linking the Russian Trans-Siberian railroad in the north and China's railroad system to the south. Mongolian policymakers in the 2010s believed that the nation needed to be part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to avoid becoming isolated from sub-regional economic integration.<sup>5</sup> To

maximize Mongolia's economic benefits, policymakers today acknowledge that regional cooperation and integration of transport routes in an Economic Transit Corridor or Steppe Road through Mongolian territory is necessary. In order to meet the increasing demand for Mongolian world-class coal and copper by China and to reach other regional markets such as in Japan and South Korea, Mongolia now calculates that obtaining the required foreign direct investment (FDI) and achieving a trade diversification strategy are dependent upon developing additional transport routes to both Russia and China which allow Mongolian access to additional seaports. Therefore, in 2016 the Mongolian government developed a government action plan for 2016-2020 that:

...will give the railway transit a priority, including technological renovation of the Ulaanbaatar Railways-Mongolian Russian joint company. Also, putting the New Ulaanbaatar International Airport into operation and becoming a hub connecting Asia with Europe are among the prime concern of the government's policy.<sup>6</sup>

However, Mongolian transit infrastructure development in the democratic era consistently has been delayed by political factors and corruption. The government over the past fifteen years has implemented a road building plan to connect all provinces

5 Jargalsaikhan Mendee, "Mongolia's Dilemma: A Politically Linked, Economically Isolated Small Power," *The Asian Forum*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.theasianforum.org/mongolias-dilemma-a-politically-linked-economically-isolated-small-power/>, accessed April 27, 2020.

6 Minister of Road and Transport Development D. Ganbat quoted in "Major road and transport projects will be put into effect to promote economy," *The Mongol Messenger*, November 4, 2016.

with paved roads, but there have been budgetary problems and documented misuse of funds. FDI in construction projects is vital but wavering--all exacerbated by an unstable legal environment. There remain challenges creating new transit infrastructure for Mongolia, which impede the establishment of the country as an economic corridor. The major problems are: 1) appropriate transit agreements need to be concluded; 2) the domestic railroad and roads system needs to be expanded and modernized; 3) border and port infrastructure and transshipment capacities need to be increased; 4) transit tariffs and regulations must be revised; and 5) more financing and significant

investment are required for hard infrastructure development.<sup>7</sup> Progress during the administration of President Kh.Battulga on transit and tariff agreements with China and Russia has been considerable, and construction of a new capital airport as well as new roads and rail spurs within the country are nearing completion. Funding for border crossing, trade zones, port facilities, and major railroad rehabilitation in the Mongolia-China-Russia corridor remains a major impediment. Nevertheless, the leaders of the three countries in recent years have committed to significantly upgrading their transportation connectivity to facilitate trade.

### Mongolia's Disaster Preparedness Strategy

Because Mongolia faces many natural threats including *zud*, flooding, drought, winds and storms, earthquakes, and forest fires, it has been very interested in disaster preparedness. The first organization founded by the Mongolian government that was devoted to coping with natural disasters was the State Permanent Emergency Commission (SPEC) in 1990. The SPEC was transformed into the present-day State Emergency Commission (SEC), which is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. This entity is the primary decision maker during

a national emergency for political and operational matters. Mongolia focused more on disaster preparedness after the devastating winter *zuds* of 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, which caused it to establish more robust disaster management organizations and the legal framework to support disaster management.<sup>8</sup> In 2004, the government established the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)<sup>9</sup> by merging the State Board for Civil Defence, Fire Fighting Department, and the State Reserve Agency. NEMA provides administration, coordination,

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7 REPORT ON ALMATY PROGRAMME, *ibid*.

8 United Nations Development Program Mongolia. 2011. Terminal Evaluation Report. Evaluation period: July 25- September 1, 2011. Strengthening the Disaster Mitigation and Management System in Mongolia Phase III (April 2008-December 2011), <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/5386>, cited in "Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook," *reliefweb*, September 2018, pg. 78, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/61895-61895disastermgmtrefhdbkmongolia.pdf>, accessed April 25, 2020.

9 See NEMA website at: <http://en.nema.gov.mn/>.

and direct assistance during a disaster by operating under an established Incident Command System (ICS). NEMA supports the SEC in general emergency management at all levels.<sup>10</sup> In the early years after its establishment, NEMA centered disaster protection efforts on response activities such as search and rescue. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mongolia with the aid of its international partners transitioned its approach to disaster risk reduction, preparedness activities, and capacity building.<sup>11</sup>

The national security emphasis for disaster preparedness in Mongolia is evidenced by the close association between disaster management exercises and the Mongolian Ministry of Defense. This relationship especially has been developed by cooperation with the United States (U.S.) Department of Defense (DOD), which has a history of military-to-military engagement with Mongolia that emphasizes disaster response exercises and exchange missions. This cooperation is under the Pacific Resilience Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange program, which focuses on interagency coordination and foreign humanitarian assistance. For example, the Gobi Wolf exercises are “designed to test disaster response processes while maximizing realism through a series of scenarios.”<sup>12</sup> It was stated that one main goal of the exercise was to increase NEMA capacity to response to earthquakes. In 2015,

a Mongolia Disaster Management Country Assessment was undertaken to define operations whereby the U.S. Government could work with Mongolia to improve disaster management capabilities and capacity.<sup>13</sup> Another indication that Mongolia has viewed disaster preparedness as a national security function is seen in the fact that the Mongolian government initiated Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security (UBD), which discusses issues related to the North-South Koreas, has included the integrative theme of regional disaster preparedness in its sessions. The UBD is organized annually by the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence.

Other key disaster management partners for Mongolia include the Mongolian Red Cross Society, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), and World Health Organization (WHO). The country developed early warning systems for flood and storms with special emphasis on earthquakes. As for mitigation preparedness, in 2018 NEMA, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), and the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (ThaiPBS) conducted media training on Reporting on Disaster Mitigation

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10 “Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook,” *ibid.*, pg. 10.

11 “Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook,” *ibid.*, pg. 8.

12 U.S. Indo-PACOM. 2015. International Team Conducts Gobi Wolf 2015, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/583258/international-teamconducts-gobi-wolf-2015/>, accessed May 1, 2020.

13 “Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook,” *ibid.*, pg. 7 citing “CFE-DM. Disaster Management Country Assessment. Civil Military Emergency Preparedness Program. Mongolia. June 5, 2015.”

and Preparedness (RedMap) with 80 Mongolian journalists to report stories to the local communities that incorporated knowledge and hands-on skills about disaster preparedness and mitigation education.<sup>14</sup>

However, in hindsight it is clear that Mongolia was not well prepared for an infectious pandemic despite its efforts to set up a disaster preparedness system. Much of the responsibility for this shortcoming can be laid upon the faulty advice and perspectives of the international agencies and countries that have been working in this field with Mongolia. Funding assistance was provided by international donors who set the agenda for the Mongols. For example, international partners such as the UNDRR and the ADPC were focused on disaster risks stemming from climate change in the grasslands and resulting societal poverty, migration to the capital of Ulaanbaatar, gender inequality, and pollution. In fact, the latest publication from the UNDRR on Mongolia in 2019 did not even consider infectious diseases or the capacity of Mongolian medical facilities to handle health pandemics.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, credit must be given to the fact that the Mongolian government early on recognized the importance of modifying its emergency preparedness training to its fight against COVID-19. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Ukhnaa Khürelsükh stated that “The 41 imported

cases of COVID-19 from over 10 countries in Mongolia is a serious warning for our country....We have prior experience in organizing comprehensive exercises for the protection of disasters and emergencies on the levels of *aimag* and region.”<sup>16</sup> He could do this by blending it with the existing Mongolian health care system, which provides citizens with free access to primary health care. Medical care is distributed through family health centers in urban settings, while in rural areas there are outpatient and inpatient services offered by the district health centers. A national immunization program was instituted in 1991 which led to improvement in the fight against communicable diseases. However, today the nation’s health care system is fairly rudimentary: health expenditures represented only 4.7 percent of GDP (2014); physicians density is 3.26 physicians per 1,000 population (2015); and hospital bed density stands at 7 beds per 1,000 population (2012).<sup>17</sup>

If you compare Mongolia’s demographics to other Northeast Asian countries, it has today a much different age structure. Since Mongolia’s population is very young, its age structure is skewed towards children and adult diseases, while its aged population is comparatively small. The age structure is reflected in the below chart.

0-14 years: 26.95 percent (male 421,675/female 405,298)

14 Vidya Rana. “Media training on Reporting on Disaster Mitigation and Preparedness (RedMap),” *ADPC’s News*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.adpc.net/igo/contents/Media/media-news.asp?pid=1388>, accessed April 25, 2020.

15 UNDRR and ADPC, *Disaster Risk Reduction in Mongolia Status Report 2019*, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/68230\\_5mongoliadrmstatusreport.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/68230_5mongoliadrmstatusreport.pdf), accessed April 28, 2020.

16 M. Montastudio, “PM: The 41 COVID-19 imported cases in Mongolia is a serious warning for us,” *Montsame*, May 7, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224749>, accessed May 11, 2020.

17 “Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook,” *ibid.*, pg. 64.

15-24 years: 16.09 percent (male 249,805/female 243,784)

25-54 years: 45.6 percent (male 677,679/female 721,435)

55-64 years: 7.07 percent (male 99,099/female 117,818)

65 years and over: 4.29 percent (male 53,364/ female 78,286) (2017 est.)<sup>18</sup>

This age structure can be juxtaposed to that of China, which instituted a one-child policy in 1979 that limited urban couples to a single child, so its fertility rate fell from 2.8 children per woman in 1979 to 1.7 in 2014. Then, with improved rural healthcare access, Chinese life expectancy increased from 43 in 1960 to 75 in 2013, while in the same period, infant mortality decreased from 12.8 percent to 0.7 percent. Thus by 2015, 9.5 percent of the population of China was aged 65 or older, which is twice

that of Mongolia.<sup>19</sup> South Korea also is a very fast growing aging society. This trend was exacerbated by a fertility rate of under 1 and average life expectancy rising from 65 in 1980 to 82.4 in 2016. In 2019 15.5 percent or 8 million people were over 65 years old.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Japan, a land of very-low birthrate and yet long-lived, has the oldest proportionate society in the world. As of 2018, almost a third of its population, 35.5 million, is over 65.<sup>21</sup> This great difference in demographics among the Northeast Asian nations must be considered when examining how the Mongols defined natural disasters in the health sphere, and why they concentrated on infant and adult lifestyle communicable diseases. It also explains why, even with lack of preparedness, the spread of COVID-19 cases, particularly mortality, in Mongolia has been very low compared to other nations in its region.

### Early COVID-19 Measures

It has been claimed that Mongolia began receiving information about the COVID-19 virus from WHO on January 10, which led the government to activate the inter-agency SEC as lead agency to support the Ministry of Health against the outbreak.<sup>22</sup> The country began to take serious steps on January 26th, when

the Mongolian Cabinet in its resolution No. 30, closed border crossings with China for vehicles and pedestrians. These actions were taken despite the fact that there were no confirmed coronavirus cases. The government-controlled *Montsame* news agency explained that “the Cabinet cited the “high risk” of the

18 “Mongolia: Disaster Management Reference Handbook,” *ibid.*, pg. 62.

19 “Does China have an aging problem?,” *China Power*, February 15, 2016 and updated March 19, 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/aging-problem/>, accessed April 26, 2020.

20 “[Editorial] Aging population,” *The Korea Herald*, January 15, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200115000621>, accessed April 26, 2020.

21 “Japan's Elderly Population Totals Record 35.88 M.,” *nippon.com*, September 15, 2019, <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2019091500338/japan%27s-elderly-population-totals-record-35-88-m.html>, accessed April 26, 2020.

22 Mendee Jargalsaikhan, “Mongolia’s Effective ‘Analogue’ Approach to COVID-19 Containment,” *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/mongolias-effective-analogue-approach-covid-19-containment>, accessed April 24, 2020.

disease spreading across the country's southern border."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, truck traffic carrying coal and other minerals across the border to China was not stopped, and the cabinet declaration did not deter President Battulga from making a state visit to Norway from January 27-29.

