

## Third Neighbor Policy Concept in Mongolia's Geopolitics

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**Abstract:** *Since the 1900s when Mongolia fought for its independence, it was looking for an ally or a supporter on which it could rely on. One of the options was third neighbor. During the dramatic times Mongolia tried to approach Japan, as the closest possible country to have relation, and the U.S. as a country somehow caught its attention, to establish, if not diplomatic, at least trade relation. Third neighbor policy is unique, as it is associated only with Mongolia due to its unique geographic location. Looking for third neighbor, it is important for Mongolia to maintain balance between two big neighbors, and to have relationship with other developed countries. But the U.S. saw Mongolia not only as a young and a good example of democracy, and strategic partner, but also possible "ally" which lies between Russia and China.*

*Third neighbor policy is not just an ordinary policy in foreign policy; it is a concept which is important for Mongolia, for a country which is sandwiched between two big nuclear Powers. With changing international environment Mongolia's strategic importance never left behind. Here will be discussed that Mongolia's third neighbor policy cannot be limited just with foreign policy or relationships with other countries. But it could have broader meaning from geo-strategic perspective, depending from international politics. I am arguing that third neighbor policy is more than just a foreign policy, it is a concept.*

**Keywords:** *history of Mongolia, foreign policy of Mongolia, Mongolia-U.S. relationship, third neighbor policy*

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## Introduction

There is a proverb “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your neighbors”. The trouble is, as many examples show, that hatred and killing often occur between close neighbors<sup>1</sup>. But for Mongolia which shared peace and wars and immense history with its neighbors, it is more cautiousness than hatred.

Throughout the history of international relations, it has been like unwritten rule that the fate of small nations surrounded by larger neighbors was either divided or absorbed by the larger nations; or survives as buffer states by mastering balance-of-power politics and skillful diplomacy. So, the history of Mongolia since the collapse of Yuan Dynasty had been no more or less that way.

Mongolia’s geographical location has always been a major, in many cases even a decisive, factor in shaping its destiny. The importance of external factors increased in the XVII-XIX Centuries, as China and Russia grew stronger and expanded their spheres of possession and influence. But for the most part, the main forces that have affected Mongolia’s external status throughout the XX Century have been China, Russia and the relationship between them<sup>2</sup>.

Ever since when Tsarist Russia

expanded its territory eastwards into Far East, and China extended its domination north of the Great Wall, Mongolia has been the area of the “great game” of the struggle between Russia and China, and other empires<sup>3</sup>.

Close to decline of Qing Dynasty in 1900s within Mongols raised sense of nationalism, probably due to the weakness of Qing Dynasty after the Opium War in 1860s. They wanted independence and rebelled against Qing Dynasty.

Since the 1900s when Mongolia fought for its independence, it was looking for an ally or a supporter on which it could rely on. Mongolians did not have either military or financial capability or support of other countries that somehow could press upon two neighbors.

Mongolia attempted early in the XX Century to diversify and broaden its foreign ties by establishing relations also with other powers, including the U.S and Japan. However, regional power politics made it impossible for Mongolia to succeed in the attempts<sup>4</sup>.

As a state with de facto independence in 1911, Mongolia tried to find a way for gaining full recognition internationally. First it tried to rely on Tsarist Russia but after the double standard policy

<sup>1</sup> Eric Her, The “Great Game”: Mongolia between Russia and China, *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, November 4, (1997)

<sup>2</sup> Enkhsaikhan, J. "Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status: Concept and Practice." *Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (2000): 342-59. Accessed June 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/3021136.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Her, The “Great Game”: Mongolia between Russia and China, *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, November 4, (1997)

<sup>4</sup> Enkhsaikhan, J. "Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status: Concept and Practice." *Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (2000): 342-59. Accessed June 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/3021136.

towards Mongolia, Mongolia tried other ways to find supporter. Geographically closest possible country to Mongolia at that time was Japan, which had claimed dominance over Korean peninsula and later over Manchuria territory, China. From this point of view the concept of third neighbor is not new.

But Japan had already signed secret agreement with Russia in 1907, dividing the northeast Asia region in sphere of influence, the aftermath of Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905.

However, by 1912s, Japan was almost a "third neighbor," attempting to create Pan-Mongol puppet state in today's Chita region, Russia, which made both China and Russia angry.

After Mongolian delegation failed to meet Japan envoy in Beijing, they also tried to approach the U.S. as another option. Mongolia somehow tried to catch the U.S. attention to establish, if not diplomatic, than at least trade relation. At that time the U.S. was not aware of Mongolia as a nation, so it had recognized Mongolia as a part of China. However, in 1920s and 1944s the U.S. paid some attention to Mongolia. The first was probably followed after Mongolians secret request, and the second one was before the Yalta Conference (1945) to decide whether to recognize Mongolia's status quo. Recognition of Mongolia's status quo was Stalin's condition on Roosevelt's and Churchill's request to intrude against Japan and end the war in the Pacific.

