

Mongolia's Strategic Choice - the OSCE

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Abstract

Mongolia's accession to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2012 marked a historic milestone in its foreign policy and international identity. As the first Northeast Asian state to join, Mongolia demonstrated its ambition to extend engagement beyond its immediate neighbors and integrate into the EuroAtlantic community. Rooted in the democratic transition of the early 1990s, this decision reflected Mongolia's independent foreign policy and its "Third Neighbor Policy," aimed at diversifying partnerships with likeminded democracies and multilateral organizations. Pragmatically, OSCE membership provided platforms for security cooperation, border management, election monitoring, and capacity building. Strategically, it reinforced Mongolia's sovereignty, democratic values, and visibility as an "Oasis of Democracy." The pathway to membership involved years of partnership as an Asian Partner for Cooperation, culminating in full participation despite geographic debates. Since accession, Mongolia has actively contributed to OSCE initiatives, hosting major forums, welcoming election observers, and promoting gender equality in peacekeeping. Its neutrality and geographic position have enabled Mongolia to act as a mediator, exemplified by the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue. Looking ahead, Mongolia seeks to deepen cooperation in democracy, sustainable development, and regional security dialogue, positioning itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Keywords: OSCE membership, Third neighbor policy, Mongolia's foreign policy, Democracy

Introduction

Mongolia's decision to join the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OCSE) was not only a diplomatic formality but a strategic move. As the first country to become a participating state from the Northeast Asian region, Mongolia showcased its ambitious aspiration to reach out into the Euro-Atlantic community and expand its engagement beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

After the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, Mongolia sought to implement an independent foreign policy for the first time, which could define Mongolia as an active and responsible international player, after many years of Soviet oversight. This move was crucial in building and projecting our own identity in the international community. Hence, Mongolia has been active and open to international engagement, as reflected in our partic-

ipation in multilateral organizations, which reinforces our image as an “Oasis of Democracy” and at the same time encourages our commitment to democracy, human rights and rule of law, core values of Mongolia’s new identity.

Reflecting the Essence of the “Third neighbour policy”

The decision to join the OSCE can be looked at from two different angles: a pragmatic one and a strategic one. The pragmatic side, the OSCE membership provided Mongolia with a new platform for engagement on security cooperation, border management, conflict prevention, capacity building and election monitoring. Whereas, in terms of strategic implication, the move symbolizes Mongolia’s desire to diversify its foreign relations through its “Third neighbour policy”, balancing our geopolitical positioning between our powerful neighbours by seeking partnerships with developed, democratic countries and multilateral organizations beyond our region.

The term “Third neighbor policy” was first introduced in 1990 by the then U.S Secretary of State James Baker. It was historically significant as it marked the first ever visit by a U.S Secretary of State to Mongolia, symbolizing Washington’s support for Mongolia’s democratic transition. And as a gesture of support, during this visit he termed the U.S as Mongolia’s third neighbor, which in a short period of time grew into one of the cornerstone of Mongolia’s foreign policy. It reflects our determination to build strong and strategic partnerships beyond our two immediate neighbors. And not just with any countries, but with like-minded democracies, such as the United States, EU, Japan, South Korea, India, Canada, Australia and importantly with international organizations like the OSCE.

Picture 1. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker’s historic visit to Mongolia in 1990 marked the beginning of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries



Source: Embassy of Mongolia to the USA

In this sense, the decision to join the OSCE was not only a diplomatic accomplishment but also a display of Mongolia's broader vision of becoming an active and visible player in world affairs, bridging Europe and Asia, as well as showcasing our capacity and ambition in promoting dialogue and confidence building in regional and global affairs.

Pathway to OSCE membership

Following the collapse of socialist systems around the world, Mongolia chose the pathway to democracy and open market economy going forward. During this transition Mongolia recognized the importance of engagement, especially with international and regional organizations that share common values. Therefore, the OSCE, one of the largest regional security organization with a comprehensive approach to security, aligned well with our strategic foreign policy orientation. Hence, before becoming a full member participating state, Mongolia has maintained close cooperation with the organization, participating in every aspect of the agenda. This period allowed Mongolia to demonstrate our commitment to the organization's goals and principles and showcase our willingness for deeper involvement.

