Sovereignty, Innovation, and Human Connection:
The Foundations of a Renewed Partnership between France and Mongolia

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Abstract

In an international environment increasingly characterised by overlapping geopolitical, ecological, and technological disruptions, often conceptualised as a condition of permacrisis[1], mid-sized and small states face growing constraints on their strategic autonomy. This article examines the evolving partnership between France and Mongolia as a case study in horizontal cooperation between non-hegemonic actors navigating structural vulnerability in Eurasia. Drawing on international relations theory, political economy, and climate governance scholarship, it argues that Franco–Mongolian cooperation is structured around a coherent trivoca: sovereignty and resilience, innovation and green transition, and human connectivity. Far from a symbolic bilateral relationship, this partnership reflects a shared strategic doctrine linking Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" policy with France's pursuit of European strategic autonomy. By analysing cooperation in cybersecurity, sustainable resource governance, renewable energy, and societal exchanges, particularly in the context of Mongolia's hosting of COP17, the article demonstrates how such partnerships can enhance autonomy without provoking bloc alignment. The Franco–Mongolian case thus offers broader insights into how mid-sized powers can preserve agency and contribute to stability within an increasingly fragmented international order.

Keywords: Strategic autonomy; Third Neighbour policy; middle powers; permacrisis; Franco–Mongolian relations; resilience; green transition

Introduction

In the vast and shifting landscape of Eurasian geopolitics, the relationship between France and Mongolia has long appeared peripheral: courteous, episodic, and rarely theorised. Yet history shows that certain partnerships acquire strategic relevance precisely when the international system enters a phase of structural stress. The early twenty-first century, marked by great-power rivalry, climate emergency, technological disruption, and the erosion of multilateral norms, constitutes such a moment. In this context, the France-Mongolia relationship can no longer be understood as marginal[2]. It has become emblematic of how mid-sized powers seek to preserve sovereignty, autonomy, and room for manoeuvre in an increasingly constrained world.

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[1]   Adam Tooze, "The Polycrisis: What COVID-19 Tells Us about Climate Change and Global Risk," *Foreign Policy*, 2022.

[2]   Thomas Hale, David Held, and Kevin Young, *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

This article builds upon a conceptual framework structured around three interlinked pillars : sovereignty and resilience, innovation and the green transition, and the human bridge, and situates it within broader academic debates on strategic autonomy, weaponised interdependence, and middle-power diplomacy. It argues that the Franco-Mongolian partnership is not a matter of diplomatic convenience but a deliberate strategic alignment, grounded in a shared understanding of sovereignty as diversification, resilience, and institutional capacity.

Three research questions guide the analysis. First, how can mid-sized powers preserve strategic autonomy in an era of systemic instability and geopolitical fragmentation? Second, in what ways do Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" policy and France's doctrine of European strategic autonomy converge conceptually and operationally? Third, can the Franco-Mongolian partnership serve as a transferable model of horizontal cooperation beyond traditional alliance structures?

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This article adopts a qualitative analytical approach combining strategic discourse analysis of official policy documents and public statements, engagement with academic literature in international relations, political economy, and climate governance, and a policy-oriented case analysis of Franco-Mongolian cooperation in security, energy, and education[3]. The objective is not to assess policy outcomes ex post, but to analyse the internal coherence, strategic potential, and structural limits of the partnership as a forward-looking strategic project.

1. A World of Permacrisis and the Predicament of Mid-Sized Powers

The notion of *permacrisis* has become a useful shorthand for the contemporary international condition in which disruptions no longer occur in neat sequences but increasingly overlap, interact, and generate enduring volatility[4]. Geopolitical conflict, climate disruption, technological acceleration, and macroeconomic fragility now form a dense web of mutually reinforcing shocks. In practice, this means that states rarely face a "single" crisis: war and sanctions reshape energy markets; energy insecurity amplifies social tensions; climate events disrupt food systems and logistics; and digital vulnerabilities become strategic liabilities[5]. For mid-sized powers, this environment produces a specific structural dilemma: their capacity to preserve autonomy is increasingly constrained, yet their exposure to coercion, through trade, networks, finance, or information systems, tends to rise.

Mongolia illustrates this predicament in unusually stark form. Its geography is not merely a constraint; it is a structural condition of statecraft. Landlocked between Russia and China, Mongolia operates in a strategic environment where sovereignty cannot be taken for granted as a passive inheritance, but must be continuously produced through

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3   Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79.

4   Laïdi, Z. (2018). *Towards a European sovereignty?* European Council on Foreign Relations

5   Adam Tooze, "The Polycrisis," *Foreign Policy*, 2022.

diversification and institutional resilience. Economically, vulnerability is magnified by dependence on a narrow set of export sectors and routes. A large share of Mongolian exports, particularly minerals, flows to a single market, making the country acutely sensitive to disruption at border points, to regulatory shifts, or to political signalling. This is not an abstract risk: in an era of "weaponised interdependence", central nodes of trade and infrastructure can become instruments of pressure. When global networks are controlled or dominated by larger powers, exposure itself becomes a strategic liability.