After the World War II, the Soviet Union considered Mongolia to be an important bastion of socialism in Asia, so its territory was expected to be of strategic importance in further Sino-Soviet military confrontation. During the Sino-Soviet split, the nature of the Soviet-Mongolian alliance, according to the treaty of 1966 and the Brezhnev Doctrine, in general, meant that the ultimate decision to use force stationed in Mongolia, would be undertaken by the Soviets alone<sup>5</sup>.

Under new circumstances, in 1994, Mongolia adopted a so-called multi-pillared foreign policy, diversifying its external relations to go beyond contact with only its immediate neighbors. At the same time, Mongolia also pledged to respect the legitimate interests of its neighbors and partners<sup>6</sup>.

In summary, looking for third neighbor is important for Mongolia to maintain balance between two neighbors. This is not that unique as someone would think who is not familiar with this issue. But it is unique, indeed, as it is associated only with Mongolia due to its unique geographic location.

Under the term unique we understand that Mongolia has two big nuclear-weapon countries, which are the permanent members of UN Security Council, and also no country pays attention to Mongolia, unless it has geostrategic interest in Mongolia.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## **Mongolia's Foreign Policy Agenda and Third Neighbor**

In Mongolia's foreign policy, there are many uniqueness and specifics. First of all, anything related to Mongolia's foreign policy has geopolitics background. It is not because Mongolia is landlocked country or has only two neighbors; the main reason lies on its geographic location and who the neighbors are. For a landlocked, sparsely-populated country that borders two great powers – China and Russia – geopolitics is not a question of political fashion; it is a fact of life<sup>7</sup>.

Throughout the history, Mongolia experienced being caught up in double geopolitics games between China and the Soviet Union; and also, between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War<sup>8</sup>. Hardly anyone in Mongolia now would like to experience it again. But unfortunately, history repeats itself.

At some point it is also true that Mongolia, physically sandwiched between China and Russia, felt it had little or no control over its relations with foreign countries during socialist period. That experience continues to shape its diplomatic relations today. Having fought

hard to build its own relationships, it is now thinking twice in order not to jeopardize its relationship with others<sup>9</sup>.

The restructuring and reforming of the country's political, social and economic systems since 1990s provide it with favorable conditions for conducting a foreign policy based on realism and according to priority of its national interests.

Mongolian leaders recognized that it was necessary to declare their intention to pursue a new foreign policy<sup>10</sup>. As Dr. Tsedendamba Batbayar<sup>11</sup> explained, "The top priority in Mongolia's next diplomacy was to fill the vacuum in its foreign relations created by the Soviet Union's disintegration" and N.Tuya, former minister of foreign affairs of Mongolia, noted "Though we are a small nation, geography and history have taught us to attach greater attention more than any other small nation would do to our relations with the world's major powers."<sup>12</sup>

Mongolia no longer treats its neighbors as friend or enemy, which means Mongolia's new post-socialist

<sup>7</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "As China and Russia Draw Closer, Mongolia Feels the Squeeze," *The Asan Forum* (11 October 2018), at <<http://www.theasanforum.org/as-china-and-russia-draw-closer-mongolia-feels-the-squeeze/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at < <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war> > (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 31-32

<sup>11</sup> Ambassador, member of Academy of Science of Mongolia

<sup>12</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 31-32

foreign policy is officially not to antagonize either, still less both<sup>13</sup>.

In 1994 Mongolia's parliament adopted its National Security Concept (NSC), a document that clearly defined Mongolia's security concerns. This document was amended in 2010 in accordance with the changing external environment.

In Mongolia's NSC, it is stated that ensuring favorable external and internal conditions for securing and protecting the genuine national interests of Mongolia.

In NSC explicitly laid out the basic foreign policy principles. It stated that Mongolia's goal would not merely keep its two neighbors at equal distance or take positions identical with theirs on all issues; rather Mongolia is to strengthen trust, develop good-neighborly relations, and cooperate with each to the mutual benefit of all<sup>14</sup>.

According to Damba Ganbat, former director of Mongolia's Strategic Studies Center, "Mongolia's foreign policy priority was always given to China and Russia, and the statement of fundamental principle of balanced relations with the two neighbors."<sup>15</sup>

As Batchimeg Migeedorj, former Member of Parliament, mentioned, the fundamental thinking behind Mongolia's

view of national security remained unchallenged due to its very unique geopolitical location: "Stable balance of power in the region remains as an important foundation of Mongolia's national security. Any substantial power shift among the major powers in the region directly and deeply affects Mongolia's security."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in the NSC adopted in 1994, Mongolia moved away from its classical approach of 'hard balancing' or relying on a friend against an enemy. It declared that Mongolia's foreign policy would be based on political realism, nonalignment, pursuit of national interest, and participation in international efforts to strengthen international peace and security<sup>17</sup>.

Mongolia will not interfere in the disputes between its two neighboring countries unless the disputes affect Mongolia's national interests<sup>18</sup>.