Since 2004 Mongolia actively started engaging with the OSCE as an Asian Partner for Co-operation. After six years, in October 2011, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Mongolia formally expressed Mongolia's interest in becoming an OSCE participating state and to accept all commitments and responsibilities contained in OSCE documents. However, some states pointed out that Mongolia was not part of the original geographic zone covered by the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) that began with the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. This zone, which covers all of Europe up to the Urals plus the five Central Asian countries that were Soviet republics, is the basis on which the OSCE is considered a regional arrangement of the United Nations under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Therefore, allowing Mongolia in would open up the possibility for other states to join the OSCE.¹ But in the end, it was ultimately decided to treat Mongolia using the same model already applied to Canada and the United States.² Russia stressed that this decision should not be seen as setting a precedent for other states outside the traditional Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region to join the OSCE as participating states. The following year, in 2012, Mongolia attained full-pledged membership, becoming the 57th country to join the organization, becoming the first country outside the original Helsinki zone to join as a full participant, which was an exceptional case that expanded the OSCE's reach into Northeast Asia. Russia supported Mongolia joining the OSCE, recognizing its unique position between Russia and China, but insisted it was an exceptional case. A key condition was that Mongolia's accession shouldn't dilute the OSCE's primary focus on European security as

¹ Theglobalobservatory.org, "Europe moves East: Mongolia joins the OSCE, 26/11/2012. Walter Kemp, <https://the-globalobservatory.org/2012/11/europe-moves-east-mongolia-joins-the-osce/#:~:text=It%20was%20too%20early%20to,states%20to%20join%20the%20OSCE.>

² Vienna Document commitments will apply to Mongolian forces in the zone of application but not to the territory of Mongolia itself. In other words, Mongolian officers could take part in inspections in European countries, but there can be no inspections of Mongolian military exercises or facilities.

defined by the Helsinki Final Act.³ Post-accession, Mongolia established a permanent mission to the OSCE in Vienna and has since participated as a full member in all dimensions. therefore, Mongolia's accession was not only a milestone in our foreign policy, but also a unique development in the history of the OSCE itself.

Motivation and factors behind Mongolia's accession

Behind Mongolia's accession to the OSCE there are several reasoning and factors such as strategic diversification, value alignment, security cooperation and visibility. As mentioned before, the importance of diversification plays a crucial role in Mongolia's foreign policy, enabling the country to balance relations with Russia and China. In terms of value alignment, the OSCE's focus on democracy, rule of law and human rights aligned perfectly with our new identity post democratic transition. Security cooperation is equally important, as Mongolia can benefit from the organization's expertise in hard security areas like border security and management, conflict prevention, crisis management, arms control, as well as soft security such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, governance and minority rights. Finally, this membership opened doors for Mongolia to broaden engagement in international affairs, offer visibility and opportunities for contribution, moving Mongolia one step forward in its quest to be an active and responsible player internally and externally.

Mongolia's engagement with the OSCE

Joining the OSCE was only the first step. The real test was: How could Mongolia make its membership meaningful. Since joining, Mongolia has been actively engaging in the OSCE operations and initiatives. We actively participate in OSCE efforts to address emerging threats such as terrorism, cybercrime and border security and have hosted workshop for law enforcement, strengthening domestic capacity and also contributing to regional stability. Thanks to our geographic and political neutrality, Mongolia has become a trusted mediator. The Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security is a prime example, bringing together regional actors, including the DPRK, for peaceful discussions. Though it is not an OSCE initiative, the dialogue reflects the same principles: cooperation, inclusivity and dialogue.

³ DECISION No. 2/12 ACCESSION OF MONGOLIA TO THE OSCE, Interpretative statement under paragraph iv.1(a)6 of the rules of procedure of the organization for security and co-operation in Europe, 21/11/2012, <https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/9/7/97736.pdf>

Picture 2. Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security 2018

Source: Institute for Strategic Studies of Mongolia

In 2015, we chaired the Forum for Security Cooperation, contributing directly to shaping regional security dialogue. That same year, we hosted the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's annual meeting, which was the first time this important gathering was held in East Asia. One of the most practical outcome of the cooperation has been OSCE election observation. We have welcomed OSCE election observers to both parliamentary and presidential elections, granting full and transparent access to our entire process. Their assessments have helped improve transparency and most importantly boost public confidence in our electoral process and outcome. In addition, Mongolia hosted a major OSCE conference on the role of armed and security forces in democratic societies. This brought together regional partners to discuss reform, oversight, and the rights of personnel.

Picture 3. Ambassador Audrey Glover, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission speaking with the head of the precinct election commission at a polling station in Ulaanbaatar in 2016



Source: osce.org

The partnership goes beyond security and elections. In terms of gender and governance leadership, we have been working closely with the OSCE to promote gender equality by encouraging women's participation in politics and peace-building operations, which yielded positive results and earned praise from the OSCE leadership. For instance, Mongolia currently deploys roughly 100 female peacekeepers out of a total of 800 personnel to United Nations peacekeeping missions. As per our commitment, Mongolia has set a goal to increase the proportion of women in our military and peacekeeping forces to 15 percent by the year 2027. As a result, Mongolia continues to be recognized for its high rate of female participation in peacekeeping, ranking 16th globally. Finally, through this membership, Mongolia has significantly expanded its diplomatic reach into Europe and North America, opening doors for important high-level forums such as the Helsinki+50 discussions, where we can contribute to shaping the future of regional security.