The ecological dimension of permacrisis is equally central in the Mongolian case. Climate change functions not only as an environmental stressor but as a multiplier of economic and social vulnerability[6]. Desertification, water stress, and the intensification of extreme winters (*dzud*) have direct consequences for rural livelihoods, urbanisation pressures, food security, and public spending. In other words, climate shocks are not "externalities"; they shape state capacity, budgetary flexibility, and social cohesion core variables of sovereignty in contemporary political economy. This places Mongolia among the states where ecological fragility and national resilience cannot be separated analytically: the integrity of institutions is tested through recurrent stress on society and infrastructure.

France, though operating at a different scale and within the European Union, confronts analogous logics of constraint. The return of overt geopolitical competition, particularly under the pressure of U.S.-China rivalry, has transformed interdependence into a strategic terrain: supply chains, technological standards, critical materials, and digital infrastructures are increasingly politicised. The European experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy shock following Russia's war against Ukraine, and the acceleration of technological competition have strengthened the French argument that autonomy must be understood not as isolation, but as the capacity to decide and act under constraint. Hence France's sustained advocacy for European strategic autonomy: not a withdrawal from alliances, but an attempt to preserve room for manoeuvre in a system that tends to push states toward alignment and dependency[7].

The key analytical point is that, for both Mongolia and France, sovereignty is no longer reducible to territorial control or conventional defence posture alone. It increasingly refers to resilience across multiple domains: the security of digital infrastructures; the robustness of energy systems; the ability to upgrade economic value chains rather than remain locked into raw-export dependence; and the protection of the information environment against manipulation. This is precisely why cooperation areas highlighted in the Franco-Mongolian agenda (cybersecurity capacity, crisis management and civil protection, secure logistics for major multilateral events, green-transition technologies, and long-term human connectivity, etc.) should be interpreted not as scattered initiatives but as a coherent response to the structural realities of permacrisis. In this sense, the renewed Franco-Mongolian partnership reflects a strategic convergence grounded in a shared diagnosis: autonomy in the twen-

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[6]   **UNEP,** *Global Environmental Outlook: Mongolia*, **2018,** Nairobi.
[7]   Jolyon Howorth, "Strategic Autonomy and EU–NATO Cooperation," *European Security* 28, no. 2 (2019): 158–177.

ty-first century depends less on unilateral power than on the ability to diversify dependencies, secure critical systems, and absorb shocks without losing decision-making integrity.

2. Strategic Convergence: Autonomy as a Shared Doctrine, Operationalised Through "Third-Neighbour" Projects

Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" policy is often described as a diversification strategy; analytically, it functions as a doctrine of autonomy under structural constraint[8]. For a landlocked liberal democracy positioned between Russia and China, sovereignty is not merely defended; it is continuously *produced* through the multiplication of partnerships that limit overdependence and broaden strategic options. In this framework, third-neighbour relationships are not symbolic: they are evaluated by their capacity to generate tangible capabilities (institutional resilience, infrastructure security, technological upgrading) without creating new dependencies.

France's doctrine of European strategic autonomy follows a parallel logic[9]. Paris argues that sovereignty in a world of "weaponised interdependence" depends on maintaining freedom of action across critical domains (energy, digital security, industrial value chains, strategic materials)[10]. The convergence between Ulaanbaatar and Paris is therefore doctrinal: both conceive autonomy as a capacity to choose and act under constraints, rather than as isolation. Among Mongolia's third neighbours, France stands out less by scale than by the particular mix it offers: non-hegemonic positioning, advanced technical and regulatory expertise, and a partnership model oriented toward capacity-building rather than alignment.

What gives this convergence empirical substance is the fact that Franco–Mongolian cooperation has progressively moved toward sectors where autonomy is materially built (civil security, crisis management, strategic resources, and the green transition) through concrete instruments that combine state-to-state cooperation with corporate and institutional carriers. A key feature of this partnership is that it tends to privilege capacity-building and operational transfer over patron-client dependency: a pattern that matches Mongolia's third-neighbour philosophy and France's preference for "peer-to-peer" cooperation.

Beyond doctrine, this convergence is also expressed through regular institutional dialogue, framework agreements, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms that translate strategic intent into operational routines. Bilateral consultations between ministries and agencies, cooperation frameworks in civil security, energy, and education, and sustained exchanges between public institutions provide the procedural backbone of the partnership. These instruments matter because they anchor strategic autonomy not only in vision, but in predictable, routinised cooperation.

