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Article

# The Indo-Pacific and Trump 2.0: Implications for Mongolia

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## Abstract

*This article examines the evolution of U.S. grand strategy through the lens of the Indo-Pacific and assesses how the strategic logic of Trump 2.0 may affect Mongolia. It argues that the Indo-Pacific has become the principal arena in which Washington's larger debate over liberal internationalism, primacy, and offshore balancing is being translated into policy. The Biden administration treated the region as the central theater of long-term competition with China, emphasizing alliances, institutional coordination, economic frameworks, and resilience against transnational threats[1]. By contrast, Trump 2.0 has not abandoned the Indo-Pacific, but it has reordered the hierarchy of priorities. The new emphasis on "core national interests," homeland security, Western Hemisphere preeminence, economic nationalism, technology protection, and burden-shifting to allies suggests a more selective, transactional, and resource-conscious strategy. The result is not a complete strategic rupture, but a reweighting of U.S. commitments[2].*

*For Mongolia, this shift has a double meaning. On the one hand, it reduces the likelihood that Mongolia will occupy a prominent place in official circles.*

*Indo-Pacific documents, as Washington concentrates on treaty allies, Southeast Asia, India, and maritime chokepoints. On the other hand, Mongolia retains value as a democratic "third neighbor" partner*

[1] The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022), 5–12.
[2] The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2025), 1–10.

*in defense diplomacy, peacekeeping, cyber cooperation, critical minerals, and regional dialogue. The article concludes that Mongolia is unlikely to become a frontline node in Trump 2.0's Indo-Pacific strategy, but it can remain a useful and credible partner if it pursues calibrated cooperation without undermining its strategic neutrality.*

## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is no longer merely a regional designation. It has become the main strategic space in which the United States defines the future balance of power, the character of regional order, and the limits of Chinese influence. Since the late 2010s, administrations in Washington have differed in tone, preferred instruments, and ideological framing, but they have converged on one underlying judgment[3]: The Indo-Pacific will shape the international order of the twenty-first century[4]. The debate is therefore not whether the United States should remain engaged there, but how it should do so, at what cost, and with which partners. From a grand-strategy perspective, the Indo-Pacific exposes a deeper U.S. dilemma. The post-Cold War United States oscillated among three broad strategic logics: liberal internationalism, which sought to preserve order through alliances, institutions, and open markets; primacy, which aimed to preserve overwhelming U.S. superiority and prevent the rise of peer competitors; and offshore balancing, which favored a more selective posture, burden-sharing, and the concentration of power against only the most consequential threats[5]. In recent years, American strategic debate has increasingly reflected concern that the United States can no longer sustain the full costs of unipolar leadership and must redistribute power more selectively.

For Mongolia, these shifts matter even if it is not a central military actor in the Indo-Pacific. Mongolia's strategic relevance has always derived less from hard power than from its identity as a democratic state located between Russia and China, its "third neighbor" diplomacy, and its utility in peacekeeping and defense diplomacy. Mongolia briefly gained greater visibility in U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific discourse in 2019–2020, but that visibility diminished under Biden's core strategy documents, reflecting a hard geopolitical truth: Washington prioritizes treaty allies, Southeast Asia, India, and maritime theaters over landlocked partners on the region's northern periphery[6].

This article argues that Trump 2.0 will likely reinforce that pattern. Mongolia will remain relevant, but not central. Its future role will depend on whether it can position

[3] Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren and Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "A Mongolian Perspective of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 648 (June 14, 2023), 1–2.
[4] U.S. Department of Defense, "DOD Releases Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," May 31, 2019.
[5] Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 15–38; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–28.
[6] Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren and Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "A Mongolian Perspective of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 648 (June 14, 2023), 1.

itself not as a symbolic inclusion in U.S. strategy documents, but as a practical, low-risk, value-adding partner in selected sectors.