Also, Mongolia formulated its definition of neighbor, and after more than a decade of active experiment, it formally enshrined its third neighbor policy in the renewed NSC passed on June 2010<sup>19</sup>.

So based on its external and internal factors, the concept of Mongolia's foreign policy is defined as follows: The

<sup>13</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at < <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war> > (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>14</sup> Enkhsaikhan, J. "Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status: Concept and Practice." *Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (2000): 342-59. Accessed June 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/3021136.

<sup>15</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 39

<sup>16</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 39

<sup>17</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept of Mongolia", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia* (2011), at <[http://www.mfa.gov.mn/?page\\_id=26263&lang=en](http://www.mfa.gov.mn/?page_id=26263&lang=en)> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "National Security Concept of Mongolia," *National Security Council* (2010), at <<http://www.nsc.gov.mn/sites/default/files/images/National%20Security%20Concept%20of%20Mongolia%20EN.pdf>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

priority of Mongolia's foreign policy is to safeguard its security and vital national interests by political and diplomatic means<sup>20</sup>. Mongolia follows to uphold peace, strive to avoid confrontation with other countries and pursue a multi-pillar policy<sup>21</sup>.

More than any other nations in the world, the concept of 'neighbor' has come to occupy the core in Mongolia's conceptualization of its place in the world. Mongolia's new foreign policy has been primarily for defensive purpose, to use the Third Neighbors to offset any aggression from either of its territorial neighbors. Yet, declaring itself a neutral state, pursuing a policy of nonalignment, how not to use or not to be used by the 'third neighbors' against China or Russia demands Mongolia to exercise its 'smart power', as it were.

In 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker made a historic short visit to Mongolia just as Iraq invaded Kuwait. During a meeting with Mongolian leaders, he stated that they should see the United States as Mongolia's "Third Neighbor". Baker's public statement initially was perceived as "a rhetorical gesture to support Mongolia's first move toward democracy". However, the Mongolian political establishment gradually formalized it in its foreign

policy legislation<sup>22</sup>. This strategic concept, called the Third neighbor policy, had political, military, cultural, and economic components. It originally meant that another large power, such as the United States, Japan, South Korea or Germany, would act as a Third neighbor for Mongolia to counterbalance the traditional roles played by Mongolia's two border neighbors<sup>23</sup>. In the third neighbor policy, Mongolia assumes to develop friendly relations with developed countries such as the U.S., Japan, South Korea and Germany, which is very important, but as time passes Japan aid and South Korean investment made very important and close-to-cooperate neighbor more than the U.S.

#### *Relations with Two Neighbors*

Having two direct neighbors, Mongolia strives to expand its neighbors with other countries. So, the concept of expanded neighbor is geopolitical<sup>24</sup>.

Mongolia does not have any territorial or border disputes with its neighbors which serves as a good basis for good-neighborly relations<sup>25</sup>.

Of course, developing good neighbor-friendly relations and wide-ranging cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China is the

<sup>20</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept of Mongolia", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia* (2011), at <[http://www.mfa.gov.mn/?page\\_id=26263&lang=en](http://www.mfa.gov.mn/?page_id=26263&lang=en)> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 31-32

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 31-33

<sup>24</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, "Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations", *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>25</sup> Tuya Nyamosor, Mongolia's asia-pacific policy and regional security strategy, *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, Nov 6, 1999, [www.mongolijol.info/MJIA/Article](http://www.mongolijol.info/MJIA/Article)

primary goal<sup>26</sup>.

Since 1900s, Russia's policy initially sought to preserve Mongolia's autonomy from China but did not support Mongolia's sovereignty, in order to maintain Russia-China relations and not alarm Japan<sup>27</sup>.

Mongolia's relations with Russia and China are governed by such principles as balance, good-neighborliness, mutually beneficial cooperation, long-term nature.

Mongolia signed Treaties of Friendly Relations and Cooperation with both Russia and China in 1993 and 1994 respectively. In accordance with these treaties both sides pledged neither to participate in military and political blocs directed against one-another nor conclude treaties and agreements with third parties detrimental to the sovereignty and independence of either signatory<sup>28</sup>.

As for any Sino-Russian disputes that might arise in the future, Mongolia would pursue a policy of non-involvement and neutrality, unless such a dispute affected Mongolia's vital interests. If so, it emphasized, Mongolia could be expected to follow those interests<sup>29</sup>.

Responding to the changed geopolitical condition of Mongolia, and repositioning itself as a 'small state', Mongolia began to treat China and Russia as equal neighbors, hoping to keep

them at equal distance while improving relations with them simultaneously.

It is Mongolia's interest that its foreign relations eventually equate with the Eternal Neighbor, Russia and China, into an "equilateral" triangle. The side of third neighbors to be larger and closer is one of Mongolia's foreign policy goals<sup>30</sup>.