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[8]   Alicia Campi, The Third Neighbor Policy and Mongolia's Diplomatic Diversification (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2012).

[9]   Josep Borrell, "European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, and What It Is Not," European External Action Service, 2021.

[10] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79.

3. Sovereignty and Comprehensive Resilience: Civil Security, Emergency Response, and Dual-Use Capabilities

In the contemporary strategic environment, sovereignty is increasingly measured by resilience, the ability to maintain institutional integrity and public authority under stress[11]. Hybrid threats (cyber disruption, disinformation, coercive economic signals) combine with climate shocks to test state capacity. For Mongolia, the operational dimension of sovereignty is visible in the development of emergency response and air rescue capabilities, where French and Mongolian actors have interacted in concrete ways.

A particularly illustrative example lies in Mongolia's acquisition and deployment of Airbus EC-145 helicopters configured for air rescue, search missions, and emergency health services. Reporting on deliveries and related ceremonies highlights the involvement not only of the Mongolian side but also of a French helicopter support actor, Heli-Union, in the support ecosystem around these platforms. This matters analytically: air mobility and emergency response are not "soft" issues in Mongolia's geography. They are state-capacity multipliers in a vast territory exposed to extreme weather, dispersed populations, and frequent disaster-management challenges.

In parallel, cooperation with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) fits into a broader logic of building an operational resilience architecture, including training, doctrine, and systems integration. NEMA itself publicly reports on technical agreements with France-related cooperation frameworks, signalling that this domain has been institutionalised beyond ad hoc exchanges. The strategic point is straightforward: modern sovereignty does not only depend on deterrence. It depends on the ability to ensure continuity of government functions, protect critical infrastructure, and respond effectively to crises that can rapidly become political.

This is also where digital resilience becomes central. Major international events, and, more broadly, democratic systems under informational pressure face risks that do not require territorial aggression to undermine sovereignty. In this respect, resilience cooperation should be understood as protecting decision-making autonomy, not merely securing assets.

4. Innovation and the Green Transition: Named Projects, Named Actors, and Value-Chain Sovereignty

The second pillar of the partnership concerns innovation and the green transition, where Mongolia's resource endowment (copper, critical minerals, rare earths potential, renewables) collides with the classic vulnerability of raw-material export dependency[12]. Here, the Franco–Mongolian relationship becomes concrete through several identifiable channels.

A clear corporate example is ENGIE's engagement in Mongolia via the Sainshand

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[11] Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[12] Nabeel A. Mancheri, Tsuyoshi Marukawa, and Takashi Nakamura, "China's Rare Earths," *Minerals* 9, no. 11 (2019).

wind farm, described by ENGIE as its first renewable project in the country, located in the Gobi Desert area, supported by a sizeable project financing package with international investors[13]. This case is analytically valuable because it illustrates how third-neighbour co-operation can contribute to Mongolia's diversification not only diplomatically but through infrastructure investment and operational know-how in a strategic sector.

Another highly concrete example is the BRGM partnership agreement with Mongolia focused on critical metals, including a pilot project involving satellite prospecting for lithium in palaeosalars[14]. BRGM notes that this pilot connects to work with the Mongolian Geological Survey and CGG, and that the basin in question was identified by Eramet as potentially lithium-rich. This is exactly the kind of cooperation that matters for value-chain sovereignty: it is not simply extraction; it is upstream geological intelligence and prospecting methodology, where technological capability shapes future bargaining power.

A third, major example is the reported joint investment deal involving Orano for the Zuuvch-Ovoo uranium project, framed as part of Mongolia's strategy to diversify partnerships and position itself within low-carbon energy supply chains. Whether one analyses this through the lens of critical materials, energy security, or geopolitical diversification, the underlying logic is the same: Mongolia seeks to embed strategic sectors in partnerships that are compatible with sovereignty and governance standards, rather than reinforcing one-sided dependence. Despite disinformation campaigns attributed to external actors seeking to politicise the project, available evidence indicates that its implementation remains on track and continues to enjoy institutional support. Moreover, the project is structured within robust environmental and health safeguard frameworks, with impact assessments and monitoring mechanisms intended to minimise risks to local populations and surrounding ecosystems. This assessment remains subject to continued regulatory oversight, transparency requirements, and sustained environmental and social monitoring throughout the project's lifecycle, which are essential to maintaining public trust and long-term project legitimacy.

Finally, in the "green transition" understood as societal resilience, cooperation also takes place through development and NGO implementation channels. **Geres** reports projects in Mongolia aimed at reducing air pollution through energy efficiency and renovation of single-family homes, including the FRESH project started in 2024 and supported by the French Development Agency (AFD). While less visible than mining or energy megaprojects, this strand is strategically relevant: air pollution is a social and political stability issue in Ulaanbaatar, and energy renovation links directly to governance credibility and sustainable development.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that the partnership is not a slogan. It is an emerging ecosystem spanning (1) renewable infrastructure, (2) strategic minerals intelligence and prospecting, (3) nuclear/uranium investment, and (4) energy efficiency and urban resilience, each carried by identifiable French institutions and companies.