## U.S. Grand Strategy and the Indo-Pacific

Grand strategy refers to the coordination of military, economic, political, diplomatic, and ideological means in pursuit of long-term national objectives. In the American case, the post-Cold War period was initially defined by unipolarity, and successive administrations interpreted that moment differently. The liberal internationalist approach associated with the Clinton and Obama years relied on multilateral cooperation, alliances, international law, open markets, and support for democratic norms. The primacist logic more closely associated with George W. Bush emphasized preserving American superiority, preventing the rise of regional challengers, and using military power proactively when necessary. A third logic, offshore balancing, argues that the United States should avoid unnecessary overextension, rely more on regional partners, and intervene decisively only when a major power threatens to dominate a key region[7].

These strategic schools are not merely abstract theories. They have shaped U.S. policy choices across administrations. Liberal internationalism favored the strengthening of institutions, collective security, and economic interdependence; primacy prioritized deterrence through superiority and the prevention of rival great powers; offshore balancing stressed restraint, regional burden-sharing, and more efficient resource allocation[8].

The Indo-Pacific became the clearest regional expression of this broader strategic debate. The Trump administration's 2019 Department of Defense *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* presented the U.S. regional approach in terms of "preparedness, partnerships, and promoting a networked region," making the case that the region was the priority theater for long-term competition[9]. That formulation was significant because it did not rely solely on military deterrence; it linked force posture, alliance management, and regional connectivity. The Biden administration deepened this strategic logic rather than reversing it. The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* declared that the United States would focus on every part of the region, from Northeast and Southeast Asia to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands. It set out five objectives: advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific, building connections within and beyond the region, driving prosperity, bolstering security, and building regional resilience[10]. The strategy also described alliances and partnerships as America's greatest asymmetric advantage in the region[11]. The 2022 *National Security Strategy* reinforced this

[7] Layne, The Peace of Illusions, 2–9, 15–38; Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 40–52.
[8] G. John Ikenberry, After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5–18; Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 1–28; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 118–123.
[9] U.S. Department of Defense, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region *(Washington,* DC: Department of Defense, 2019).
[10] The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 8–18.
[11] Ibid., 5–6.

orientation at the highest level. It identified the People's Republic of China as "America's most consequential geopolitical challenge" and the only competitor with both the intent and the growing capability to reshape the international order[12]. It also emphasized that no region would matter more to the world and to everyday Americans than the Indo-Pacific[13]. In other words, the Biden administration saw the Indo-Pacific not merely as one region among many, but as the principal strategic theater for the future of U.S. power.

In this sense, the Biden approach represented a hybrid of liberal internationalism and competitive statecraft. It aimed to deny China regional domination through coalition-building, deterrence, and institutional adaptation. It did not seek simply to contain China through military means alone; rather, it sought to preserve a favorable balance through networks of alliances, economic frameworks, technology partnerships, and regional resilience[14].

## Trump 2.0 and the Reweighting of Strategy

Trump 2.0 does not signify the abandonment of the Indo-Pacific. Rather, it signals a tightening of strategic definition. The 2025 *National Security Strategy* states that the purpose of foreign policy is the protection of "core national interests" and warns that to focus on everything is to focus on nothing[15]. That formulation indicates a deliberate narrowing of priorities compared with broader post-Cold War formulations that treated global order-building, democracy promotion, and diffuse multilateral engagement as coequal with hard security concerns.

This narrowing is visible in two linked shifts. First, the strategy elevates homeland security and Western Hemisphere primacy. It argues that the United States must be preeminent in the Western Hemisphere and places new emphasis on border control, anti-narcotics efforts, migration, and the rollback of extra-hemispheric influence in the Americas[16]. Second, while reprioritizing the homeland and the Western Hemisphere, Trump 2.0 still identifies the Indo-Pacific as one of the key economic and geopolitical battlegrounds of the century[17]. Thus, China remains the principal long-term external competitor, but Washington appears less willing to maintain diffuse commitments that do not serve a tightly ranked hierarchy of interests. This suggests continuity in ends but change in means. The end remains preventing Chinese predominance in Asia. The means, however, are more selective and more transactional. Rather than treating every theater with near-equal rhetorical weight, Trump 2.0 seeks to compel allies to do more in Europe, preserve deterrence in Asia, harden the U.S. technological and industrial base, and reduce vulnerabilities created by excessive economic openness[18]. This is why