According to Sergey Radchenko "It was not that Mongolia lost interest in being part of the Russian orbit, but that Russia no longer had an interest in Mongolia and felt that it was a burden economically. So maintaining a close relationship with Mongolia, no longer made strategic sense". Now, with the rise of China as the region's leading economic and military power, Russia is eager to bolster its standing with the country that borders each<sup>31</sup>. However, Russia is rebuilding financial and military ties with Mongolia, partially to counter Beijing's growing influence in the country. In 2014, when Western sanctions over the annexation of Crimea prompted Kremlin's pivot to the east, some Russian officials began to speak of rebuilding ties with Mongolia as a means of increasing economic access to the rest of Asia, describing the country as a key transit corridor.

In 2019, Putin supported Mongolia's offer to build a gas pipeline to China through its territory. Now that project

<sup>26</sup> "National Security Concept of Mongolia," *National Security Council* (2010), at <<http://www.nsc.gov.mn/sites/default/files/images/National%20Security%20Concept%20of%20Mongolia%20EN.pdf>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>27</sup> Eric Her, The "Great Game": Mongolia between Russia and China, *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, November 4, 1997

<sup>28</sup> Enkhsaikhan, J. "Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status: Concept and Practice." *Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (2000): 342-59. Accessed June 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/3021136.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, "Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations", *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>31</sup> DIMITRI SIMES, "Russia renews interest in Mongolia to counter Chinese influence," *Nikkei Asia* (3 October 2019), at <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-renews-interest-in-Mongolia-to-counter-Chinese-influence>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

is on the way. Russian experts admitted that Moscow had serious concerns about Beijing's growing economic clout in Mongolia, viewing it as a potential long-term threat. They explained that balancing China's influence is a major issue for the Kremlin. Professor Alexei Maslov warned that if China absorbs Mongolia into its economic orbit, Russia could find itself even more economically dependent on Beijing than it already is. He said that "If Mongolia falls under Chinese economic control, then 70% of Russia's border will be with China, making us more economically dependent on them"<sup>32</sup>. But as Lukin argued, Moscow and Beijing have far more pressing geopolitical concerns than dominance in Mongolia. "Two strategic partners are not interested in butting heads over Mongolia, if for no other reason than that they have a much more important common goal: resisting the United States."<sup>33</sup>

From other side, Putin will be acutely aware of the United States' attempts to court favour with Mongolia. Washington recently reaffirmed Mongolia as "an important Indo-Pacific Partner," and both have signed a "shared commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights." It must be viewed against the backdrop of Russia's wider regional policy and its attempts to deter other rivals, including Turkey and the United States, from gaining a regional foothold<sup>34</sup>.

As for China Mongolia is an

important neighbor, which has intimate connection with its autonomous region of Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, and which causes no major headaches concerning border demarcation, migration unlike China's other 14 immediate neighbors. China's government has promoted Mongolia as an exemplary case for China's treatment of its small neighbors and a potential beneficiary of the Belt and Road Initiative. But Mongolia's connection with the Dalai Lama and anti-Chinese sentiments in Mongolia continue to exist. Unsurprisingly, Beijing briefly suspended all political talks with Mongolia in response to the Dalai Lama's December 2016 visit. This fueled Mongolia's fear of what economic dependence on Chinese goodwill might imply. President Xi's assertive China's may tire of Mongolia, while Mongolia's hopeful partners Russia, Japan, and the U.S. would avoid worsening their relations with Beijing over Mongolia<sup>35</sup>. So they can't help with support, but they would use Mongolia for its interest.

### *Two Neighbors and SCO*

Russia and China prefer to see Mongolia as a member of SCO. SCO membership can be viewed as contrary to third neighbor concept.

Not only Russia but also China is keen to welcome Mongolia into the SCO, as both Russian and China are

<sup>32</sup> DIMITRI SIMES, "Russia renews interest in Mongolia to counter Chinese influence," *Nikkei Asia* (3 October 2019), at <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-renews-interest-in-Mongolia-to-counter-Chinese-influence>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Shahid Hussain, "Why Is Russia Moving Closer to Mongolia?" *The Diplomat* (23 June 2020), at <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/why-is-russia-moving-closer-to-mongolia/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>35</sup> JARGALSAIKHAN, MENDEE. Report. East-West Center, 2017. Accessed June 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17396>.



key members of the SCO. Hardly only Russia's intention is to have Mongolia as a member to SCO because Russia's influence would serve as a counterweight to China. It is possible that SCO might serve as counterweight to the U.S., not to China, because China is also a member state, furthermore, China has big influence on other members of SCO.

As some would notice, Mongolia's reticence to fully embrace the SCO was due to its "third neighbor" policy, which emphasizes its cooperation with developed and democratic Western countries. And some observers think that such cooperation has raised concerns among Mongolia's partners in North America, Europe and Asia<sup>36</sup>.

Mongolia is not concern of Russia more than China, particularly, at the period of tension between US and other countries stance against China. It would likely be widely read as a net loss for Washington if Mongolia were to join the SCO; US would not be objected to the economic corridor, which is a "logical and inevitable result of geographical reality"<sup>37</sup>.