[13]   International Energy Agency, *Renewables 2021* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021).
[14]   International Energy Agency, *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2022).

5. The Human Bridge: From Cultural Diplomacy to Skills Pipelines and Institutional Embeddedness

The third pillar of the Franco-Mongolian partnership, the human bridge, is often relegated, in diplomatic discourse, to the domain of cultural exchange or soft power symbolism[15]. Such a reading significantly underestimates its strategic function. In reality, human connectivity constitutes the long-term infrastructure that enables both sovereignty-oriented resilience and green-transition projects to endure beyond political cycles, budgetary fluctuations, and external shocks. Where physical infrastructure can be built in years, human capital and institutional trust require decades[16]; yet once established, they provide continuity precisely when geopolitical or economic conditions deteriorate.

In the Franco-Mongolian context, the human bridge must therefore be analysed not as an adjunct to state-to-state cooperation, but as a capability-generating system. Its relevance lies in the creation of stable professional communities (engineers, emergency responders, researchers, civil servants, and policy specialists, etc.) who share technical languages, regulatory cultures, and problem-solving frameworks. These communities reduce transaction costs, mitigate misunderstandings, and allow cooperation to persist even when formal diplomatic momentum slows.

France has maintained a long-standing cultural and linguistic presence in Mongolia through institutions such as the Alliance Française in Ulaanbaatar, which functions not only as a language centre but also as a platform for intellectual exchange. While cultural diplomacy alone does not generate strategic capacity, it plays a crucial enabling role: familiarity with language, norms, and professional culture lowers barriers to technical cooperation in more sensitive domains such as security, energy, or resource governance.

This cultural layer is particularly important in a context where Mongolia seeks third-neighbour partnerships that do not come with intrusive political conditionality. French cultural diplomacy, characterised by relative autonomy from direct state messaging and a strong emphasis on intellectual exchange, fits this expectation and contributes to a perception of France as a non-hegemonic partner, a key asset in Mongolia's diversification strategy.

Beyond culture, education and research cooperation form the backbone of the human bridge. Mongolian students have increasingly pursued higher education in France in fields directly relevant to national sovereignty and resilience: engineering, energy systems, environmental sciences, public administration, and international relations. Mechanisms facilitated by Campus France and bilateral university agreements have enabled the formation of a small but growing cohort of Mongolian professionals trained in French academic and regulatory environments.

This matters strategically for several reasons. First, graduates trained in France often

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[15]   Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

[16]   Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

return with not only technical skills but also familiarity with European standards in safety, environmental regulation, and project governance standards directly applicable to sectors such as renewable energy, mining sustainability, and infrastructure management. Second, alumni networks function as informal but durable channels linking Mongolian institutions to French expertise, easing future cooperation and reducing dependence on ad hoc consultancy.

Academic cooperation also operates at the institutional level. Partnerships involving French research bodies, such as those specialising in environmental monitoring, geology, or energy systems and Mongolian universities contribute to the localisation of expertise. Joint research programmes, visiting professorships, and co-supervised doctoral work help embed analytical capacity within Mongolian institutions rather than externalising it. In strategic terms, this supports **knowledge sovereignty:** the ability to assess, regulate, and negotiate complex projects using domestically anchored expertise.

The human bridge is particularly visible in domains where operational coordination is critical. Cooperation related to civil security and emergency response linked to Mongolia's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), illustrates how skills pipelines translate into institutional resilience. Training exchanges, joint exercises, and exposure to French civil-protection doctrine enable Mongolian practitioners to adapt international best practices to local conditions marked by extreme climate, vast territory, and limited infrastructure density.

These exchanges generate more than technical competence. They foster professional trust and shared operational culture, which are decisive in crisis situations. In the context of major events such as COP17, where coordination between multiple agencies and international partners is required, the existence of pre-established professional networks significantly enhances response capacity. In this sense, the human bridge directly reinforces Mongolia's operational sovereignty: its ability to manage crises without excessive external intervention.

The green transition pillar of the partnership further illustrates the strategic role of human connectivity. Renewable energy projects, mineral processing initiatives, and environmental monitoring systems cannot be sustained by capital and technology alone. They require engineers, technicians, regulators, and project managers capable of operating, maintaining, and governing complex systems over time.

Here, professional exchanges linked to French corporate and institutional actors involved in Mongolia, whether in renewable energy, geological surveying, or environmental protection, play a decisive role. Training local engineers on-site, embedding Mongolian professionals in project-development teams, and facilitating short- and medium-term placements in France contribute to the gradual localisation of competence. This reduces long-term dependence on foreign operators and strengthens Mongolia's bargaining position in future projects.