When the President returned home, a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) was convened. According to N. Enkhbold, deputy head of the NSC and Minister of Defense, a number of steps were taken to control the spread of the virus within Mongolia by banning the 'Zolgot'<sup>24</sup> greeting and national wrestling competition for the upcoming 2020 Tsagaan Sar national holiday commencing February 25<sup>th</sup>. City authorities cancelled public events scheduled for the Lunar New Year celebrations. This required shutting down public transportation for three days in the capital city and blocking all major roads between the capital and provincial centers from February 21 to March 1. The NSC assigned the Ministry of Health to manage the preparation of temporary quarantine accommodations in a special coronavirus hospital and to organize medical checkups for citizens returning from China.

Particular emphasis was placed on

limiting transit across the southern border which was believed would be the source of infection into the country. Upon the NSC's recommendation, the Cabinet held another irregular meeting on January 31<sup>st</sup> and decided to: ban entry of Chinese nationals and other foreigners coming to Mongolia through China or through Mongolia's border checkpoints (air, rail and auto) with China from February 1 to March 2; ban Mongols from traveling to China until March 2; allow Mongols to return through all border crossings with China until February 6; and let Mongols return through the Buyant Ukhaa capital airport border checkpoint and the Zamyn-Uud railway border checkpoint until March 2. However, the Cabinet imposed no immediate restrictions on the export and import of goods by rail or air.<sup>25</sup> From January 28<sup>th</sup> through February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2,615 Mongolian nationals, 36 Chinese citizens, and 1,432 vehicles were subjected to quarantine inspections and entered Mongolia through Gashuunsaikhait border checkpoint in Khanbogd soum of Omnugobi *aimag*.<sup>26</sup> At the customs checkpoint Shiveekhuree, which borders with Alxa League of Inner Mongolia, China, the number of trucks carrying coal through this checkpoint already had decreased over 90 percent because some mining companies had decided to

23 "Report: Mongolia closes border with China amid virus fears," *Associated Press*, January 27, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/report-mongolia-closes-border-china-amid-virus-fears-68557875>. Accessed March 12, 2020.

24 "Zolgotkh" (Mongolian: Золгох) is a traditional Mongolian formal greeting whereby two people hold both their arms out, and the younger person's arms are placed under the elder person's and grasps the elbows indicating support for elders. The two people then touch each other's cheeks, and offer a spoken greeting, such as the phrase *Amar mend üü* (Mongolian: Амар мэнд үү), meaning "Are you well and peaceful?". This type of greeting is usually reserved for Tsagaan sar celebrations, while sometimes holding a *khadag*.

25 "Mongolians banned from traveling to China until March 2," *Montsame*, January 31, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/214656>, accessed September 12, 2020.

26 M.Unurzul, "Operative team works in Gashuunsukhait border checkpoint," *Montsame*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/215373>, accessed March 21, 2020.

suspend shipments.<sup>27</sup>

Although in early February coronavirus cases in South Korea, Japan, and Singapore were being widely publicized in the media, the Mongolian government did not impose restrictions on travel from those or other affected areas. Its attention was solely focused on China and stopping foreign nationals that transited China and Hong Kong. This decision was not explained publicly. On February 7, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia proclaimed that foreign nationals and stateless persons, who had not travelled to/or arrived from the territories of the People's Republic of China (including Hongkong, Macao and Taiwan) after January 1, 2020, and possessed valid Mongolian visas or were from visa-free countries were still allowed entry as normal into Mongolia through Buyant-Ukhaa airport (Chingis Khaan International Airport).<sup>28</sup>

The national carrier MIAT decided to stop transporting foreign nationals from Beijing and Hong Kong to Ulaanbaatar

in order to abide by the government's decision to temporarily impose travel restrictions. MIAT stopped carrying Mongolian citizens on outbound flights to Beijing and Hong Kong from Ulaanbaatar and refunded tickets or waived rebooking fees, but did transport foreign nationals leaving Mongolia to all destinations including Beijing and Hong Kong. MIAT canceled most of its flights to Beijing through February and to Hong Kong from January 31 through March 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>29</sup> Mongols returning home were required to be quarantined in specially designated guarded hotels and hospitals for 14 days, which was later increased to 21 days after March 26th on the advice of WHO. In these facilities there was testing, aggressive contact-tracing and immediate isolation for anyone presenting coronavirus symptoms. All travelers have been subject to health screenings and quarantine upon entry to Mongolia. A negative COVID-19 test is not required for entry; however, a test may be required to board a flight into the country.<sup>30</sup>

### Closing and Re-Opening the Borders

On February 5th, the National Security Council decided it was necessary to build temporary accommodations at the border checkpoints to test Mongols coming from China. The SEC dispatched

officers to the border checkpoints on the Chinese border at ZamynUud, Buyant Ukhaa capital airport, and the coal truck transit point in the South Gobi of Gashuunsukhait. It also recommended to

27 "Operative team reviews border control and health screening," *Montsame*, February 10, 2020, <http://m.oannews.org/news.php?id=556656>, accessed March 21, 2020.

28 T.Baljmaa, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs releases measures to be enforced," *Montsame*, February 10, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/215499>, accessed March 21, 2020.

29 T.Baljmaa, "MIAT not to transport foreign nationals from Beijing and Hong Kong," *Montsame*, February 3, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/214779>. Accessed March 3, 2020. However, the last flight from China to Mongolia by Chinese carrier arrived on February 13.

30 On August 6, in close coordination with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Department of State lifted the Global Level 4 Health Advisory. However, Mongolia remains at Level 4 because its borders are closed. August 14, 2020. <https://mn.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/>. Accessed September 1, 2020.

the Cabinet to temporarily ban imports of pork and chicken, fodder, and eggs from China. During the following two weeks, about 6,000 Mongolian nationals returned from China through all border crossing points.<sup>31</sup> People entering Mongolia from China via road, rail, and air were required to have their temperature checked at all border crossings. After the complete travel ban was imposed, charter flights for Mongolian nationals were arranged, at their own travel expense, and returnees were put into temporary isolation in Mongolia.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, Mongolian President Battulga made a daylong trip to China on February 27th to discuss the restrictions against China. The President was accompanied by D. Tsogtbaatar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, D. Gankhuyag, Mongolian Ambassador to China, Major General T. Badral, Head of NEMA, U. Shijir, Chief of Staff to the President, and T. Tegshjargal, Foreign Policy Advisor to the President. This visit was the first foreign head of state visit to China since the outbreak of the coronavirus, and therefore portrayed by both countries as evidence that Mongolia was actively supporting China in the midst of the most difficult part of its struggle to contain COVID-19. As visible indication of assistance for China's fight against the virus by its strategic partner and a neighbor, Battulga donated 30,000 sheep. The Chinese response was to call the trip an example of genuine

Mongolian support. Upon his return home, President Battulga and his accompanying delegation were quarantined 14 days as a precautionary measure.<sup>33</sup> At the end of April it was announced that Major-General T. Badral, Head NEMA and who had accompanied President Battulga to Beijing, was nominated as Mongolia's next ambassador to China. The nomination later was approved by the parliament and the President.

On March 23rd coal transportation by truck was resumed through the Gashuunsukhait border checkpoint. However, all vehicles had to be fully decontaminated and drivers were required to wear protective clothes.<sup>34</sup> In mid-March Mongolia cautiously reopened the northern Altanbulag border checkpoint for drivers and vehicles transporting cargo and products entering into the territory of Mongolia from Europe and Russia. The measures included having them under police surveillance, disinfection, and isolation. In the first 3 weeks, 202 trucks transporting 2,760 tons of food products were inspected at monitoring zones for quality and safety. Officers of the Export, Import, and Border Quarantine Control Departments of the Professional Inspection Department of the Capital in cooperation with the NCCD, the National Center for Zoonotic Disease, Customs, and the Police Agency of Ulaanbaatar performed the checks. During that period,

31 "Operative team reviews border control and health screening," *Montsame*, February 10, 2020, <http://m.oanews.org/news.php?id=556656>, accessed March 21, 2020.

32 "Preventive measures taken against the Coronavirus spread," *The Mongol Messenger*, February 14, 2020.

33 "Mongolian President quarantined after 1-day visit to China," *Akipress.com*, February 28, 2020, [https://akipress.com/news:636040:Mongolian\\_President\\_quarantined\\_after\\_1-day\\_visit\\_to\\_China/](https://akipress.com/news:636040:Mongolian_President_quarantined_after_1-day_visit_to_China/), accessed March 1, 2020.

34 E.Erdenejargal, "Coal shipment resumes through Gashuunsukhait border checkpoint," *Montsame*, March 23, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/219842>, accessed March 24, 2020.

63 Mongolian drivers were isolated in 7 locations, while foreign drivers were put into isolation in the vehicle cabin and forced to leave Mongolia without exiting the vehicle. No virus cases were recorded. Vehicles that traveled outside the border area were disinfected; the cargo was tested for infection and sealed in customs guaranteed warehouses.<sup>35</sup>

Into the spring, Mongolian authorities came to recognize the growing danger that coronavirus was being imported from the northern border free trade zone. Mongolian students were arriving from the Russian Federation, placed in quarantine under medical supervision, and some cases identified. More alarming were cases of drivers of freight vehicles and the fact that usually they had to be repeatedly tested in order for the disease to be identified. An example was on April 21<sup>st</sup> at the Altanbulag border checkpoint when COVID-19 was detected after several tests in a truck driver, who was placed in compulsory quarantine in Selenge *aimag*. Immediately after his identification as an active case, 24 people, including border officers, who had close contact with him, were isolated and tested. Tests showed that his wife and co-driver also had the virus. They had travelled to Budapest, Hungary, through Russia on February 21st and returned home on April 18.<sup>36</sup>

He was placed in mandatory isolation in Selenge *aimag*, but was brought to Ulaanbaatar for additional treatment. As a result, General Badral, head of FEMA, announced the suspension of movement of vehicles and passenger trains into and out of Ulaanbaatar city, Darkhan-Uul, and Selenge aimags from April 21-25.<sup>37</sup> Later that month on the 29th, the parliament approved the Law on Pandemic Preparedness and Response.

On April 22nd, a team from the Operative Staff of the SEC inspected disinfection operations on transport vehicles and their drivers at the Zamyn-Uud border checkpoint in Dornogobi *aimag*. Another team oversaw infection control activities at the Altanbulag international auto road port and provided training on PPE and disinfection instruction to border inspection, police departments, and Military Unit No.101 checkpoint.<sup>38</sup> By June 11th, it was reported that freight transportation no longer was interrupted, and the export of coal and mineral products had returned to normal levels.<sup>39</sup>

Mongolia has continued to extend suspension of all inbound personal travel from foreign locations and has banned the entry into or exit from Mongolia of all foreign nationals by commercial flights, passenger rail, and auto traffic. The Mongolian government claims that all Covid-19 cases through August 2020

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35 A.Munkhzul, "Cargo from Europe being allowed entry under close inspection," *Montsame*, April 3, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/2210530>, accessed April 4, 2020.

36 *Mongol Messenger*, "35 coronavirus cases in Mongolia, eight recoveries and no death," April 24, 2020.

37 T.Baljmaa, "Traffic movement in and out of Ulaanbaatar, Selenge and Darkhan-Uul suspended until April 25," *Montsame*, April 21, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/223047>, accessed April 22, 2020.

38 M.Unurzul, "Infection control activities of border checkpoint checked," *Montsame*, June 4, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/227533>, accessed June 9, 2020.

39 Around 570 heavy trucks daily were crossing the country's border through Gashuunsukhait checkpoint, and the Mongols had entered into talks with the Chinese side to increase the number. "State Emergency Commission discusses COVID-19 related issues," *Mongol Messenger*, June 19, 2020, pg. 3.

only have been detected in returnees from abroad, all of whom were placed under immediate and mandatory isolation upon arrival in Mongolia. Health authorities require mandatory COVID-19 testing by the NCCD for all arrivals. This testing is free for every traveler to Mongolia from overseas. All travelers are required to undergo a combined 35-day quarantine/self-isolation period. As of August 28<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that there are more than 3,800 people staying in the isolation facilities. These individuals must undergo 21-day strict quarantine at government-

designated isolation facilities for which they must pay a total cost of about 1.3 million tugriks or approximately US \$450 per person and spend a further 14-days in mandatory home-based isolation and provide authorities with temperature checks.<sup>40</sup> Initially, COVID-19 measures were strictly and universally applied throughout the country, but by the end of the summer, daily life in Mongolia gradually was returning to resembling that of pre-COVID-19 conditions.