The road ahead

Looking ahead Mongolia sees many opportunities to further deepen our engagement with the OSCE, building on the progress achieved in the past decade. In accordance with the OSCE's core values, Mongolia aims to fully implement strengthening of democratic institutions, rule of law and uphold human rights. In terms of economic cooperation, Mongolia seeks to expand its cooperation with participating states, particularly in sustainable developments and economic diversification.

Promoting dialogue in security affairs and bridging connectivity still remains one of Mongolia's roles in the region. Mongolia positions itself as a unique and promising location for hosting wide range of security dialogues, particularly on conflict prevention. By proposing new regional formats inspired by the OSCE, Mongolia is competent and ready to help shape the future of cooperative and transparent security dialogues in Northeast Asia.

Mongolia is also active in the Asian partners for co-operation framework, working to build stronger collaboration between the Asian partners. One of the steps forward was the proposal to establish an OSCE Policy centre in Ulaanbaatar. Not long after becoming a member, Mongolia requested the OSCE to establish a field presence in Ulaanbaatar, and met with positive response. The Chairmanship sent a representative to lead a small delegation of OSCE officials to Mongolia to study the need for, and feasibility of, establishing a field presence there. That visit produced a report that recommended establishing a small presence in Ulaanbaatar.⁴ Although the centre is yet to be established, interest remains strong, with Mongolian diplomats and scholars actively advocating for the establishment.

Advancing democratic values still remains high on the agenda. Mongolia will continue to invite OSCE observers to future elections, as their presence reinforces transparency and build public trust in the process. Furthermore, Mongolia's peaceful transition to democracy, as well as preserving democracy, can be a great model in which we can share within the region.

⁴ Osce.org, United States Mission to the OSCE-Statement on Mongolia, delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer to the Permanent Council, Vienna November 21, 2013. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/1/108943.pdf>

To sum up, the OSCE membership has been a bold and strategic choice for Mongolia. It strengthens our sovereignty, supports our democracy, and gives substance to our independent and balanced foreign policy. As global dynamics continue to evolve, Mongolia is ready to be a bridge builder, committed partner and a peace promoter for a more inclusive, cooperative region.

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Монгол Улсын стратегийн сонголт – ЕАБХАБ

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Монгол Улс, Улаанбаатар, Үндэсний аюулгүй байдлын зөвлөлийн
Стратеги судалгааны хурээлэн

Хураангуй

Монгол Улс 2012 онд Европын аюулгүй байдал, хамтын ажиллагааны байгууллага (ЕАБХАБ)-д элссэн нь гадаад бодлого болон олон улсын нэр хүндийн хувьд түүхэн үйл явдал болсон юм. 1990-ээд оны ардчилсан шилжилтээс эхтэй энэ шийдвэр нь Монголын бие даасан гадаад бодлого болон “Гуравдагч хөршийн бодлого”-ыг илэрхийлж, ардчиллын үнэт зүйлсээр холбогддог орнууд болон олон улсын байгууллагуудтай харицаагаа төрөлжүүлэх зорилготой байв. Практик талаасаа ЕАБХАБ-ын гишүүнчилэл нь аюулгүй байдлын хамтын ажиллагаа, хил хамгаалалт, сонгуулийн ажиглалт, чадавх бэхжүүлэх шинэ талбаруудыг Монголд олгосон.

Стратегийн хувьд энэ нь Монголын тусгаар тогтнол, ардчилсан үнэт зүйлсийг бататгаж, “Ардчиллын баянбүрд” хэмээх нэр хүндийг улам бэхжүүлж чадсан. Тус байгууллагын гишүүн болсноор Монгол Улс ЕАБХАБ-ын санаачлагад идэвхтэй оролцож, томоохон чуулга, уулзалтууд зохион байгуулж, сонгуулийн ажиллагчдыг урьж, энхийг сахиулах ажиллагаанд эмэгтэйчүүдийн оролцог нэмэгдүүлэх зэрэг бодит хувь нэмэр оруулж ирсэн. Геополитикийн төвийг сахисан байр суурь нь Монголыг зуучлагчийн хувьд итгэлтэй түнши болгож байгаа бөгөөд Улаанбаатарын яриа хэлэлцээ санаачлагчаар улам бататгаж байгаа юм. Цаашид Монгол Улс ардчилал, тогтвортой хөгжсил, бүс нутгийн аюулгүй байдлын яриа хэлэлцээг гүнзгийрүүлэх зорилготой бөгөөд Европ, Азийг холбосон гүүр болох байр сууриа бататгахыг эрмэлзэж байна.

Түлхүүр үз: ЕАБХАБ-ын гишүүнчлэл, Гуравдагч хөрийний бодлого, Монгол Улсын гадаад бодлого, ардчилал

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