Environmental monitoring provides another example. Satellite-based observation, climate modelling, and land-use analysis rely on continuous data interpretation and institutional memory. Franco–Mongolian cooperation in this field, when coupled with training and joint research, allows Mongolia to internalise analytical capacity rather than remaining a passive data recipient. This is particularly relevant in a country where environmental stress has direct political and social implications.

Taken together, these layers (cultural familiarity, academic cooperation, professional exchange, and on-the-job skills transfer) constitute what can be described as **strategic insurance**. They ensure that cooperation does not collapse when leadership changes, projects are delayed, or geopolitical pressure intensifies. Unlike formal agreements, human networks are difficult to disrupt and costly to reverse.

For Mongolia, this dimension is especially valuable. It aligns with the logic of the Third Neighbour policy by reinforcing autonomy through competence rather than dependency. For France, it reflects a mode of engagement consistent with its preference for capacity-building and long-term influence rather than transactional presence.

In analytical terms, the human bridge transforms the Franco-Mongolian partnership from a collection of sectoral projects into a **durable strategic ecosystem**. It is this embeddedness rather than any single investment or agreement that ultimately determines whether cooperation in resilience and green transition can withstand the pressures of an era defined by permacrisis.

COP17 as a Strategic Stress Test: Security, Infrastructure, and Reputation Under Pressure

Mongolia's hosting of COP17 should not be interpreted primarily as a symbolic or ceremonial opportunity, but as a strategic stress test of state capacity under conditions of maximum visibility. High-level multilateral summits concentrate vulnerabilities in a compressed time frame: cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, infrastructure disruption, logistical failure, and reputational damage are not peripheral risks but structural features of contemporary global governance[17]. In an era of permacrisis, the success of such an event depends as much on operational resilience as on diplomatic positioning or negotiation outcomes.

From an analytical perspective, COP17 exposes a core tension faced by mid-sized powers. On the one hand, hosting a COP allows Mongolia to project agency, signal climate leadership, and reposition itself within global governance debates. On the other hand, failure, whether technical, organisational, or reputational, would amplify perceptions of vulnerability and undermine precisely the autonomy such an event is meant to reinforce. COP17 thus functions as a stress test of sovereignty, revealing the extent to which Mongolia can maintain control over critical systems under intense external scrutiny.

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[17]   Thomas Hale, "Catalytic Cooperation," *Nature Climate Change* 10 (2020): 573–582.

The concentration of political leaders, delegations, media, and civil society actors during COP17 creates a high-risk environment for both physical and hybrid threats[18]. Emergency response capacity therefore becomes immediately "load-bearing". Cooperation with Mongolia's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the gradual strengthening of air rescue and rapid-response capabilities, particularly through platforms supplied or supported by French operators, must be understood as part of the operational backbone of COP security.

In practical terms, this includes readiness for medical evacuation, response to extreme weather events, fire incidents, infrastructure accidents, or large-scale disruptions affecting transport and public order. Mongolia's vast territory, dispersed infrastructure, and exposure to climatic volatility mean that contingencies cannot be managed through redundancy alone; they require mobility, coordination, and real-time decision-making capacity. In this context, air assets configured for search and rescue, emergency medical services, and disaster response are not peripheral tools but core instruments of state capacity.

More broadly, COP17 will test Mongolia's ability to coordinate multiple agencies (civil protection, police, health services, transport authorities, and digital infrastructure operators) under a unified command framework. This is precisely where prior cooperation, joint exercises, and doctrinal exchanges matter. Resilience is not improvised during a summit; it is accumulated through prior institutional learning.

Beyond physical security, COP17 will unfold in a highly contested information environment. International summits have become prime targets for cyber operations, data breaches, and disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting hosts, delegations, or outcomes. Such actions need not disrupt proceedings directly to be effective; sowing doubt about organisational competence or narrative control can be sufficient to erode credibility.

For Mongolia, whose digital infrastructure and cybersecurity ecosystem remain under development, this dimension is critical. Protecting communication networks, registration systems, media platforms, and coordination tools is not merely a technical issue but a matter of decision-making sovereignty. A compromised digital environment constrains the host's ability to manage narratives, control information flows, and respond coherently to crises.

Here again, cooperation frameworks developed with French partners particularly in cybersecurity doctrine and protection of critical systems take on concrete significance. COP17 will test whether such cooperation has translated into operational resilience rather than remaining at the level of policy intent.

The credibility of a COP host is also assessed through its own energy and infrastructure choices. Disruptions to power supply, reliance on carbon-intensive backup systems, or visible inconsistency between climate discourse and operational reality would carry repu-

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[18]   Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

tational costs. Conversely, demonstrating reliable, renewable-based energy provision reinforces both symbolic and substantive leadership.