### **Economic Effects of the Pandemic**

Like other nations around the world, Mongolia in 2020 has suffered serious consequences from the prolonged COVID-19 quarantine and travel restrictions, particularly in relation to its export-based economy and tourism industry. It is vulnerable to swings in commodity prices because of its dependence on mining, which accounts for almost a quarter of gross domestic product and 90 percent of exports. The virus pandemic changed the picture of trade for Mongolia because it is heavily dependent on trade with China, “where an economic slowdown has triggered a sharp fall in export prices in Mongolia and badly hit the transport, tourism, retail trade, and services sectors.”<sup>41</sup> According to the Bank of Mongolia,

FDI in the first quarter of 2020 totaled \$481.4 million, 20 percent lower than the same period last year, and more than 90 percent of this was related to the Oyu Tolgoi project.<sup>42</sup> Mining, as the main source of export income, has been hard hit. According to the Customs General Administration, Mongolia’s exports declined by 40.4 percent in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the same period of the previous year. The decline was attributed to the closing of the borders and reduction of mining production brought on by pandemic prevention measures. After the shutdown of the borders, cross border trade between Mongolia and China was seriously affected. In mid-April Deputy Prime Minister Enkhtuvshin acknowledged this

40 “COVID-19 heightened state of readiness extended,” *The Mongolia Messenger*, August 28, 2020.

41 “ADB Provides \$100 Million to Support Mongolia’s COVID-19 Response,” May 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mongolia/adb-provides-100-million-support-mongolias-covid-19-response>, accessed May 18, 2020.

42 B.Batchimeg, “AmCham Mongolia discusses Economic Outlook of Post-Election Mongolia,” *Montsame*, June 10, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/228061>, June 10, 2020.

reality: "In the past, 1,500-1,700 trucks transported products a day to China, but now there are about 100 trucks a day."<sup>43</sup> Only 4.1 million tons of coal were exported to China in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to 11.4 million tons in the first quarter of 2019.

The country had expected to export abroad this year about 40 million tons of coal, but at the end of August this number was only around 13 million tons of coal--a decrease of 46 percent in coal exports compared to 2019. During the spring months, as cross-border traffic for coal trucks gradually was reopened, coal exports have been growing. The daily volume of coal freight trucks crossing border checkpoints to China grew to about 1,800 and by the end of August exceeded 2,000, which was a return to pre-COVID-19 levels.<sup>44</sup> The Mongolian and Chinese governments have been jointly implementing 'Green Gateway' temporary regulations at border crossing points. These sterilization and disinfection practices on all trucks transporting coal and other minerals prevent the spread of COVID-19. To expedite the process, heavy-duty trucks are being escorted under police surveillance to clearance terminals.<sup>45</sup>

Overall imports also decreased by \$202 million in first four months of 2020 compared with the same period of 2019. Imports of automobiles and equipment decreased by 115.5 percent.<sup>46</sup> In the first quarter of 2020, the economy contracted by 10.7 percent, government revenue fell by 8.6 percent year on year, and government expenditures to bolster the economy increased by 19.3 percent.<sup>47</sup> The UNDP has predicted that Mongolia's GDP will shrink by almost 11 percent in 2020 with lesser demand for the nation's coal, copper and zinc concentrate exports.<sup>48</sup> According to the preliminary results, the gross industrial output reached MNT 4.1 trillion in the first four months of 2020, which was a decrease of MNT 1.3 trillion (24.1 percent) from the same period in 2019. This decrease was mainly due to a 33.0 percent decrease in mining and quarrying gross output although gold extraction actually increased over 2 times, and 6.5 percent decrease in manufacturing output.<sup>49</sup>

The cashmere hair industry is the second most important sector of the economy and the mainstay livelihood for most nomads in the Gobi provinces. It provides income to over 100,000 people, 90 percent of whom are women, and 80

43 "China presents thermographic cameras to Mongolia," *The Mongol Messenger*, April 24, 2020.

44 According to the Cabinet Secretariat of the Mongolian government, on August 25 a total of 2,001 heavy duty trucks for coal transportation moved through Gashuunsukhait, Shiveekhuren, Yarant, Khangai border crossing points to China.

45 B.Dolgarmaa, as reported in T.Baljmaa, "Mongolia's coal exports to China growing amid COVID-19," *Montsame*, August 27, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/234748>, accessed September 1, 2020.

46 E.Erdenejargal, "Mongolia exports USD 1.5 billion worth of goods," *Montsame*, May 8, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224847>, accessed May 13, 2020.

47 Tapan Mishra, "COVID-19 means development setbacks for Mongolia: a UN Resident Coordinator blog," *UN News*, July 25, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068821>, accessed September 1, 2020.

48 "Landlocked central Asian nations show potential beyond commodities," UN Conference on Trade and Development, July 16, 2020, <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2429>, accessed September 1, 2020.

49 M.Unurzul, "Mining and quarrying gross output decreased by MNT 1.3 trillion," *Montsame*, May 18, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225805>, accessed June 1, 2020.

percent are under the age of 35.<sup>50</sup> Because the majority of the hair is sent to China for processing, the stoppage of exports across the southern border and reduced textile factory production over the winter in China seriously impacted Mongolian herders. In response, Mongolian cashmere producers decided to stockpile 5,000 kg tons of raw material in 2020 this year. In order to assist them in buying up to MNT 366 billion for 3,600 tons of cashmere and to sell 6,400 tons to foreign customers, the Mongolian government in mid-March granted a total of MNT 300 billion in loans with 12 percent interest to the cashmere producers from the Development Bank of Mongolia.<sup>51</sup>

International tourism, as the third major sector of the Mongolian economy, employs between 50,000 to 60,000 people. Tourism in 2019 contributed a total of MNT 1.6 trillion (over \$607 million) to Mongolia's budget. It was decimated by the COVID-19 situation, even though tourism in the country is concentrated mainly in the summer months, and originally it was hoped that the pandemic's effects might have somewhat subsided. Mongolia cancelled cultural and tourism events beginning in March. According to custom

statistics, Mongolia received 32,961 foreign arrivals before the country fully closed its borders in March with Russia and China and suspended all flights. This represented a decrease of 21 percent over the same period in 2019. Prior to the official lockdown, the number of tourists arriving from South Korea, Japan, the USA, Turkey, Germany, and Australia had fallen by 57 percent. Tourism revenue already had declined \$11.7 million or 28 percent in the first two months of 2020 from 2019.<sup>52</sup> Seventy percent of tourists who booked travel to Mongolia had cancelled their trips by April. Mongolia hosted 577,000 tourists in 2019 and in 2020, the number was expected to rise by 24 per cent,<sup>53</sup> but of course this will not happen.

A different type of change has been seen in the makeup of the Mongolian workforce. According to the National Statistical Office, during the first quarter of 2020, 4,300 foreign workers from 97 foreign countries were employed under labor contracts with or without pay, a decrease of 12.4 percent. Over one third of these were from China, and over 1,500 (36.3 percent) were working in the mining sector.<sup>54</sup> Amidst the coronavirus

50 Marco Spina, "Annual Cashmere Market Report, 2018," The Schneider Group, March 1, 2019, <https://www.gschneider.com/2019/03/01/annual-cashmere-market-report/>, accessed May 18, 2020.

51 B. Ankhtuya, "Financial support to Mongolia's cashmere producers," *news.mn*, March 19, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791354/>, accessed March 20, 2020.

52 B. Ankhtuya, "Tourism in the Year of the Virus," *news.mn*, March 20, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791385/>, accessed March 20, 2020.

53 According to a survey conducted by the Mongolian Tourism Association. See B. Ankhtuya, "COVID-19 impact: most tourists cancel their 2020 trips to Mongolia," *news.mn*, April 2, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791626/>, accessed September 1, 2020.

54 Of the foreign workers, 36.0% came from China, 8.7% from Australia, 7.5% from Russia, 6.2% from South Korea, 5.5% from USA, 4.8% from Vietnam, 3.9% from South Africa, 3.8% from Philippines, 3.0% from Great Britain, 2.8% from Canada and the remaining 17.8% from other countries. 22.7% work in the education sector, 743 workers (17.2%) are working in wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, 255 workers (5.9%) are working in manufacturing sector, 175 workers (4.1%) are working in transportation and storage, 158 workers (3.7%) are working in administrative and support service activities, 130 workers (3.0%) are working in construction sector and 0.3 thousand foreign workers (7.1%) are working in other sectors. The above statistics come from Mongolia's National Statistical Office. See B. Batchimeg, "Number of foreign workers in Mongolia decreased," *Montsame*, April 14, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/222070>, accessed April 16, 2020.

lockdown, the Mongolian government decided to not bring in another 6,000 foreign construction workers in 2020, but nevertheless, on March 22nd it flew in 105 Chinese engineers to work on the important Ulaanbaatar – Darkhan highway. The engineers were tested for COVID-19 in Beijing prior to boarding and then after arrival in the capital airport taken by bus to Tuv aimag for 14 days of observation under isolation.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Mongolia has utilized the coronavirus period to upgrade the construction skills of its local workforce, especially in railroad construction.

In the first four months of 2020, Mongolia imported 16.9 million face masks worth US\$5 million, of which \$4.8 million was imported in April alone. This compares to only 976,301 face masks imported in all of 2019. During the same four months in 2020, 40,606 test kits, 13,437 protective gears, and 5.8 million pieces of medical equipment were imported.<sup>56</sup> MIAT Airlines in May began international cargo flights using a Boeing 767-300 airplanes to transport various medicines as well as personal protective equipment (PPE), face masks

and medical equipment to be used at hospitals. This was the national airline's first entrance into the international cargo transport market and an attempt to bring in revenue since the air travel market had become so restricted.<sup>57</sup> The sharp fall in crude oil prices, resulting from the Covid-19 crisis, was a huge benefit for Mongolia, according to D. Sumiyabazar, Minister of Mining and Heavy Industries. Because Mongolia imports 100 percent of its fuel demands from foreign countries, mostly from Russia's Rosneft, since March, Mongolian fuel prices have decreased by MNT 200 per liter.<sup>58</sup>

The quarantines and lockdowns in Mongolia also have accelerated the rise of the new digital economy. This was evidenced by the May webinar of the American Chamber of Commerce in Mongolia (AmCham Mongolia) which discussed digital transformation during the pandemic. The topics included global digital transformation trends, how they are shaping businesses in Mongolia, and steps needed on the part of private businesses and the Mongolian government in order to embrace the momentum of digital transformation.<sup>59</sup>

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55 Minister of Road and Transportation, B. Enkh-Amgalan in the article reported that the 244 km Ulaanbaatar – Darkhan is of strategic importance, because it is part of the north-south corridor, linking the capital with Russia. Originally, it was expected to carry 600 vehicles a day. Now nearly 3,800 cars use it daily and this number swells to 12,300 during festival times. The road will be renovated with four-lanes and concrete surfaces in accordance with international standards. See B. Ankhtuya, "Mongolia to bring 105 Chinese workers by chartered flight," *Montsame*, March 20, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791408/>, accessed March 22, 2020.

56 According to the Customs General Administration. See E. Erdenejargal, "Mongolia imports 16.9 million face masks in 2020," *Montsame*, May 8, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224399>, accessed May 13, 2020.

57 A.Munkhzul, "MIAT Mongolian Airlines conducts international cargo flight," *Montsame*, April 28, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/223707>, accessed May 1, 2020.

58 B.Ankhtuya, "Mongolians benefit from global market fall in crude." March 19, 2020, *Montsame*, <https://news.mn/en/791351/>, accessed March 22, 2020.

59 The panelists were George Chen, Head of Public Policy at Facebook Inc; Ganhuyag Hutagt, CEO and founder of Ard Financial Group; Bayarsaikhan Volodya, COO of And Global Pte Ltd. and Founder and CEO of TomYo EdTech; and Uyanga Khurelbaatar, Director of Digital and Technology Solution Division at Wagner Asia. "AmCham Mongolia urges for Mongolia's bold Digital Transformation during the pandemic," *Mongol Messenger*, June 5, 2020, pg. 4.