But Mongolia wants to maintain its observer status since many issues discussed in the SCO were "not high priority" for Mongolia. Mongolia is mostly interested in China-Mongolia-Russia Economic corridor, and the three neighbors agreed to jointly develop the project involving energy, infrastructure

construction, and other projects ranging from finance to environmental protection.

Mongolia sees the economic corridor as a way of overcoming its landlocked constraints<sup>38</sup>.

For Mongolia, being an observer to SCO, in order to meet with both neighbors, at the same time to conduct third neighbor policy, is favorable. In 2014, Mongolia proposed its initiative of trilateral summit, to discuss up to date issues among three parties, and also proposed the summit to be held annually. In 2015, during the SCO and BRICS meeting in Russian city of Ufa, Russia and China principally agreed on that. So far trilateral summit were three times.

The SCO had grown to the view of China's Belt and Road Initiative. China uses it to develop infrastructure across Eurasia as it offered further potential for regional economic and commercial integration. Even if more Middle Eastern countries were to join following Iran, for example, the body could one day compete for influence with the US foreign policy agenda<sup>39</sup>.

In May 2021, during her visit to Russia, Battsetseg.B, foreign minister of Mongolia, said that SCO is very important intergovernmental organization in Central Asia, and it is Mongolia's interest to cooperate with the SCO in certain issues. Therefore, Mongolia continues to be an observer, paying attention mostly to free trade and

<sup>36</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at < <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war> > (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at < <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war> > (searched date: 28 June 2021)

economy. So today, being an observer is the most suitable position. Further, Mongolia will examine SCO's progress, and develop mutually benefiting cooperation<sup>40</sup>, in other words, maintaining balance between SCO and third neighbor policy.

### *Relations with Third Neighbor Countries*

Third neighbor policy has its roots in 1912s. But in terms of modern foreign policy of Mongolia, third neighbor policy has broader meaning, persuading "third neighbor" strategy, developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with highly developed democratic countries in political, economic, cultural field and humanitarian affairs.

Everyone recognizes Mongolia as a unique country located between two big authoritarian regimes with nuclear capabilities<sup>41</sup>. And this is exactly the point. Because, for instance, from the U.S. perspective Mongolia is small country maybe not able to be overlooked behind the heels, meaning China<sup>42</sup>.

From its democratic revolution in 1990, through the early 2010s, Mongolia became something of a "sweetheart" for

Western democracy promoters, mining investor, and international investment bankers<sup>43</sup>.

Mongolia succeeded in securing its biggest effort to date in consolidating its Third Neighbor Policy focused on expanding relations with the Western world. Although it could be claimed that the initiative was from Mongolian side, but without any concrete interest from the US, there would be no agreement<sup>44</sup>.

However, some believe that Mongolia's effort brought them under the economic umbrella of the Japanese and South Koreans rather than of the Americans and Western Europeans<sup>45</sup>.

Mongolia is the only successful democratic institution in Eurasian heartland, possibly the milestone to penetrate to Eurasia or between Russia and China.<sup>46</sup>

Despite its continued reference to "third neighbors", particularly, the U.S., Germany, Japan, and India have little ability to support Mongolia politically or economically<sup>47</sup>.

Although Mongolia's foreign policy can be de facto considered as neutral, China, Russia, as well as Japan and the United States are intensifying their efforts

<sup>40</sup> Munkhbaatar.S, "Battsetseg.B:Hiin hooloin tusul Mongol-Orosiin shine zuunyg tuluuluh buteen baiguulalt bolno," *Montsame*, (16 June 2021), at <<https://montsame.mn/mn/read/267049>> (searched date: 26 June 2021)

<sup>41</sup> "A "victory" for Mongolian foreign policy," *news.mn*, (6 August 2019), at< <https://news.mn/en/788466/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> JARGALSAIKHAN, MENDEE. Report. East-West Center, 2017. Accessed June 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17396>.

<sup>44</sup> "A "victory" for Mongolian foreign policy," *news.mn*, (6 August 2019), at< <https://news.mn/en/788466/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>45</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 38

<sup>46</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at< <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war> > (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>47</sup> JARGALSAIKHAN, MENDEE. Report. East-West Center, 2017. Accessed June 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17396>.

to attract Mongolia<sup>48</sup> to their interest.

Even if the space were not shrinking, the Chinese and the Russians could attempt to subvert Ulaanbaatar's "third neighbor" policy by offering inducements of badly needed economic aid or regional economic cooperation – the proverbial "carrot" in place of the "stick." In such a situation, geopolitics could well reassert itself, pulling Mongolia firmly into the political orbit of its much more powerful neighbors, and confining the "third neighbor" policy to the realm of wishful thinking<sup>49</sup>.

Understanding these vulnerabilities, in September 2015, Mongolia's president tried to proclaim "permanent neutrality" for Mongolia, like that enjoyed by Switzerland and Turkmenistan<sup>50</sup>. Anyway, Mongolia can't be aside from Asia Pacific, due to its participant's (meaning the U.S. and its allies) intension to use any method in dealing against China<sup>51</sup>.