In this respect, the presence of renewable energy projects developed with international partners, such as ENGIE's wind project in Mongolia, provides more than background context. It signals that the host country is not merely advocating climate action but implementing it. Experience gained through such projects contributes to grid stability, energy management expertise, and institutional familiarity with renewable integration, all of which become relevant during a high-demand event such as COP17.

From a strategic standpoint, energy reliability during the summit functions as a credibility multiplier. It aligns Mongolia's diplomatic posture with demonstrable domestic capacity, reducing the gap between climate narrative and governance reality.

COP17 also offers Mongolia an opportunity, and a challenge, to position itself within global debates on the material foundations of the energy transition. Climate diplomacy increasingly intersects with questions of critical minerals, low-carbon supply chains, and resource governance. Mongolia's cooperation with French institutions and companies in geological surveying (BRGM and CGG), identification of critical metal basins (including those highlighted by Eramet), and uranium investment through Orano can be mobilised as part of a coherent narrative: Mongolia not only as a climate-vulnerable country, but as a strategically relevant contributor to the global transition.

This positioning is delicate. It requires balancing environmental responsibility, sovereignty over resources, and openness to international cooperation. COP17 will test Mongolia's ability to articulate this balance credibly demonstrating governance capacity rather than extractive dependency. In this sense, the summit becomes a platform where the quality of partnerships matters as much as their scale.

Finally, COP17 will inevitably reflect domestic perceptions. Large international events place pressure on urban infrastructure, housing, transport, and public services, particularly in Ulaanbaatar, where air pollution, energy efficiency, and housing quality remain politically sensitive issues. Projects supported through French development channels, including AFD-linked programmes implemented by organisations such as Geres to improve energy efficiency and reduce household pollution, contribute indirectly but meaningfully to the social foundations of COP credibility.

Societal resilience matters because legitimacy is not produced only in negotiation rooms. It is also shaped by how citizens perceive the costs and benefits of international engagement. Demonstrating that climate diplomacy connects to everyday improvements in living conditions strengthens domestic support and reduces the risk of backlash against international commitments.

Viewed holistically, COP17 represents the moment when Mongolia's third-neighbour strategy is tested under real-world conditions. The question is not whether Mongolia can

host a conference, but whether diversified partnerships can generate secure, credible, and high-capacity governance under pressure.

Success would validate the strategic logic underpinning the Franco-Mongolian partnership: that autonomy is built through resilience, competence, and diversified cooperation rather than through alignment or isolation. Failure, by contrast, would expose the limits of institutional preparedness and the risks of ambition exceeding capacity.

In this sense, COP17 is not an endpoint. It is a revealing episode in a longer process of statecraft, one that will shape perceptions of Mongolia's role in global governance and the credibility of its third-neighbour partnerships for years to come.

Constraints, Trade-Offs, and Geopolitical Sensitivities

While the Franco-Mongolian partnership displays strong doctrinal coherence and growing operational depth, it would be analytically misleading to present it as frictionless or immune to structural constraints. On the contrary, its very ambition, preserving autonomy through diversification in a fragmented international system, exposes it to geopolitical sensitivities, capacity asymmetries, and implementation risks that must be addressed explicitly if the partnership is to remain credible and sustainable.

Mongolia's strategic environment is defined, first and foremost, by its immediate neighbours. Any third-neighbour cooperation, however benign in intensity, is inevitably interpreted through the lenses of Moscow and Beijing. This does not imply automatic opposition, but it does impose limits on visibility, pacing, and framing.

China, as Mongolia's dominant economic partner, occupies a structurally asymmetrical position. The concentration of Mongolian exports, particularly minerals, toward a single market creates latent vulnerability to regulatory pressure, border disruptions, or signalling through informal channels. In this context, diversification through European partnerships is rational but politically sensitive. If framed as strategic decoupling or geopolitical rebalancing, it risks generating counterproductive reactions. The challenge for Mongolia is therefore to embed diversification within a narrative of complementarity rather than substitution, emphasising resilience and standards rather than alignment against any actor.

Russia, while economically less central, retains symbolic and strategic significance, particularly in energy and security imaginaries. In a context of heightened tension between Russia and Western states, Mongolia should avoid being perceived as a vector for strategic encroachment. Franco-Mongolian cooperation, especially in areas such as civil security, digital resilience, or satellite-based monitoring, must therefore remain transparent, civilian in nature, and firmly anchored in multilateral norms.

For France, this implies restraint as well as engagement. The credibility of the partnership depends not on visibility alone, but on discursive discipline: avoiding the temptation

to over-politicise cooperation or to present Mongolia as a geopolitical "outpost". The partnership's strength lies precisely in its non-confrontational logic.