There are four major areas where the COVID-19 pandemic already has caused significant changes in Mongolia's foreign policy calculations:

### **1. Return of Dependence Upon Foreign Assistance to Prop Up Economy**

What may turn out to be the most deleterious effect of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic is the return to the Mongolian government and public's mentality of turning to foreign governments and institutions for assistance and money to solve their problems and willingness by the Mongolian government to carry ever higher loads of debt. This is what happened in the 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed and its subsidizing of Mongolia's socialist-era budget shortfalls of about one-third also disappeared. During the first fifteen years of Mongolian democracy, bilateral aid together with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank assistance to Mongolia amounted to almost \$1.5 billion, reportedly the highest level per person in the world. Such generous international donor assistance, granted for benevolent reasons, actually caused the explosion of corruption, social instability, and greater income inequality which still haunt Mongolia today.<sup>60</sup> It is hoped that this new burst of generosity, which is so appreciated during these pandemic times, will not contribute in the long run to greater economic distortion of Mongolia's economic development.

However, there are indications in the media that the extent of the donations have been wildly distorted. For example,

it was reported by a young Mongolian researcher on the BreatheMongolia.org website that as "of June 2020, Mongolia has received an estimated USD \$513.5 million as support against the novel Coronavirus pandemic from The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asia Development Bank, the European Union, USAID, and Oyu Tolgoi LLC, governments and international agencies as well as from international and Mongolian individual donors."<sup>61</sup> This figure includes a major mistake in the calculation of the conversion rate of PRC yuan to U.S. dollars whereby the Chinese government is credited with donating \$114 million worth of PPE, when the actual figure is closer to \$112,000. Also, this analysis labels all Japanese bilateral aid for Mongolian economic and social programs (\$11.8 million) as coronavirus assistance, which is about ten times higher than the actual numbers.

#### *International Organizations' Assistance*

In late March it was reported in the media that the Mongolian Cabinet decided to hold negotiations on loan agreements with World Bank, International Development Association (IDA) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) on preparedness plans to deal

60 Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's Foreign Policy: Navigating a Changing World* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 72-74.

61 Namuun Purevdorj, "A Summary of COVID-19 Relief and Support Received by Mongolia," *Breath Mongolia.org*, August 5, 2020, <https://breathmongolia.org/news-article/a-summary-of-covid-19-relief-and-support-received-by-mongolia/>, accessed September 10, 2020.

with potential COVID-19 outbreaks. The World Bank Group pledged \$14 billion in immediate support to affected countries, and Mongolia decided to seek \$26.9 million for essential medical equipment for Mongolia's health industry. The country received \$13.1 million in very favorable soft financing from the IDA.<sup>62</sup> Another \$13.8 million loan agreement was asked of the IBRD.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s pandemic-related assistance had begun in early February with the reallocation of \$1.4 million under the Asia Pacific Disaster Response Fund to support the procurement of 570 pieces of emergency medical equipment.<sup>63</sup> A small-scale technical assistance grant of \$225,000 for strengthening national capacity for emergency preparedness was announced on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Under this, WHO technical experts from Germany were deployed that month to train Mongols in infection prevention and control and to train personnel in provincial and district level hospitals. On May 7, the ADB approved an additional \$30 million for the Fifth Health Sector Project to strengthen the country's preparedness. Then, just a few days later it approved a \$100 million Countercyclical Support Facility

Loan, funded through the COVID-19 pandemic response option (CPRO), to mitigate the severe health and economic impacts of the coronavirus disease. At least 45 percent of the funds are directed to women, and support also is provided to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in international trade, particularly the import of critical food and medical supplies.

ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa noted Mongolia's small number of virus cases, but warned that because the strain on the economy and threat to public health remains, the ADB would fund the government's ongoing initiatives, including a National Emergency Response Plan to contain the virus' spread and the countercyclical development expenditure program (CDEP). The support in the short-term will be used to supply medical equipment and supplies and a set of medium-term measures will be allocated for "strengthening 35 hospitals to meet national infection prevention and control standards, and improving 210 hospitals to meet national standards to manage Severe Acute Respiratory Infection patients, and enhancing testing capacity."<sup>64</sup> An element of the ADB's COVID-19 response package was poverty related, as it included a \$26.4 million Shock Responsive Social

62 At a 1.25 percent annual interest rate for the balance, 0.5 percent for capital insurance premium, and service charges of 0.75 percent. See T. Baljima, "Mongolia to get financial assistance from int'l organizations to fight Covid-19," *Montsame*, March 25, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/220116>, accessed April 1, 2020.

63 This assistance was used for diagnosis and treatment patients with respiratory conditions for 30 district and provincial general hospitals and 4 tertiary level hospitals. The equipment included portable digital X-rays, ventilators, patient monitors, oxygen concentrators, infusion and injection pumps and nebulizers. Personal protective equipment also was delivered to 700 customs officers working at the borders. See M. Unurzul, "Behind ADB's Response to Mongolia's COVID-19 Crisis," *Montsame*, June 30, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/229951>, accessed July 2, 2020.

64 The ADB's COVID-19 Rapid Response Program is funded through the COVID-19 pandemic response option (CPRO) under ADB's Countercyclical Support Facility. CPRO was established as part of ADB's \$20 billion expanded assistance for developing member countries' COVID-19 response that was announced on April 13. See "ADB Provides \$100 Million to Support Mongolia's COVID-19 Response," May 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mongolia/adb-provides-100-million-support-mongolias-covid-19-response>, accessed May 18, 2020.

Protection Project to provide cash transfers to households channeled through the Food Stamp and Child Money Programs in Mongolia. As an example of encouraging Mongolia to ask for more aid, the ADB announced it would support a further request by the new government formed after the June 24<sup>th</sup> elections. This resulted at the end of July in the granting of an additional \$1 million from the Asia-Pacific Disaster Response Fund in non-refundable aid. The funds were to be applied to purchase medical equipment for a new hospital in Ulaanbaatar city and for training of its workforce.<sup>65</sup>

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also put together a financial package for Mongolia to weather the pandemic crisis since its previous debt reduction and reserve accumulation program was scheduled to expire on May 23, 2020. An IMF staff team conducted discussions with the Mongolian authorities from May 11-13<sup>th</sup>. The Mongols sought emergency financing of about \$99 million to contain the looming health risks. The IMF team leader, Mr. Geoff Gottlieb, announced that “After the pandemic abates, the priority should shift to enhancing resilience by reducing public debt, building up foreign exchange reserves, and strengthening bank capital. In particular, the authorities agreed to continue banking sector

reforms in the period ahead, possibly in the context of a follow-on program to the expiring Extended Fund Facility.”<sup>66</sup> The IMF Executive Board approved the request on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Strangely, one of the reasons given for approval is the goal of encouraging Mongolian further reliance on donor aid rather than urging Mongolia to strengthen self-reliance: “This emergency financial assistance will help support foreign exchange reserves, create fiscal space for essential pandemic-related expenditure, and catalyze donor support.”<sup>67</sup>

The World Bank has been a leading critic of Mongolian fiscal policies over the years. As World Bank Senior Economist for Mongolia Jean Pascal Nganou stated in February 2020, “While monetary policy tightening since late 2018 has helped contain credit growth, further macroprudential measures will help preempt emerging risks. Mongolia should continue its ongoing efforts to strengthen financial supervision and its macroprudential framework, and bolster its crisis management and resolution frameworks.”<sup>68</sup> World Bank Country Manager for Mongolia Andrei Mikhnev continued, “Despite the positive medium-term outlook, strengthening fiscal buffers through continued fiscal consolidation and building up reserves by limiting excessive foreign exchange interventions should remain two important policy

65 B.Batchimeg, “ADB pledges to provide additional USD 1.5 million aid to Mongolia,” *Montsame*, July 28, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/232163>, accessed August 1, 2020.

66 B.Batchimeg, “IMF staff completes discussions for Emergency Access to the Rapid Financing Instrument on Mongolia,” *Montsame*, May 19, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225999>, accessed May 20, 2020.

67 “IMF Executive Board Approves US\$99 Million Disbursement Under the Rapid Financing Instrument to Mongolia to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic,” IMF PRESS RELEASE NO. 20/232, June 3, 3030, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/03/pr20232-mongolia-imf-executive-board-approves-us-99m-disbursement-under-the-rfi-address-covid19>, accessed September 6, 2020.

68 “Mongolia: Medium Term Economic Outlook Remains Positive Amid Heightened Uncertainties,” *The World Bank Press Release*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/02/14/mongolia-medium-term-economic-outlook-remains-positive-amid-heightened-uncertainties>, accessed September 6, 2020.

priorities of the government. The government's commitment to reforms in 2020 will be crucial to maintain promising market sentiment and the flow of foreign direct investment.”<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, the World Bank in early 2020 approved US\$26.9 million for the Mongolia COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness project. An additional \$2.2 million was diverted from the ongoing E-Health project to purchase some of the most needed medical diagnostic equipment. In mid-May the World Bank reallocated \$15 million under its existing Employment Support Project for some of the COVID-19-related economic stimulus measures that were endorsed by the Mongolian parliament on April 9<sup>th</sup>. This support is being utilized “to cover out-of-pocket social insurance contributions for an estimated 120,000 individuals—including the self-employed, micro-entrepreneurs, and those informally employed—for a period of five months so they can free up resources to cover their daily expenses during the difficult time of crisis.”<sup>70</sup> While such assistance certainly was necessary, in light of the generous funding aid from other multilateral organizations and bilateral donors, it must be questioned if the World Bank is only exacerbating the very problems it has complained about.

The United Nations-affiliated organizations also have provided much aid to Mongolia during the pandemic. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Rapid Response Funding

has allocated \$9.5 million to assist the Mongols in developing a national COVID-19 recovery strategy that comprehensively responds to economic and social dimensions. UNDP also is supporting disrupted cashmere and dairy sector value chains and is providing assistance to the social welfare system to reach vulnerable groups in remote rural areas through the use of digital technologies amidst COVID-19.<sup>71</sup>

With a goal of the \$8,098,300, the UNICEF Mongolia response plan is 32 per cent funded. \$2,608,134 had been received/pledged by August 12, 2020 with contributions from bilateral donors (Governments of Japan and Australia, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), multilateral donors (ADB, Global Partnership for Education, the United Nations Response and Recovery Fund) and individual philanthropists (Child Fund Korea). UNICEF's Risk communication and community engagement activities were oriented towards social media to provide mental health advice for teenagers and their parents and reached 340,000 views between May and the end of July. UNICEF also is supporting the nationwide Hygiene Campaign to produce and disseminate a series of hygiene (handwashing) communication materials through national television and social media, reaching over 900,000 people. UNICEF Mongolia since April has been working together with the Mongolian

69 “Mongolia: Medium Term Economic Outlook Remains Positive Amid Heightened Uncertainties,” *ibid*.

70 Batchimeg, “World Bank to help alleviate burden,” *ibid*.

71 “Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030,” UNDP Mongolia website, <https://www.mn.undp.org/content/mongolia/en/home/coronavirus/support-to-national-response.html>, accessed September 6, 2020.

Red Cross Society, WHO, and USAID to provide hygiene supplies to health facilities staff and other frontline workers in 67 quarantine centers to handle the around 9,500 people quarantined upon their arrival in Mongolia by government-operated charter flights. In addition, these supplies were provided to about 100 frontline staff working at 11 border entry points in eight provinces of Mongolia.<sup>72</sup>

It is not clear that the WHO has taken the lead in Mongolia specifically on pandemic issues, despite the fact that there is a representative office in Ulaanbaatar. Relatively little information on designated funding and programs for fighting the coronavirus within the country are available. On May 15, WHO's Representative to Mongolia Sergey Diorditsa held a briefing in Ulaanbaatar on the Covid-19 situation praising the SEC's emergency management exercise for COVID-19 response on May 6-8 and for restricting public events and the Tsagaan Sar - Lunar New Year. He also lauded cooperation between professional organizations and the government as well as all Mongolian citizens for complying with health guidelines.<sup>73</sup> It appears that WHO operations are being supervised and publicized through other UN-related organizations and the UN Resident Coordinator.