So, there are two countries as an example of third neighbor concept – Japan and the U.S. – with which Mongolia has close relations in strategic level.

### *Relationship with Japan*

As Alicia Campi noted, Japan as number one Asian "Third neighbor."<sup>52</sup> According to her, Mongolia-Japan relation is a classic example of the continuity and expansion of Mongolia's foreign policy, during the entire presidency, the MPs and Governments of Mongolia<sup>53</sup>.

In September 1991 and May 1992, under the joint chairmanship of the government of Japan and World Bank, Mongolia Assistance Group meeting were held in Tokyo. At the meeting Mongolia succeeded in obtaining from the participating countries and international organizations assistance of totaled \$320 million to prop up the collapsed Mongolian economy. Japan quickly became an influential player in Mongolia's economic and cultural sectors but not in security and defense<sup>54</sup>. From this example we can see that it is not relationship between two countries, it is more a political move, which can be referred to third neighbor concept.

The Government of Japan has announced a policy to support Mongolia's democracy and reforms in bilateral relations and internationally

<sup>48</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, "Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations", *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>49</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "As China and Russia Draw Closer, Mongolia Feels the Squeeze," *The Asian Forum* (11 October 2018), at <<http://www.theasianforum.org/as-china-and-russia-draw-closer-mongolia-feels-the-squeeze/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Maria Siow, "US-China tensions: why Mongolia is in the middle of a new cold war," *South China Morning Post* (15 August 2020), at <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097419/us-china-tensions-why-mongolias-middle-new-cold-war>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>52</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), p. 43

<sup>53</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, "Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations", *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>54</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia's foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), p. 44

in 1991. After that, in 1998, Mongolia proposed The Mongolia-Japan Joint Declaration on building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development, and in 2010, the two countries identified the development of a “Strategic Partnership” as their shared diplomatic goal<sup>55</sup>.

Mongolia had officially started to receive Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 1987. The governments of the two countries negotiated and set priorities for development assistance in Mongolia in 1997, and in 2004 the Government of Japan developed an ODA program to Mongolia. Then, in 2011, the program was updated<sup>56</sup>.

The Mongolia-Japan-U.S trilateral meeting is also being held regularly. The sides discuss regional issues, strengthening cooperation between Mongolia, Japan, and the United States, as well as regional issues during the meeting. Japan is the fourth largest country that invests in Mongolia and the fifth largest foreign trade partner.

The defense cooperation between the two countries is not that much as the U.S., but it has also enhanced by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2012

As some think, Mongolia is actively working with the United States, Japan, and Western Europe, which are considered to be third parties to

prevent the country from becoming too close to Russia and China, not to be too dependent on both neighbors<sup>57</sup>, which is hardly correct.

### *Relationship with the U.S*

Before the perestroika in the Soviet Union, Soviets were concerned that the Americans would use Ulaanbaatar as a listening post located between the two largest communist countries, therefore, they actively discouraged the Mongolians from discussing diplomatic recognition with the United States<sup>58</sup>.

During the transition period in Mongolia, in early 1990s, seeing Mongolia as a young democracy, the U.S. began to pay attention to Mongolia, and started its assistance by giving humanitarian assistance and helped to enroll to world financial institutions such as World Bank, IMF and ADB.

In 1990s Mongolia and the U.S. signed agreements on Investment support (September 29, 1990), trade relations (January 23, 1991), and mutual investment (October 4, 1994) in order to develop trade relations. In 2004, Mongolia exported to the U.S. \$240 million worth of goods, which was the highest. But due to transportation distance and cost, production delay, made goods from Mongolia not competitive. Economic relations between two countries were more favorable to trade

<sup>55</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, “Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations”, *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Dashdorj Bayarkhuu, “Third neighbor policy on Mongolia-Japanese relations”, *JapanUpClose* (1 April 2020), at <[https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401\\_1.html](https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20200401_1.html)> (search date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>58</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolia’s foreign policy: Navigating and Changing the World* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), pp. 34-37

than development<sup>59</sup>. But as time passes trade disbalance increased.

However, for the U.S., Mongolia's economy is too small, and although the U.S. allowed free tariffs for Mongolian goods, there were no sufficient goods from Mongolia export to the U.S.

From other side, as Mongolia's "third neighbor," the United States has come to consider Mongolia as the "democratic sanctuary" in the nomadic heartland between Russia and China<sup>60</sup>. At the beginning it was mostly humanitarian part of cooperation. The U.S. found it an exclusive moment, and in 1990 James Baker, the State Secretary, visited Mongolia; right after in 1991, the U.S. opened the Peace Corps with a first cohort of 21 volunteers, after which also USAID program launched<sup>61</sup>. The U.S. paid attention to Mongolia and in 1995 first lady Hillary Clinton, in 1998 Madeleine Albright, U.S. State Secretary of State, and in 2005 President G.W.Bush paid official visit to Mongolia respectively<sup>62</sup>.