[12] *The White House,* National Security Strategy (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 8.
[13] Ibid., 24–26.
[14] The White House, Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 5–18.*
[15] The White House, National Security Strategy (2025), 1–4.
[16] Ibid., 7–13.
[17] Ibid., 31–36.
[18] Ibid., 1–10, 31–36.

Trump 2.0 appears closer to an updated form of offshore balancing, although it also retains primacist elements in the fields of technology and military superiority[19].

The economic dimension is particularly revealing. In early 2025, the administration issued policy actions linking national security to domestic energy production, critical mineral supply chains, and investment screening[20]. It also advanced an "America First Investment Policy" that targeted PRC-linked access to U.S. technology, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and other strategic sectors[21]. These measures suggest that economic statecraft under Trump 2.0 is not secondary to geopolitical competition; it is central to it.

The military dimension follows a similar pattern. According to the 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy, Trump 2.0 gives greater emphasis to U.S. territorial defense and the Western Hemisphere while expecting Europeans to assume more responsibility for their own security[22]. It also notes that support for balancing China in the Indo-Pacific remains intact, even as Europe is treated as a more manageable theater[23]. It also emphasizes several continuities: support for Taiwan, opposition to China's growing power, defense-industrial mobilization, and the strengthening of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.[24]

The broader implication is that Trump 2.0 does not amount to isolationism. It is better understood as prioritization with sharper edges: narrower in declared purpose, more selective in commitments, more demanding of partners, and more explicit about the cost-benefit logic of American engagement.

## Mongolia and the Indo-Pacific under Trump 2.0

Mongolia's place in U.S. Indo-Pacific thinking has always been paradoxical. It is politically attractive to Washington as a democratic state situated between Russia and China, but geographically and economically, it lies outside the core maritime theaters that dominate U.S. force planning. This helps explain why Mongolia was visible during the late Trump-era expansion of Free and Open Indo-Pacific discourse and then faded from the core documents of the Biden period[25].

The year 2019 marked the high point of Mongolia's explicit visibility in U.S. Indo-Pacific discourse. Shortly after the release of the Pentagon's first *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited Mongolia and described it as an important partner for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. In the same year, the United States and Mongolia elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic

[19] "Американий Нэгдсэн Улсын Үндэсний Батлан Хамгаалах Стратеги - 2026," https://niss.gov.mn/en/ану-ын-үндэсний-батлан-хамгаалах-стра/
[20] The White House, "Unleashing American Energy," January 20, 2025.
[21] The White House, "America First Investment Policy," February 21, 2025.
[22] "Американий Нэгдсэн Улсын Үндэсний Батлан Хамгаалах Стратеги - 2026," https://niss.gov.mn/en/ану-ын-үндэсний-батлан-хамгаалах-стра/
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid
[25] Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren and Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "A Mongolian Perspective of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 648 (June 14, 2023), 2.

partnership[26]. The State Department's official declaration emphasized democratic values, sovereignty, and common strategic interests[27].

Yet visibility does not equal centrality. Later strategy documents under Biden gave Mongolia little or no significant attention. The reason is straightforward. U.S. planners rank Indo-Pacific partners according to strategic utility: treaty allies first, Southeast Asia and maritime chokepoints second, India as a balancing power, and then other partners according to their contribution to deterrence, logistics, intelligence, technology, or economic architecture. In that hierarchy, Mongolia, as a landlocked state with limited direct weight in maritime competition, occupies a peripheral position[28]. The realistic American strategy is to focus on Southeast Asia, strengthen ties with India, and rely on treaty alliances; in that setting, Mongolia is "a faraway destination with little geostrategic and economic significance" for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific regional architecture[29].