The European Union (EU) on May 29th signed a first-ever Financing Agreement for the EU Budget Support programme of €50.8 million over four years to boost employment and improve transparency in public finances. The EU is partnering with the UNDP, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, International Labour Organization, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. This agreement included an upfront disbursement of €16 million to fight the social and economic consequences of COVID-19.<sup>74</sup> World Vision Mongolia from April 1 to September 1<sup>st</sup> implemented a \$2.3 million project to prevent Covid-19 infections. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, MNT 56.4 million worth of PPE was presented to the NEMA staff. The organization also has provided PPE and disinfectant devices to frontline police officers.<sup>75</sup> The Asia Foundation's Lotus Rapid Response Fund has been tapped in 2020 to provide aid that has direct connection to the coronavirus pandemic. For example, the Fund has disbursed emergency cash grants, funded a direct hotline for women experiencing psychological or social problems and mentorships to assist businesses in the transition to online sales, and established a public information partnership with the Ulaanbaatar police department to

72 UNICEF, "Mongolia Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Situation Report No. 4," July 9-August 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Mongolia%20COVID-19%20Situation%20Report%20No.%204%20-%209%20July%20-%2012%20August%202020.pdf>, accessed September 8, 2020.

73 M.Anudari, "WHO Representative in Mongolia gives Covid-19 information and advice," Montsame, May 19, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225968>, accessed May 20, 2020.

74 "EU supports Mongolia in boosting employment and transparency amid COVID-19 pandemic," European Commission, May 29, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/eu-supports-mongolia-boosting-employment-and-transparency-amid-covid-19-pandemic\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/eu-supports-mongolia-boosting-employment-and-transparency-amid-covid-19-pandemic_en), accessed September 10, 2020.

75 M.Anudari, "World Vision Mongolia provides PPE kits," Montsame, April 22, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/223160>, accessed September 8, 2020.

disseminate information about domestic violence.<sup>76</sup>

#### *Bilateral assistance*

A good deal of COVID-19-related aid has come in the form of bilateral assistance in medical products, outright donor aid, or very low-interest loans. Mongolia's border neighbors, China and Russia, many nations that thirty years ago provided large amounts of official development assistance (ODA) to underpin the Mongolian economy as it transitioned to the market economy and democracy (e.g. United States, Japan, Republic of Korea), as well as newer global partners have been generous towards Mongolia during a time when their own societies were suffering. Repeating the pattern established in the 1990s, the United States, has emerged as an aid coordinator/booster in the international community and a major ODA provider. On March 24<sup>th</sup> the U.S. allocated nearly \$1.2 million for health assistance "to prepare laboratory systems, activate case-finding and event-based surveillance, and support technical experts for response and preparedness."<sup>77</sup> This is being distributed by USAID to WHO (\$700,000) and the United Nations Children's Fund (\$500,000)

to support the Mongolian Ministry of Health to enhance risk communication and community preparedness, provide critical supplies, improve water, sanitation, and hygiene services, and assist with data collection and analysis, as well as to protect health workers and patients. Calling Mongolia's response to the pandemic "impressive", U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia Michael Klecheski said, "As a friend and third neighbor, U.S. will continue to stand by our Mongolian friends and neighbors in this challenging time."<sup>78</sup> In June, the U.S. government and U.S. Department of Defense donated 60,000 PPE kits for Ministry of Health and Border customs workers.

The Japanese, a longtime aid provider to the Mongols, have sent the Mongolian government several tranches of coronavirus assistance. The first was \$235,000 through the International Federation of Red Cross, and in April another \$670,600 was dispatched to the Mongols to fight the COVID-19 pandemic through the United Nations Children's Fund.<sup>79</sup> Later in May, Save the Children Japan donated laptop, color printing and GPS devices worth MNT 5 million to NEMA, which continued their partnership since 2108 in disaster

76 Soomin Jun and Saranzaya Gerelt-Od, "Funding Women Entrepreneurs on Mongolia's Covid Front Line," Asia Foundation, July 8, 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/2020/07/08/funding-women-entrepreneurs-on-mongolias-covid-front-line/>, accessed September 10, 2020.

77 The United States has invested about \$106 million in health projects of its more than \$1 billion in total assistance for Mongolia over the past 20 years. See "State department: Update: The United States continues to lead the global response to COVID-19," OCHA Services Relief Web, June 19, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/state-department-update-united-states-continues-lead-global-response-covid-19>, accessed September 8, 2020.

78 M.Montastudio, "United States providing assistance to support Mongolia's COVID-19 response," Montsame, March 24, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/219993>, accessed March 25, 2020.

79 M.Anudari, "Japan to provide USD 670.6 thousand in assistance to Mongolia," Montsame, April 21, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/222989>. April 22, 2020.

preparedness.<sup>80</sup>

PRC assistance to Mongolia has come mainly in the form of medical supplies. On March 28<sup>th</sup> Chinese Ambassador Chai Wenru promised that 500,000 face masks and 3,000 rapid testing kits would be given to the country.<sup>81</sup> In the ambassador's April 21<sup>st</sup> meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Enkhtuvshin, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on bilateral economic relations was discussed. The two sides agreed that in response to the severe shortfall in Mongolian coal exports, local coordination between the border crossings would be increased. Two Chinese thermographic cameras, each worth US\$40,000 or MNT 110 million, which are capable of measuring body temperatures of 15 people concurrently, were gifted to the SEC.<sup>82</sup> On May 26<sup>th</sup> the Chinese government presented the Mongolian Ministry of Defense's Military Central Hospital with medical-use PPE goggles, boots, facemasks, and remote thermometers worth CNY 1 million as non-refundable aid in thanks for Mongolia's earlier support to China at the outbreak of the pandemic.<sup>83</sup>

Noting that since the Covid-19 outbreak the Mongolian leaders and people have sent donations and assistance, the Chinese Ambassador, his staff, and the China Society in Ulaanbaatar in mid-March presented a donation of MNT 126.73 million to Minister of Foreign Affairs Tsogtbaatar.<sup>84</sup> At the end of that month, the Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation donated the promised 500,000 N95 face masks to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs D. Davaasuren thanked the Chinese government for these supplies and in response Chinese Ambassador Chai Wenrui promised further donations: "We will never forget all-round support that the government, organizations and people of Mongolia have rendered us during a hard time in China. As a contribution to Mongolia's actions in response to Covid-19, China's Alibaba Foundation is delivering this donation."<sup>85</sup> In June the Government of Taiwan donated 200,000 face masks to the doctors and staff of Mongolia's National Center for Communicable Diseases (NCCD).<sup>86</sup>

The Russian government has provided Mongolia with medical supplies to fight the coronavirus. In

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80 M.Unurzul, "Save the Children donates equipment to NEMA," *Montsame*, May 22, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/226361>, accessed May 22, 2020.

81 T.Baljmaa, "China to provide 500,000 masks and 3,000 coronavirus test kits," *Montsame*, March 27, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/220330>, accessed April 1, 2020.

82 "China presents thermographic cameras to Mongolia," *The Mongol Messenger*, April 24, 2020.

83 B.Batchimeg, "Defense Ministry of China donates CNY 1 million worth of PPE to Mongolia," *Montsame*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/226784>, accessed June 1, 2020.

84 B.Ankhtuya, "Chinese people donate money to Mongolia for fighting Covid-19," *news.mn*, March 19, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791361/>, accessed September 8, 2020.

85 M.Unurzul, "Donation of Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation arrives in Mongolia Society," *Montsame*, April 1, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/220698>, accessed April 2, 2020.

86 E.Erdenejargal, "Taiwan donates 200,000 face masks," *Montsame*, June 10, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/228029>, accessed June 14, 2020.

March it sent testing kits,<sup>87</sup> and in early September it promised to provide Mongolia with ‘Sputnik V’ coronavirus vaccine, if it proves to be a success in trials.<sup>88</sup> The Turkish government’s cooperation and assistance program, TIKA, donated 500 plastic face shields to Mongolia’s Military Central Hospital. The face shields were made by 3D printers which were presented by TIKA as nonrefundable aid to the National University of Mongolia and Mongolian University of Science and Technology.<sup>89</sup> On April 20th, the Asia Foundation and its Urban Governance Project, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, donated MNT50 million worth of PPE to the city of Ulaanbaatar. The donation included disposable face masks, N95 masks, and hand sanitizers.<sup>90</sup> Donations also have come from South Koreans living in Mongolia, who in April gave 2,000 rapid test kits to the SEC. When thanking the representatives of the Korean Citizens’ Society in Mongolia, Deputy Prime Minister Enkh-tuvshin said that “Countries will go through this hardship as a result of collaboration. Therefore, it is crucial for countries to share their experience and information.”<sup>91</sup>

A month later Mongolia received 30,000 rapid COVID-19 test kits worth 250,000 U.S. dollars from the South Korean government.<sup>92</sup> In mid-June the German Ministry of Defence gave €1 million to Mongolia to procure medical devices, medicines, and PPE for the Central Military Hospital in Ulaanbaatar, one of the main hospitals to isolate and treat patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>93</sup>

A different form of assistance was obtained from the French company, Orano Mining (Areva) in March. The French Ambassador to Mongolia relayed a donation, which was more in the nature of compensation, of MNT 1 billion (\$361,354) to the NEC because Mongolia’s first case of coronavirus was brought into the country by a Frenchman who works for Badrakh Energy, a subsidiary of Areva in Dornogobi province, who did not follow Mongolia’s quarantine procedures. He had contact with nearly 500 people in Mongolia after his arrival in Ulaanbaatar on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, but, fortunately, tests indicated he did not infect these people.<sup>94</sup> Locally, Oyu Tolgoi LLC, a copper and gold mining company in Mongolia that is owned by

87 “Where Has Russia Sent Coronavirus Aid Around the World?,” *Moscow Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/01/where-has-russia-sent-coronavirus-aid-around-the-world-a69825>, accessed September 9, 2020.

88 M.Anudari, “Russia ready to provide Mongolia with coronavirus vaccine if trials prove successful,” *Montsame*, September 1, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/235100>, accessed September 2, 2020.

89 *The Mongol Messenger*, July 3, 2020.

90 M.Unurzul, “Asia Foundation donates protection equipment worth MNT50 million,” *Montsame*, April 21, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/222972>, accessed April 21, 2020.

91 B.Batchimeg, “S. Korean citizens living in Mongolia donate rapid test kits,” *Montsame*, April 3, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/220980>, accessed April 5, 2020.

92 “South Korea donates COVID-19 test kits to Mongolia,” *Xinhua*, May 5, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/05/c\\_139032905.htm#:~:text=%22The%20South%20Korean%20government%20plans,said%20during%20a%20handover%20ceremony](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/05/c_139032905.htm#:~:text=%22The%20South%20Korean%20government%20plans,said%20during%20a%20handover%20ceremony), accessed September 9, 2020.

93 M.Unurzul, “Germany to grant EUR 1 million to Mongolia,” *Montsame*, June 15, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/228469>, accessed September 10, 2020.

94 B.Ankhtuya, “French Company compensates Mongolia for employee,” *news.mn*, March 19, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/791364/>, accessed March 21, 2020.

multinationals Rio Tinto and Turquoise Hills, together with the government of Mongolia, donated over \$163,000 to the

Ministry of Finance to aid COVID-19 relief work.<sup>95</sup>

## **2. Mongolian Assistance to Foreign Countries to fight COVID-19**

While Mongolia has been the recipient of much assistance and funding related to containing the impact of the COVID-19 virus, a new, very promising development in its foreign policy that has emerged is the country's willingness to donate to other nations facing coronavirus difficulties. This has been more than supportive rhetoric, but has been very strategically targeted towards countries that the Mongolian policymaking establishment likely believe hold keys to the country's future economic and national security development. This aid has been concrete, substantive, and extended towards superpowers and one Central Asian nation so far, in a deliberate and thoughtful manner. Since the assistance has not been to poor nations suffering the effects of the pandemic, such a response cannot just be explained as the development of a mentality of responsible membership in the international community or predicated on a history of stepping up to help other nations in times of crisis.