Although economic and other cooperation with the U.S. is developing with slow pace, as time goes by, military cooperation has developed at the most. It developed so intense that for some it looked like Mongolia to be called the

Trojan horse of the Pentagon.

In 1996, following the agreement on security and defense, Mongolia started to conduct military exercise, and exchange military personnel's<sup>63</sup>.

After 9/11 terrorist attack in New York, international environment changed dramatically, Mongolia offered partnership to the U.S. and expressed sincere condolence. Following that horrible terrorist attack Mongolia was one of the first countries which offered real cooperation, with which probably the U.S. saw Mongolia at the level of ally. Since then military cooperation between two countries intensified. To the out of date since the Soviet times Mongolia's military capability opened new perspective to modernize military equipment and qualify military personnel.

In 2003, Mongolia pledged to support the War on Terror, which was a key breakthrough in relationship between Mongolia and the U.S<sup>64</sup>. Since then the U.S. made many contributions to Mongolia's armed forces, after which Mongolia's policy on modernization of its armed forces and their skill is as much as possible to send its practitioners to UN Peacekeeping and NATO-led missions<sup>65</sup>. Since then, Mongolia sent troops to serve with the U.S.-led occupation of

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan S. Addleton, *A most helpful factor: U.S.-Mongolia Diplomatic Relations, 1987-2012*, (Ulaanbaatar: Weatherford foundation, 2012), p. 107

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Mendis, "Mongolia's 'Eternal' Neighbors and the Two New 'Strategic' Neighbors of the Indo-Pacific," *China and US Focus*, (12 December 2019), at <<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/mongolias-eternal-neighbors-and-the-two-new-strategic-neighbors-of-the-indo-pacific/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>61</sup> "History of the U.S. and Mongolia," *U.S. Embassy in Mongolia*, at <<https://mn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/io/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan S. Addleton, *A most helpful factor: U.S.-Mongolia Diplomatic Relations, 1987-2012*, (Ulaanbaatar: Weatherford foundation, 2012), p. 109

<sup>64</sup> "A "victory" for Mongolian foreign policy," *news.mn*, (6 August 2019), at< <https://news.mn/en/788466/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>65</sup> "A "victory" for Mongolian foreign policy," *news.mn*, (6 August 2019), at< <https://news.mn/en/788466/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

Iraq. In addition, Mongolia participated in the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) from December 2005 to March 2007<sup>66</sup>. Mongolia's army officers served in UN peacekeeping mission in Kongo, Western Sahara, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kosovo, Chad and Sudan. Also they participated in coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>67</sup>. Mongolia's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has helped cement its alliance with the United States and secure grants and aid.<sup>68</sup>

U.S. developed Tavan Tolgoi military training base near Ulaanbaatar, which is recognized as peacekeepers support and training base in Northeast Asia<sup>69</sup>.

Since 2003, joint with U.S. navy, Mongolian armed forces conduct training "Khan Quest", and by 2011, 19 countries have been participated in training.

During UN and NATO peacekeeping missions, Mongolian armed forces became more trained, experienced and qualified than before<sup>70</sup>.

As Abraham Denmark said, "Mongolia is not going to side entirely with anybody against anybody<sup>71</sup>. But they are looking to bolster their relationships with the United States because possibly they want American economic

engagement and political engagement, but also because it gives them a bit more breathing space in their relations with Beijing and Moscow,"<sup>72</sup>.

In 2010, NATO announced that Mongolia had become the 45th country to contribute troops for the North Atlantic military bloc's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and the 44th nation to be formally dra-gooned into NATO's first ground and first Asian war was Montenegro. Mongolia became a member of ISAF and according to NATO a key contributor to the international mission."<sup>73</sup>

To demonstrate its appreciation of the role that Mongolia plays in U.S. geostrategic plans for Eurasia, three months earlier "The U.S. Congress passed a resolution...commending Mongolia on marking 800 years since Genghis Khan forged a nation out of the vast territory inhabited by disparate tribes, and praising its 'commitment to democracy, freedom and economic reform.'"<sup>74</sup>

Mongolia is the optimal location for U.S. military surveillance (ground, air and satellite) to monitor China and Russia simultaneously. The nation's U.S.-educated staffs are not likely to deny Wash-

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<sup>66</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/37551964/NATO\\_AND\\_MONGOLIA](https://www.academia.edu/37551964/NATO_AND_MONGOLIA)

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan S. Addleton, *A most helpful factor: U.S.-Mongolia Diplomatic Relations, 1987-2012*, (Ulaanbaatar: Weatherford foundation, 2012), p. 111

<sup>68</sup> "Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China and Russia," March 31, 2010, <https://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia/>

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan S. Addleton, *A most helpful factor: U.S.-Mongolia Diplomatic Relations, 1987-2012*, (Ulaanbaatar: Weatherford foundation, 2012), p. 111

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>71</sup> Idrees Ali, With an eye on Russia, China and a horse, Pentagon chief visits Mongolia, Reuters, August 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mongolia-idUSKCN1UX2HP>

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China and Russia, March 31, 2010, <https://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia/>

<sup>74</sup> Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China and Russia, March 31, 2010, <https://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia/>

ington's requests in that regard.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, on July 31, 2019, after the meeting of two Presidents, the U.S. Department of State released the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United States and Mongolia, which again indicates Mongolia's successful utilization of the third-neighbor policy<sup>76</sup>.