A second structural dimension of the partnership concerns differences in institutional, financial, and technological configurations. France brings long-established administrative practices, experienced industrial actors, and access to European cooperation and financing mechanisms. Mongolia, for its part, operates in a context shaped by rapid institutional evolution, a highly skilled but concentrated human capital base, and economic cycles closely linked to commodity markets.

These differences do not constitute a weakness, but rather a starting point for designing cooperation that is mutually reinforcing. Well-calibrated partnerships can help accelerate Mongolia's own capacity-building objectives, particularly in strategic and technically demanding sectors such as cybersecurity, geological surveying, and energy systems management.

The central challenge is therefore not asymmetry itself, but how it is managed. Cooperation that focuses exclusively on external delivery risks limiting long-term domestic ownership. By contrast, partnerships that are structured around joint production rather than delegation, systematic skills development alongside project implementation and durable institutional integration, can strengthen Mongolia's strategic autonomy while deepening mutual trust.

In this perspective, the human dimension of cooperation plays a decisive role. Sustained investment in training, exchanges, and embedded expertise transforms technical cooperation into a long-term asset. Third-neighbour partnerships are most effective when they reinforce domestic competencies and decision-making capacity, rather than simply filling short-term gaps.

This consideration is particularly important in sectors linked to the green transition, mining, renewable energy, and infrastructure. While often framed in technical or economic terms, such projects are inherently political. In Mongolia, they intersect with land governance, pastoral livelihoods, environmental protection, and public confidence in institutions.

Recognising this reality creates both a responsibility and an opportunity. Inclusive consultation, attention to environmental and social concerns, and transparent governance can enhance project resilience and public legitimacy. When these dimensions are fully integrated, international cooperation not only supports economic development, but also contributes to social cohesion and institutional credibility.

French actors, whether public or private, should therefore operate within a governance-sensitive framework. The credibility of the partnership depends not only on environmental standards, but on procedural legitimacy: transparency, consultation, and responsiveness to local concerns. In the absence of these elements, cooperation risks being reframed domestically as external imposition, an outcome fundamentally at odds with the logic of autonomy.

Mongolia's democratic vitality is a strategic asset, but it also introduces volatility. Frequent changes in government, shifting parliamentary coalitions, and evolving public priorities can complicate long-term project implementation. Institutional memory is uneven, and administrative turnover can disrupt continuity.

France faces a different, but related, constraint. Strategic attention is finite. Competing priorities within Europe, the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and the Middle East can dilute sustained engagement with Mongolia, particularly if cooperation does not yield visible short-term returns.

This mutual constraint reinforces the importance of institutionalisation. Partnerships anchored solely in political momentum or high-level visits are fragile. Those embedded in agencies, universities, professional networks, and long-term financing instruments are more resilient to leadership change on both sides.

Finally, there is a risk of overextension. COP17, green transition, critical minerals, civil security, cybersecurity, human exchanges, each domain is strategically justified, but together they place significant demands on administrative bandwidth and coordination capacity.

From a critical standpoint, the danger lies not in ambition per se, but in symbolic inflation: multiplying strategic narratives faster than operational capacity can absorb them. If expectations outpace delivery, credibility erodes, not only for specific projects, but for the partnership as a whole.

A disciplined prioritisation strategy is therefore essential. Franco-Mongolian cooperation will be judged less by the number of memoranda signed than by the durability of a limited set of flagship initiatives that demonstrably enhance Mongolian autonomy and resilience.

These constraints do not invalidate the partnership; they define its operating environment. Indeed, acknowledging them strengthens the analytical case. The Franco–Mongolian relationship does not succeed despite structural limits, but **because it is shaped by them**. Its logic is not maximalist, but incremental; not confrontational, but adaptive.

In this sense, the partnership reflects a mature form of statecraft suited to an era of permacrisis. It recognises that autonomy is never absolute, that diversification always involves trade-offs, and that strategic success depends as much on restraint as on initiative.

Conclusion: Strategic Autonomy as Relational Statecraft

This article has examined the evolving Franco–Mongolian partnership as a case study in how mid-sized powers navigate an international environment increasingly defined by overlapping crises, structural asymmetries, and constrained strategic choice. Framed through the concepts of *permacrisis*, weaponised interdependence, and strategic autonomy, the analysis has argued that this partnership is neither a symbolic diplomatic

gesture nor an embryonic alliance. Rather, it constitutes a form of **relational statecraft**, in which sovereignty is pursued through diversification, resilience-building, and institutional embedding.