Mongols have cited stories of how 800 years ago Chinggis Khaan and his army gathered orphaned children during battles to be cared for by Mongolian women, including 200 children raised by the Khaan's mother Höelun. It is true that in the modern era communist

Mongolia sent meat and horses to the Soviet Union during World War II and 10,000 horses to the DPRK during the Korean War. It offered protection in an Ulaanbaatar orphanage from 1952-1959 for 200-400 children, aged 2-5, who were orphans of North Korean political and military leaders. The North Korean ruling Kim family has often remarked on how this humanitarian gesture cemented Mongolian-DPRK friendship and trust. Also, the day after September 11, 2001, the Mongolian government issued a special stamp that was sold throughout the country to raise funds for the U.S. victims. This gesture gained immediate praise throughout the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress. All of these past actions, as well as the ones outlined below, can be interpreted as wily foreign policy calculations that utilized humanitarian gestures as soft power instruments to bolster Mongolia's reputation and to strengthen its national security.

Early during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mongolia donated \$200,000 towards China's epidemic control efforts. This was part of the Mongolian governmental nationwide campaign called "Emotional Support to Eternal Neighbor" for Mongolian citizens to donate money and supplies to China to help contain the

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<sup>95</sup> Namuun, "A Summary of COVID-19 Relief and Support Received by Mongolia," *ibid.*

spread of the epidemic.<sup>96</sup> On February 27<sup>th</sup> Mongolian President Kh.Battulga, as the first foreign head of state to visit China in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, also donated 30,000 sheep, an act often praised in the Chinese media. The fact that the President and his team then had to place themselves in 14-day quarantine upon their return home was evidence of the President's sincerity and commitment to the bilateral relationship. In addition, in May the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Mongolia, the Military Central Hospital, and the Ministry of Defense of Mongolia made a cash donation to the staffs of a military hospital in China in order to combat the coronavirus in Wuhan city of Hubei Province.<sup>97</sup>

In late May the Mongolian Prime Minister Khürelsükh presented Russian Ambassador to Mongolia Iskander Azizov a certificate for meat and meat products worth \$1 million to fight the coronavirus. The aid initiative, approved by the Mongolian National Security Council, "will play a major role for strengthening further relations of comprehensive strategic partnership between Russia and Mongolia."<sup>98</sup> On June 9, the Uvs branch of the Mongolian Women's Association mounted a campaign to help the Tuva Republic of Russia cope with the Covid-19 crisis

by raising MNT 35.8 million from 275 private citizens and business people and over 60 governmental organizations and companies. MNT 12.5 million of these funds were used to buy surgical masks, medical gloves, respirators, and PPE for the people and healthcare workers of Tuva. General Consul of Mongolia in Kyzyl, Russia Mr. Ch. Ganbold handed over the rest of the collected donation of MNT 23 million (\$8000 or RUB 12,000) in cash to First Deputy Chairman of Government of Tuva Alexander Brokert.<sup>99</sup>

In early June the Mongolian government offered \$1 million of humanitarian assistance from its contingency fund to the United States to help the country cope with COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>100</sup> A MIAT Boeing 767 named the Chinggis Khaan on June 21 landed in Seattle with 60,000 pieces of PPE, most of which was to be donated by Mongolia to the people of the Navajo Nation indigenous community to assist in their efforts to stem the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>101</sup>

Mongolia's geographically closest Central Asian neighbor, Kazakhstan, is a rich nation in Eurasia and key to a stable continental environment. Also, Mongolia has many Kazakh ethnics living in its western *aimags*, especially Bayan-ölgi, so there is a sentimental tie between the

96 "Mongolia shows solidarity with China in fighting against COVID-19," Xinhua, February 28, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/28/WS5e586610a31012821727af17.html>, accessed September 10, 2020.

97 Batchimeg, "Defense Ministry of China donates CNY 1 million," *ibid*.

98 "Mongolia offers Russia \$1 mln in humanitarian aid amid pandemic," Tass, May 26, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1160555>, accessed September 10, 2020.

99 M.Anudari, "Aid delivered to Tuva," *Montsame*, June 10, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/228052>, accessed June 10, 2020.

100 "Mongolia to provide USD 1 million to help United States fight coronavirus," *Mongol Messenger*, June 5, 2020, pg. 3.

101 "First ever nonstop flight from Mongolia to US delivers PPE to Navajo Nation," *bne IntelliNews*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.intellinews.com/first-ever-nonstop-flight-from-mongolia-to-us-delivers-ppe-to-navajo-nation-186437/>, July 1, 2020.

two nations. The Mongols at the end of August, initiated by 336 Mongolian citizens, donated MNT 12 million to help Kazakhstan fight the spread of COVID-19. The Embassy of Kazakhstan in Mongolia reported that Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Yeraly Tugzhanov sent a letter of gratitude to those who joined the campaign: “I am

expressing my sincere gratitude to you on giving your helping hands in this difficult time. We deem that the help of 336 Mongolian nationals is a huge support provided to the Kazakh people. It is certain that the donation given by you would contribute in making people of the two countries closer.”<sup>102</sup>

### **3. Acceleration of Self-Strengthening under ‘Mongolia First’ Self-Sufficiency Policies**

Mongolia’s decision to choose a path of greater Eurasian connectivity via transportation development to facilitate diversification of its trade partners has been an on-going policy for over ten years. While some nations in the region, including Mongolia, have been rethinking the concept of Eurasian connectivity and dependency because of the pandemic, Mongolian decision makers have concluded that the pandemic definitely proves that Mongolia must develop as quickly as possible its own domestic industries to increase self-sufficiency, and this means placing greater emphasis on the completion of domestic transportation and energy projects long in the pipeline. This determination to rely on Mongolian workers, expertise, and existing funding to execute these plans has been embraced by Mongolian President Battulga under his ‘Mongolia First’ development strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has frozen some of the funding and execution for new rail and road linkage projects in Mongolia, but not all. These projects are deemed necessary to develop Mongolia as a transit economic corridor between Russia and China, but also a means of linking domestically processed minerals and animal products to Mongolian customers around the nation and to the developed economies in the region that can utilize them. In 2020 construction of rail lines around the major mining site of Tavan Tolgoi, 240 km to the Chinese border at Gashuunsukhait<sup>103</sup> and 415 km to Zuunbayan in Sainshand<sup>104</sup> has proceeded. These rail spurs will permit Mongolia to increase its coal exports to 30 million tons a year and use the Chinese seaports of Huanghua, Tianjin, Qingdao and Jinzhou for transport to third countries.<sup>105</sup> Since Mongolia has

102 B.Batchimeg, “Government of Kazakhstan expresses gratitude to Mongolian nationals,” Montsame, August 31, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/234948>, accessed August 31, 2020.

103 More than 300 engineering and technical staff, over 1700 workers and over 510 machineries are working in this project.

104 More than 5,000 workers are working at the construction site and 2,500 pieces of equipment and machinery are being utilized. T. Baljmaa, “Zuunbayan-Tavantolgoi railroad construction in full swing,” Montsame, June 9, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/227910>, accessed June 25, 2020.

105 B.Batchimeg, “Tavantolgoi-Gashuunsukhait railroad to be commissioned in 2022,” Montsame, July 24, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/231951>, accessed August 22, 2020.

been unable to import some necessary equipment and machinery due to the pandemic, Mongolian engineers and personnel of the military units of the Mongolian Armed Forces and Ulaanbaatar Railways (UBTZ) Mongolian-Russian Joint Venture have been given PPE to continue construction operations by themselves.<sup>106</sup> Prime Minister Khürelsükh has articulated the positive element in this challenge: “The railway is a lifeblood of the country’s prosperity. We must connect our country by road and rail. Mongolians can build railways themselves. Putting a Zuunbayan-Tavantolgoi railway network into operation will bring enormous economic benefits.”<sup>107</sup>

Becoming independent in energy production, especially to supply electricity to strategic deposits in the southern region and the Gobi, has been a long-held goal for Mongolia. In the beginning of September, Mongolia completed the construction of three 220 kV substations and 670 km-long overhead power transmission lines to supply power to the Oyu Tolgoi copper-gold mine which previously imported electricity from China.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, the construction of a \$1.236 billion Mongolian refinery with Indian funding, the first for Mongolia and India’s single largest project of assistance, will be capable of refining 1.5 million metric tons of crude which is about three-

fourths of the nation’s oil requirements.<sup>109</sup> Construction of the refinery with roads, railways, and power line has continued during the pandemic and is scheduled to be completed by December 2022.

Tradewise, the Mongolian government, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recognized that the modifications Mongolia was compelled to make within its manufacturing base due to the pandemic held the potential to catalyze new exports to foreign trade partners. An example of this was seen in the fact that Minister of Foreign Affairs Tsogtbaatar, President of the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry O. Amartuvshin, and Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Mongolia Gregory May visited the ‘Munkhiin Tun’ pharmaceutical factory on May 8. The factory has produced 3.5 million face masks, since the year began, at a rate of 150,000 per day. In February it began to manufacture PPE for medical professionals and officials--85,000 of which were for Mongolian government use and 50,000 on contracts from the WHO and the World Bank. The gear produced meets the South Korean quality standards for export to the U.S. When Foreign Minister Tsogtbaatar suggested that these types of products could be exported, May responded that, “As trade turnover between our two countries is lower than our expectations, we are interested in new opportunities to expand

106 “President Battulga Visit Railroad Construction Sites,” Montsame, May 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0tmCCssSjg>, accessed May 12, 2020.

107 M.Unurzul, “Prime Minister U.Khurelsukh checks railway construction progress,” Montsame, June 15, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/228488>, accessed August 24, 2020.

108 M.Unurzul, “Oyu Tolgoi mine starts sourcing power domestically,” The Mongol Messenger, September 11, 2020.

109 “India-funded oil refinery in Mongolia to be completed by 2022-end: Pradhan,” Business Standard, September 20, 2019, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-funded-oil-refinery-in-mongolia-to-be-completed-by-2022-end-pradhan-119092001148\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-funded-oil-refinery-in-mongolia-to-be-completed-by-2022-end-pradhan-119092001148_1.html), accessed September 11, 2020.

trades in the framework of the strategic partnership. After Mongolian cashmere products, I perceive that hospital gear can also be put on the U.S. market.”<sup>110</sup>

As evidence that Mongolia is seeking to implement greater cooperation with “Third Neighbors” in a tangible way, there is the example of Foreign Minister Tsogtbaatar’s May 29th phone conversation with his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. In addition to pledging mutual support to overcome the pandemic, the Indian Foreign Minister offered to cooperate in the supply of COVID-19 pharmaceuticals. Minister Tsogtbaatar took the opportunity to emphasize that Mongolia wanted their joint oil refinery project to move forward more quickly despite the pandemic. He also informed Jaishankar that Mongolia had established a working group responsible for trial shipping of some goods to expand trade with India and increase their bilateral logistics capacity.<sup>111</sup>

Another example of moving forward with self-sufficiency projects was seen when Minister of Foreign Affairs Tsogtbaatar and Minister of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry Ch. Ulaan participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Biocombinat factory with loan financing provided by the Hungarian government on May 21<sup>st</sup>: “The project will enable the domestic production of an average of

10.0 million doses of FMD vaccine, 10-15 million doses of rabies vaccine, and 20 million doses of smallpox vaccine per year, which will not only improve animal health but also reduce currency outflows.”<sup>112</sup> The connection of the coronavirus pandemic to Mongolian views of export promotion were reinforced at recently appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs N. Enkhtaivan’s meeting with President of the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MNCCI) Amartuvshin on August 28th. Both sides told the press that it is crucial to mitigate COVID-19 impact on the economy by reviving exports of non-mining products and promoting Mongolian products and services at international fairs and events. Therefore, the government and MNCCI would cooperate on creating an online trading center for Mongolian goods in Berlin and Hohhot within the ‘Mongol Export’ program.<sup>113</sup>

One of the most impressive accomplishments that has arisen in the coronavirus era is that Mongolia’s often troubled and insolvent national airline, MIAT, has been significantly upgraded to meet the demand of repatriation flights. While normal international air travel has disappeared, the special flights of Mongolian citizens from sites in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States have been perfect opportunities for the flight crew and staff to learn new

110 A.Munkhzul, "Hospital gear made in Mongolia can be put on U.S. market," Montsame, May 8, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224880>, accessed May 11, 2020.