### *Third Neighbor Concept in Broader Meaning*

Mongolia's President Battulga, during his state visit to the U.S. in 2019, said that the strength of Mongolia's contemporary foreign policy is based on three factors: continuing good neighbor relations with Russia and China; gaining a strategic place in the Asia-Pacific by contributing to security and peace dialogues; and to be an active member of both global and regional economic groupings<sup>77</sup>. Under the economic grouping Mongolia wants to be a member of APEC.

During the trilateral meeting in Washington on January, 2020, the United States and Japan reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening their bilateral relationships with Mongolia in line with Mongolia's "third neighbor" policy and the three sides' visions for a free and open Indo-Pacific<sup>78</sup>. Parties shared their

respective visions for regional development and also exchanged views on how to cooperate to ensure a prosperous and peaceful future for independent, sovereign and democratic states of the region. Parties also noted with satisfaction that the United States became strategic partner of Mongolia in 2019 and intend to strengthen these strategic partnerships. All sides underscored their desire to deepen economic partnership, including through enhanced collaboration in the areas of digital economy, cyber security and energy. They also discussed the importance of developing Mongolia's business climate and ability to attract foreign investment, particularly from the United States and Japan, through improved transparency, predictability, and enforcement<sup>79</sup>.

Mongolia wants to be active in cooperation to regional countries' policies and efforts towards strengthening strategic stability and establishing security cooperation mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific region and East Asia, including North-East Asia<sup>80</sup>.

From Pacific perspective Mongolia's third neighbor policy has broader meaning. The U.S. wants Mongolia to see as a strategic partner, particularly, one of the important countries against China. Of course, it doesn't mean economic and technologic factor but democratic

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Anthony Kim, "Advancing the U.S.–Mongolian Partnership," *The Heritage Foundation*, (29 July 2019), at <<https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/advancing-the-us-mongolian-partnership>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>77</sup> Bolor Lkhaajav, "US Becomes Mongolia's 5<sup>th</sup> Strategic Partner," *The Diplomat*, (5 August 2019), at <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/us-becomes-mongolias-5th-strategic-partner/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>78</sup> Joint Statement on the U.S.-Japan-Mongolia Trilateral Meeting, U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-japan-mongolia-trilateral-meeting/>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "National Security Concept of Mongolia," *National Security Council* (2010), at <<http://www.nsc.gov.mn/sites/default/files/images/National%20Security%20Concept%20of%20Mongolia%20EN.pdf>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

institution.

Even the U.S. Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Strategy report included Mongolia as one of the "democracies in Indo-Pacific." The report also emphasized security relationship based on Mongolia's unwavering contribution to U.S.-led operations.<sup>81</sup> Being the first country to embrace the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Mongolia holds special place in the U.S. strategy toward Asia.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

Since its independence Mongolia seek to have support of other countries, beyond two neighbors. Due to the secret agreement between Russia and Japan on sphere of influence in Northeast Asia, which was resulted after 1904-1905 war between Russia and Japan, and also China's intention to keep whole Qing Dynasty territory made Mongolians' effort to make relation with other Powers nearly impossible, also other Powers ignored Mongolia.<sup>81 82</sup>

From the beginning third neighbor policy has been a definition of relationship between countries and it was closely associated with the independence. After double standard policy of the Tsarist Russia, Mongolians decided to find another ally, which might support.

Since 1990s Mongolia seek to have relationship with developed countries, beyond Russia and China. This time third neighbor policy contains understanding such as balance between to neighbors, economic cooperation with big economies, and free trade with the world, lastly, to join integration.

With the fast-changing international environment not only Mongolia wants to have broad international relations and cooperation with other countries, but also countries within the region and beyond began to pay attention toward Mongolia.

Mongolia sees third neighbor policy as an opportunity to have broad economic relations and future development. But other countries interest in Mongolia and raising pressure between big Powers of the region makes Mongolia's third neighbor policy even more important for Mongolia and could be a part of regional power politics.

From this perspective, third neighbor policy is not just a relationship with other countries which do not have common border, it is a policy which derived from geographic reality. Under the third neighbor policy should be understood balance of Powers and economic integration. So the third neighbor policy is not only relationship with developed countries, but it is a foreign policy concept covering Mongolia's regional integration.

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<sup>81</sup> Bolor Lkhaajav, "US Becomes Mongolia's 5<sup>th</sup> Strategic Partner," *The Diplomat*, (5 August 2019), at <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/us-becomes-mongolias-5th-strategic-partner/>> (searched date: 28 June 2021)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



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