The convergence between Mongolia's "Third Neighbour" policy and France's doctrine of European strategic autonomy is doctrinal rather than circumstantial. In both cases, autonomy is understood not as isolation from global systems, but as the capacity to preserve decision-making integrity within them. This shared understanding explains why cooperation has gravitated toward domains where sovereignty is materially produced: civil security and emergency response, cybersecurity and information resilience, energy transition and critical resources, and the long-term formation of human capital. Each of these domains responds to a specific vulnerability identified in the condition of permacrisis whether climatic, technological, economic, or geopolitical.

Empirically, the article has shown that the partnership rests on concrete mechanisms rather than abstract alignment. Cooperation involving Mongolia's National Emergency Management Agency, air rescue and mobility platforms, renewable energy projects, geological intelligence on critical minerals, uranium investment, and urban energy-efficiency programmes demonstrates that third-neighbour engagement can translate into operational capacity. The human bridge, through education, professional exchange, and institutional network, emerges as the critical connective tissue that allows these initiatives to persist beyond political cycles and external shocks.

At the same time, the analysis has deliberately foregrounded constraints. Geographic proximity to Russia and China imposes limits on visibility and framing; asymmetries of capacity create risks of substituted sovereignty; green-transition projects generate domestic political and social sensitivities; and administrative bandwidth remains finite on both sides. Acknowledging these limits is not a concession, but an analytical necessity. In an era where overextension and symbolic inflation often undermine strategic credibility, restraint and prioritisation become forms of strategic discipline.

Mongolia's hosting of COP17 crystallises these dynamics. The summit functions as a stress test of governance under pressure, revealing whether diversification and partnership can deliver secure, credible, high-capacity state action under intense scrutiny. Success would reinforce Mongolia's position as a responsible and autonomous actor in global climate governance, while validating the Franco–Mongolian partnership as a viable model of peer-to-peer cooperation. Failure, by contrast, would expose the fragility of ambition unsupported by institutional depth.

Beyond the bilateral case, the implications of this analysis extend to broader debates in international relations. The Franco-Mongolian experience suggests that mid-sized powers retain agency even in a fragmented system, provided they reconceptualise autonomy as relational rather than absolute[19]. Power, in this view, is less about dominance than about

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[19] Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

the capacity to manage interdependence, absorb shocks, and maintain institutional coherence. Strategic partnerships succeed not by eliminating vulnerability, but by distributing and governing it.

Ultimately, the Franco–Mongolian partnership illustrates a pragmatic pathway through the constraints of contemporary geopolitics. It neither challenges great powers directly nor retreats into neutrality. Instead, it constructs autonomy incrementally, through competence, credibility, and connectivity. In a century marked less by clear alignments than by persistent uncertainty, such forms of relational statecraft may prove to be among the most durable strategies available to mid-sized states.

Тусгаар тогтнол, инноваци ба хүний харилцаа, холбоо: Франц, Монголын хоорондын шинэчлэгдсэн түншлэлийн үндэс

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Хураангуй

Олон улсад жижиг, дунд улсууд геополитик, экологи, технологийн хөнөөлт байдал буюу хямрал байдал байгаа явдал нь стратегийн бие даасан байдал сөрөг үр дагаварт хүргэх боллоо. Энэхүү өгүүлэлд Франц-Монголын хоорондын түншлэлийг Евроазийн бүтцийн эмзэг байдлыг даван туулахад хамтын хэвтээ ажиллагаагаар жишээ болгон авч үзсэн болно.

Олон улсын харилцааны онол, улс төрийн эдийн засаг, уур амьсгалын засаглалын судалгаан дээр үндэслэн Франц-Монголын хамтын ажиллагааг тусгаар тогтнол ба сөрөн тэсвэрлэх, инноваци ба ногоон шилжилт, хүний харилцаа, холбоо гэсэн бүтцийн хүрээнд судаллаа. Энэхүү түншлэлийг бэлгэдлийн хоёр талын харилцаанаас илүүтэйгээр Монголын "Гуравдагч хөрш"-ийн бодлогыг Францын Европын стратегийн бие даасан байдалтай холбосон стратегийн номлол гэж үзсэн.

Кибер аюулгүй байдал, тогтвортой засаглал, сэргээгдэх эрчим хүч, нийгмийн солилцоо зэрэг хамтын ажиллагааг, нэн ялангуяа Монгол Улс СОР 17-г зохион байгуулж байгаатай холбогдуулан шинжлэх, мөн энэхүү өгүүллээр хамтын бие даасан харилцааг эрчимжүүлэхэд чиглэсэнд оршино. Тиймээс Франц, Монгол зэрэг дунд гүрэн улам хуваагдмал болж буй олон улсын дэг журмын хүрээнд хэрхэн тогтвортой, эрх мэдэлтэй байх нь чухал юм.

Түлхүүр үг : Стратегийн бие даасан байдал, гуравлагч хөршийн бодлого, дунд гүрэн, хямрал байдал, Франц-Монголын харилцаа, сөрөн тэсвэрлэх; ногоон шилжилт