111 M.Unurzul, "Foreign Minister holds phone conversation with Indian counterpart," Montsame, May 30, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/227150>, accessed June 1, 2020.

112 E.Erdenejargal, "Groundbreaking ceremony held for new factory building of Biocombinat," Montsame, May 22, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/226348>, accessed May 25, 2020.

113 B.Batchimeg, "Foreign Minister meets President of Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry," Montsame, August 31, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/234975>, accessed September 1, 2020.

skills on new planes at new airports. Once international travel returns to normal, it is expected that new air routes will be opened such as direct flights to the United States, India, Australia, and London.<sup>114</sup> It has been reported in the American and Mongolian media that “MIAT Mongolian Airlines has applied for permission to launch scheduled

passenger services between Mongolia and the United States. Despite having an active fleet of just seven aircraft, the airline has expressed an interest in launching a single route between the U.S. and Ulaanbaatar. This could perhaps really happen once MIAT Mongolian Airlines receives its first Boeing 787-9 in 2021.”<sup>115</sup>

#### **4. Improvement in Citizen Services in Embassies and through Repatriation Flights**

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Mongolia began to implement a series of new methods of conducting foreign relations and trade. New practices were adopted in overseas embassies and consulates which provided valuable on the job training for Mongolian diplomats. How long these changes will continue after the pandemic crisis is over is yet to be seen, but it is a good prediction that several of the innovations will be established as normal practices.

##### *Teleconferencing*

One area of change has been expansion of on-line bilateral and multilateral teleconferencing. Mongolia and China established an online mechanism for communication and held their first video-conference on April 21st. The video-conference was attended by representatives of health, border, customs, specialized inspection, trade, transport and civil aviation organizations of the two countries as

well as staff officials from the Embassy of Mongolia to China, Consulate General of Mongolia in Huhhot, Consulate General of Mongolia in Shanghai, Consulate of Mongolia in Erenhot, the Embassy of China to Mongolia, and Chinese Consulate General in Zamyn-Uud. In the Mongolian media this type of communication was explained as a new cooperative mechanism to ensure the exchange of information online about Covid-19 response measures and experiences in prevention, diagnosis, isolation, treatment, and quarantine. At the teleconference they discussed tightening prevention and control and strengthening the cooperation of health institutions in both nations. The officials also talked about maintaining bilateral economic cooperation in the face of current restrictions and quarantine, and particular emphasis was placed on exchanges of citizens and freight transportation.<sup>116</sup> In mid-May Acting State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign

114 “Direct Flight between London and Ulaanbaatar Under Study,” *The Mongol Messenger*, September 11, 2020.

115 Jakov Fabinger, “Mongolian Airlines Operates First Non-Stop Flight To The US,” *Simple Flying*, June 24, 2020, <https://simpleflying.com/mogolian-airlines-us-non-stop-flight/>, accessed September 11, 2020.

116 “New mechanism for Mongolia-China cooperation established,” *The Mongol Messenger*, April 24, 2020.

Affairs Ms. O. Enkhtsetseg met with Chinese Ambassador Chai Wenrui to further assess the implementation of an online Mongolia-China cooperation mechanism for the fight against Covid-19 and other discussions on important issues of bilateral cooperation.<sup>117</sup>

The online mechanism of video conferencing now has been employed beyond the Sino-Mongolian bilaterals. After the scheduled Mongolia-Kazakhstan Intergovernmental Commission meeting for April was postponed due to the pandemic, a May 14th video conference of the working group of for trade, economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation was co-chaired by E. Sarantogos, Director General of the Asia-Pacific Department of the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Kanat Olzhabayev, Director of the Department for Multilateral Relations of the Ministry of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan. The respective ambassadors and representatives of the Ministry of Road and Transport Development, Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry, Specialized Inspection Agency, and Erdenes Alt company of Mongolia were in attendance. The Kazakh side presented a list of specific products to export to Mongolia. They both agreed to develop a plan to intensify by 2024 Mongolian-Kazakh trade and economic cooperation. Until the can organize an intergovernmental commission meeting when the pandemic has passed, both sides agreed to hold a series of virtual meetings between the ministries.<sup>118</sup> Such virtual meetings with Foreign Ministers and heads

of international organizations all over the world have become commonplace and are well-reported in the Mongolian media.

#### *Repatriation Flights Enhance Foreign Ministry's Capacity for Citizen Services*

At the beginning of 2020 there were more than 190,000 Mongolians living and working overseas. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the subsequent worldwide lockdown of economies, many in this community were compelled to consider returning home. However, initially most of these people remained abroad, expecting their jobs, schools, and activities to resume after several weeks. As a result of travel bans, thousands of Mongolians in foreign countries were stranded when nations around the world and airlines stopped international travel. The only option was to return by government-chartered evacuation flights or by designated entry points on land (these entry points were only permitted for permanent residents and students in China and Russia). Evacuation flights were restricted to 900 passengers per month because of multiple factors, including limited availability of quarantine camp accommodations and shortage of flight crew members (as they were isolated along with incoming citizens). The SEC prioritized people with serious health conditions, infants and children, older people (>60 years), and women in the late stages of pregnancy for such evacuation flights. By the end of May, 3,488 people had been repatriated on 18 flights and 5,580 by land travel;

117 M.Anudari, "Acting State Secretary of Foreign Ministry meets foreign ambassadors," Montsame, May 18, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225801>, accessed May 19, 2020.

118 M.Anudari, "Mongolia-Kazakhstan working group convenes virtually," Montsame, May 15, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225594>, accessed May 15, 2020.

more than 8,000 citizens remained stranded abroad, often living in extreme conditions because of diminishing funds.<sup>43</sup>

When Mongols did return from overseas, whether by train, car, or plane, cases of COVID-19 were imported into the country. This was expected amongst the population returning from China, so when citizens were allowed to enter through the southern border checkpoints during the winter months, Mongolian nationals crossing from Erenhot (Erlie) in Inner Mongolia were placed immediately in isolation for 21 days in Zamyn-Uud soum.<sup>119</sup> As spring approached, Mongolian authorities saw that new cases of the virus increasingly were coming from Russia and Europe. An example was on April 11 when of the 282 Mongolians who traveled to Ulan-Ude from Moscow and Irkutsk, 13 Mongol students aged between 19 and 23 from the group tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>120</sup> It was decided that to control the growing danger of importing coronavirus from Mongolian citizens returning home, border inspection points on the northern as well as the southern border had to be more closely monitored, quarantine for these individuals was extended to 21 days, and cross-border movement slowed to a trickle.

By April the government was faced

with thousands of requests to return home from citizens in 35 countries who had not returned prior to the curtailment of international travel and closing of the borders. From mid-March to April 6<sup>th</sup>, Mongolia had arranged six special chartered flights from Tokyo, Seoul, Istanbul, and Berlin to evacuate more than 1,500 Mongolian nationals living abroad.<sup>121</sup> As the weeks of lockdown in foreign countries grew to months of lockdown, these citizens working and studying in foreign countries increasingly could not sustain themselves because of closed schools and work places and little access to financial help from foreign governments. The largest Mongolian communities seeking return were in South Korea and the USA, and there were around 500 Mongols in Turkey and 150 people in India as well as another 150 children in Delhi receiving medical treatment all waiting to be evacuated. The MFA and Russians agreed that 150 waiting Mongols living in Russia, regardless of their location, would be allowed to return home only via the Altanbulag border checkpoint.<sup>122</sup>

Mongolian officials in Ulaanbaatar and around the world were pressured to further assist their countrymen find a way back to Mongolia despite the lack of international air travel. These requests were screened by the SEC and

119 B.Batchimeg, "55 Mongolians arrive from Erenhot," *Montsame*, April 16, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/222568>, accessed May 19, 2020.

120 M.Montastudio, "Total COVID-19 cases in Mongolia jump to 30, with 5 recovered," *Montsame*, April 14, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/222249>, accessed April 14, 2020.

121 T.Baljmaa, "More than 6,000 Mongolians abroad wish to return home," *Montsame*, April 6, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/221238>, accessed April 9, 2020.

122 Statistics were according to L.Munkhtushig, Director General of the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who gave information concerning the Mongolian nationals stranded abroad in the wake of travel restrictions imposed by Mongolia and foreign countries due to COVID-19 pandemic. See T. Baljmaa, "More than 6,000 Mongolians abroad wish to return home," *Montsame*, April 6, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/221238>, accessed April 9, 2020.

the Foreign Ministry beginning February 1<sup>st</sup>, but the slow process heightened anxiety among the overseas Mongols, and pressure spilled into confrontations in some Mongolian embassies. For example, 48,100 Mongolians were estimated to live in South Korea. The Mongolian Embassy in Seoul had difficulty in developing a list of people who met the criteria for expatriation registration. Deputy Prime Minister Enkhtuvshin, speaking as SEC Head, on April 28th reported:

We are bringing our citizens from Russia and China through railways and auto-roads. There are over 190 thousand Mongolian nationals that are currently abroad. As it is impossible to immediately bring back each and every citizen, elders, pregnant women, and people with young children are being prioritized. There have also been a few cases in which our citizens who wish to return to Mongolia have announced sit-ins outside of our embassies in some countries. Citizens must understand that organizing sit-ins will not result in government-organized charter flights and help increasing the capacity of isolation facilities. Currently, we only have the capacity to bring back those who are transiting through countries such as the Republic of Korea that have direct flights to Mongolia. We have no capacity to organize direct

flights to India, Australia, and the U.S.<sup>123</sup>

The Mongolian citizens chosen for evacuation were tested 48 hours before the flight and students had to be under 18 to be considered. First Deputy Head of the NEMA, Brigadier General G. Ariunbuyan explained the criteria for assistance: elders, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, mothers with young children, school children, and university students. Repeating that the SEC had explained that all requests by Mongolian nationals waiting abroad to return home cannot be met due to the limited number of mandatory isolation facilities and medical staff to take care of them and the number of MIAT planes available for charter flights, he criticized the disruptive behavior of some Mongols at the Embassy of Mongolia in Seoul who demanded immediate repatriation.<sup>124</sup>

Mongolian citizens traveling overland back to their homeland continued into May and brought new cases into the country. By the end of the month, a working group led by Head of the Operative team of the SEC and Deputy Chief of NEMA developed a system whereby those coming by train through the Altanbulag border crossing checkpoint in Selenge *aimag* were brought to Ulaanbaatar by a chartered train on Ulaanbaatar Railways. On May 26-27th, a group of 360 Mongolians, all of whom were studying in Russian cities, such as Moscow, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude,

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123 A.Munkhzul, "9,890 Mongolians abroad submit requests to return home," Montsame, April 28, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/223733>, accessed May 1, 2020.

124 A.Munkhzul, "Around 800 Mongolians to arrive on charter flights this week," Montsame, April 29, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/223838>, accessed May 1, 2020.

Tuva, Kazan, and Novosibirsk returned home.<sup>125</sup> From January through May, the government of Mongolia and SEC had evacuated about 2,350 citizens on charter flights from abroad, alongside more than 2,400 citizens through the border auto checkpoints and railway.

On May 4, President Kh.Battulga held a meeting with the SEC wherein he said that the requests of the Mongols abroad to return home should be fulfilled since their living situation had worsened and they were at risk of losing livelihoods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He cited the Mongols in India, who are at high risk of contracting the coronavirus and reportedly facing food shortages. For Mongolia, this was the first time the government took the decision to be responsible for the repatriation of average Mongolian citizens. Previous repatriation involved Mongolian diplomats and other officials. This certainly was a step forward for Mongolia as a democracy that was responsive to the wishes and needs of its nationals, even those outside its borders.

It was suggested at that meeting that to reduce costs Mongolian air personnel and facilities could be used instead of local facilities and flight personnel.<sup>126</sup> Since the national air carrier MIAT did not fly to India, the President instructed

the SEC head and Deputy Prime Minister Enkhtuvshin to negotiate with India's airline to conduct a flight to Mongolia. On May 8th, Enkhtuvshin met with Indian Ambassador Mohinder Pratap Singh to discuss procedures. About 480 Mongolian citizens all over India had submitted requests to return home. The Mongolian Embassy in New Delhi reported that 21 of those had medical conditions, 164 were students, and 260 were children under 18 years.<sup>127</sup> The evacuation flight took place on May 19<sup>th</sup> with 158 Mongolian nationals from India onboard. It made a fuel stop in Hanoi, Vietnam and picked up 11 Mongols from Vietnam.<sup>128</sup> This began Mongolian repatriation flights worldwide which are continuing throughout 2020.

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, a charter MIAT flight brought 179 Mongolian nationals from Istanbul, Turkey. All of the people were immediately placed under 21-day precautionary isolation at Baga Bayan sanatorium and Toyoko Inn Hotel.<sup>129</sup> That same day the government released the news about Covid-19 test results for the Mongolian military students who arrived from Russia on May 13<sup>th</sup>. Fifty-five of them had tested positive. This brought the total number of cases in Mongolia to 98.<sup>130</sup> Such statistics raised

125 M.Montastudio, "360 Mongolians arrive from Russia," *Montsame*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/226777>, accessed May 28, 2020.

126 M.Unurzul, "Concerns around COVID-19 and upcoming election discussed with President," *Montsame*, May 8, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224835>, accessed May 11, 2020.

127 M.Anudari, "Mongolia to charter flight to India next week to evacuate citizens," *Montsame*, May 5, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/224869>, accessed May 11, 2020.

128 B.Batchimeg, "158 Mongolians return from India," *Montsame*, May 19, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225907>, accessed May 20, 2020.

129 M.Unurzul, "179 Mongolians return from Turkey," *Montsame*, May 14, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225409>, accessed May 15, 2020.

130 M.Montastudio, "Record number of new COVID-19 cases confirmed, total surges to 98," *Montsame*, May 14, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/225519>, accessed May 15, 2020.

concern among the Mongolian populace about the danger and cost of allowing their fellow citizens to return home. All of these evacuees brought the number of people under precautionary isolation in Mongolia to 2,029 people at 27 places in the capital and countryside. From January 28 to May 19, the SEC reported that 130,206 citizens entered Mongolia, of whom 3,315 were repatriated from abroad by 15 charter flights and 5,007 passed through railway and vehicle border checkpoints.<sup>131</sup>

In response to demands for further assistance and in order to be responsive to President Battulga's call for additional repatriation, B. Uuganbayar, head of Operative Staff of the SEC on May 20<sup>th</sup> announced the continuation of evacuation flights. Uuganbayar noted that during a week in mid-May, 1,070 Mongolians were evacuated from Turkey, India, and Russia by charter flights and through the northern border checkpoint of Altanbulag. As of May 19<sup>th</sup>, 10,761 Mongolians from 46 countries had applied to return home. Among them were 1,611 people with young children, 449 with medical reasons, 869 elderly, 152 pregnant women, 136 with short-term visas, 158 who have been unable to stay in the foreign country, 2,818 students, 1,002 who became financially incapable, 358 minor children as well as more than 3,000 with other reasons for returning.<sup>132</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Enkh-tuvshin on May 27<sup>th</sup> met with Ambassador

of Kazakhstan to Mongolia Zhalgas Adilbayev to discuss repatriation of their citizens on a charter flight. Over 1,000 Mongolian nationals had applied to return to home and over 100 Kazakhs, the majority resident in Bayan-Ulgii *aimag*, sought repatriation to Kazakhstan.

In June with support from UNICEF Mongolia and UNICEF India, 178 Mongolian child monks were repatriated on a special flight from India from the Gomang Buddhist Monastery in a Tibetan refugee settlement in Karnataka State, India. There are around 597 Mongolian Buddhist child monks and students living at three monasteries in the state of India, and 357 of them are children aged between 10 and 18. Parents of 219 children there as well as the Gomang Monastery administration sought help from SEC and Mongolian cabinet to organize the repatriation. Because 70 percent of the children are from nomadic herder families and their parents could only afford flight expenses, not the quarantine costs, the government decided to repurpose MNT 229.9 million from the Child Development and Protection Program for the quarantine expenses and ordered the Minister of Labor and Social Protection to cooperate with the SEC to provide psychological counseling services for them.<sup>133</sup>

The demand for the repatriation flights grew throughout the summer, which then became a huge task organized by the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In

131 M.Unurzul, "SEC: "Evacuation of Mongolians from abroad to continue uninterrupted," Montsame, May 20, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/226046>, accessed May 20, 2020.

132 Unurzul, "SEC: "Evacuation of Mongolians from abroad," *ibid*.

133 T.Baljmaa. "219 Mongolian child monks to arrive from India, Montsame, June 1, 2020, <https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/227204>, accessed September 11, 2020.

late August the Director General of this department, L. Munkhtushig, announced that a total of 3,460 Mongolians had been evacuated on 14 charter flights. There were 4 flights to South Korea (including one flight to Seoul to bring transit passengers from other countries), 3 flights to Europe, 2 flights to Japan, and one each to Australia, Turkey, U.S., and India-Vietnam.<sup>134</sup> The SEC announced that at least 12 charter flights for 260 people per plane would be arranged for September, and all 3,120 Mongolian evacuees still would be placed in 21-day quarantine.<sup>135</sup> The flights with their dates, departure cities, and passenger capacities were all publicly announced, which was another sign of the increasing efficiency and confidence of the Foreign Ministry and its worldwide embassy staff in executing the complicated and emotional process of repatriation.

This effort to assist its nationals overseas has been unprecedented and worthy of praise, but somewhat surprisingly in today's Mongolia and among Mongolian communities abroad, this record has been criticized as being still insufficient. The repatriation flights prioritize children and elderly, but thousands remain without the ability or a timetable for return, leaving them financially vulnerable. Bloggers have complained that "Many Mongolians are

stuck overseas, some lacking money, accommodation and legal status to be where they currently are," and called for government solutions for those in urgent need while also balancing the danger from returnees carrying home the virus.<sup>136</sup> This has put tremendous pressure upon the embassy staff worldwide to be responsive under constant critical scrutiny and has even endangered their lives and government premises, as the occupation of the Mongolian embassy in Seoul illustrated. From another viewpoint, citizen pressure on the government to increase flights beyond 900 seats available per month has been successful, which illustrates the effectiveness of Mongolia's civil society and vibrant democracy. Thus, the Mongolian government proudly reported on August 27, 2020 that since the ban on all international travel was imposed, "Mongolia has arranged 62 charter flights and brought its 12,976 citizens from overseas countries. As of today, 12,409 Mongolian nationals stranded abroad have submitted their request to return home immediately from 48 countries."<sup>137</sup> This record of accomplishment is unparalleled among developing countries and much better than wealthier Asian nations that apparently do not share Mongolia's concern for the welfare of their average nationals living abroad.

134 B.Ankhtuya, "Mongolia to evacuate some 4000 of its nationals in August," news.mn, July 30, 2020, <https://news.mn/en/793624/>, accessed September 11, 2020.

135 3 from Seoul, 2 from Tokyo, 2 transits from Hong Kong, 2 from Frankfurt, and 1 each from Sidney, Istanbul, and Seattle. See E. Erdenejargal, "12 charter flights to bring 3120 Mongolians home in September," Montsame, August 27, 2020, <https://montsame.mn/en/read/234706>, accessed September 11, 2020.

136 Bud Gankhuyag, "Proactive Prevention Works: Mongolia's Successful COVID Response," September 8, 2020, <https://www.globalintegrity.org/2020/09/08/proactive-prevention-works-mongolias-successful-covid-response/>, accessed September 8, 2020.

137 Erdenejargal, "12 charter flights to bring 3120 Mongolians home in September," *ibid.*

## Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has resulted in a new compact between Mongolian people and their government. Mongolian citizens today have a new set of expectations for government assistance and all parties have been undergoing a period of evaluating the value of being Mongol and being in the homeland. This has put pressure on the government, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to develop the citizenship services side of their activities and enhance the capacities and skills of each diplomat to be responsive to the needs of their citizens. Moreover, Mongolian citizens have learned that if they exert enough pressure on their official representatives to more effectively manage their interests, then they can influence government policymaking. This is the essence of democracy and democratic leadership.

Concurrently, as in other countries around the world, Mongolian policymakers have been rethinking both domestic and foreign relations strategies in response to the coronavirus global crisis. We can understand the new thinking by examining the speeches and actions of Mongolian officials over the past several months. A window into the re-evaluation process has been provided by a unique article, published in early June in the press in both Mongolian and English languages by Gantulga Tudevkhuu Besud, Deputy Energy Minister and Professor of Political

Science. This is both a personal and governmental statement about the new realities for Mongolia since the pandemic appeared. He asserts that as social life has come to a complete halt worldwide because of mass quarantines, including mandatory self-isolation at home, people have learned that money alone cannot solve all problems. Gantulga acknowledges that because the world has been hit by COVID-19, there has been “a reversal from globalization to isolation accompanied by a plunge in trust in international organizations and reduced legitimate power of leading countries to manage the world liberal order. ... countries are faced with a challenge to overcome the current crisis by relying on their own domestic resources and correctly prioritizing the principal directions for action.”<sup>138</sup> However, he rejects the analysis that Mongolia is just pursuing isolationist policies.

When outlining Mongolia’s value system for future decision making, Gantulga suggests that if Mongolia in the future will pursue a foreign policy “of comprehensive mutual trust with our two “eternal” neighbors, we need to develop comprehensive partnerships within the framework of our third neighbor policy and pursue a soft diplomacy to attract geopolitical attention and economic interests of other countries, all the while putting the interests of our country and nation first.”<sup>139</sup> These statements indicate

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138 Gantulga Tudevkhuu Besud, “The rule of his lordship “Coronavirus” or COVID-19,” *Mongol Messenger*, June 5, 2020.

139 Gantulga, “The rule of his lordship “Coronavirus,” *ibid*.

that some in the Mongolian leadership are supportive of continuing the “Mongolia First” policies of President Battulga while also pursuing Eurasian regional cooperation, because for Mongolians their traditional culture is best for them and the necessity of diversifying political and economic ties beyond those of the two geographical neighbors remains more important than ever.

Over the summer of 2020 the UNDP in Mongolia commissioned an initiative to explore “What development means in a post pandemic Mongolia? What continues? What is restored? What can never be redone? What new opportunities now exist?”<sup>140</sup> A UNDP Reference Group or “Sounding Board”<sup>141</sup> was established that consists of a number of unnamed local experts who are participating in a series of structured discussions looking at transformational possibilities to examine what the pandemic has done to Mongolia and its environs and what needs to be done in response. The first

meeting of the “Sounding Board” was organized on July 21st in a hybrid in-person and virtual format and presided over by Elaine Conkievich, the Resident Representative of UNDP Mongolia. The process will continue throughout the rest of the year with the next meeting on challenges facing Mongolia scheduled for September. Such dialogue mechanisms should be open and transparent, and not just the domain for elite “experts”. Although opening up the discussion to Mongolian citizens holds the possibility of degenerating into negative complaint sessions, at the same time this will show the Mongolian governmental leadership and the community of foreign economic experts invested in Mongolia’s future the real scope of the domestic and regional connectivity problems and lead to formulating realistic strategies for Mongolia’s vibrant democracy to be successful in 21<sup>st</sup> century regional integration.

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140 "What does development mean in a post pandemic Mongolia?," The Mongol Messenger, July 24, 2020.

141 The ‘Sounding Board’ was described as consisting of thought leaders and key influencers from different walks of life in Mongolia, but the actual member list has not been published. “We have constituted a reference group to explore both what the pandemic has done to the country, especially to the most vulnerable and how we can better define what we need to focus on to invest in tomorrow’s economy. It brings together select representatives from the government, NGOs, and the private sector. They represent the urban centers and the provinces. Our group has gender balance, with experts on energy, digitalization, and cashmere.” Posted on “Working towards a new post-pandemic horizon through systems thinking in Mongolia” blog, June 8, 2020. [https://www.mn.undp.org/content/mongolia/en/home/blog/2020/a-system\\_s-approach-to-define-the-post-pandemic-future-for-mongo.html](https://www.mn.undp.org/content/mongolia/en/home/blog/2020/a-system_s-approach-to-define-the-post-pandemic-future-for-mongo.html). Accessed August 22, 2020.