At the same time, Mongolia is not irrelevant. Its significance lies in niche roles. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has facilitated Mongolia's participation in wider regional political and security networks, and the Khaan Quest exercise has become a recognized venue for multinational peacekeeping-oriented interaction. Mongolia's democratic identity also carries symbolic value in a region increasingly shaped by authoritarian influence. Moreover, its "third neighbor" policy aligns naturally with the diversified external engagement that Washington prefers, even when Ulaanbaatar avoids explicit geopolitical alignment.

The constraints, however, are equally clear. Mongolia remains deeply dependent on Chinese markets, money, and infrastructure, and also vulnerable to Russian fuel and electricity supplies. This structural dependence explains why Mongolia is cautious about endorsing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific too explicitly, especially when the strategy is widely perceived as directed at limiting China's influence. Mongolia's strategy resembles that of many small states: not to be caught in the geopolitical competition of great powers.

Trump 2.0 is likely to sharpen both the opportunities and the limits of this situation. On the limiting side, Mongolia is even less likely to be prominently featured in major U.S. strategy documents if Washington becomes more selective about where it spends diplomatic and military attention. A strategy focused on homeland security, Western Hemisphere primacy, high-end deterrence in the maritime Indo-Pacific, and measurable allied burden-sharing will not prioritize symbolic outreach to peripheral partners for its own sake[30].

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[26] Ibid
[27] U.S. Department of State, "Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia," July 31, 2019.
[28] The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 10–18; Nyamtseren and Jargalsaikhan, "A Mongolian Perspective of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," 1.
[29] Ibid
[30] The White House, *National Security Strategy* (2025), 1–13.

On the opportunity side, a more transactional strategy can create openings for niche partners. Mongolia can still matter in at least several practical areas. First, defense diplomacy and peacekeeping remain low-cost and politically acceptable fields of cooperation. These forms of engagement do not require Mongolia to adopt a confrontational posture toward either China or Russia, yet they preserve interoperability, visibility, and strategic trust. Second, cyber cooperation and resilience are likely to gain importance as U.S. strategy increasingly values secure digital ecosystems and trusted technological networks. Third, critical minerals may become an area of practical interest, as Trump 2.0 connects resource security, industrial capacity, and supply chain resilience more directly to national power[31]. Fourth, Mongolia can remain useful as a venue and voice for regional dialogue, particularly because its neutrality gives it political room to convene and communicate across divides such as the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, the Ulaanbaatar process, and other initiatives. Finally, Mongolia's democratic credentials continue to matter even in a more interest-based U.S. foreign policy, because regime identity still carries symbolic and diplomatic weight.

## Conclusion

The evolution of U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific reveals continuity beneath apparent change. Across administrations, Washington has increasingly accepted that China is the central long-term competitor and that the Indo-Pacific will remain the decisive theater of geopolitical competition. The primary difference lies in the strategic method. Biden emphasized collective capacity, institutionalized partnerships, economic frameworks, and regional resilience. Trump 2.0 retains the anti-hegemonic objective but reorders priorities toward core national interests, homeland defense, Western Hemisphere primacy, economic nationalism, technology protection, and stricter burden-sharing.

For Mongolia, this means sober realism is more useful than inflated expectations. It is unlikely to become a central pillar of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy under Trump 2.0, just as it was not central under Biden. Its geography, market size, and military weight impose obvious limits. But those limits do not amount to irrelevance. Mongolia remains a credible democratic partner with utility in peacekeeping, defense diplomacy, cyber resilience, selected mineral cooperation, and regional dialogue. Its best course is neither to seek artificial prominence in great-power competition nor to retreat into passivity. Rather, it should deepen cooperation where doing so strengthens sovereignty and diversification, while preserving the neutrality required by its geopolitical environment.

In that sense, Mongolia and the United States may be moving toward a surprisingly compatible strategic logic. Trump 2.0 values selectivity, economy of effort, and concrete returns. Mongolia values flexibility, balance, and the avoidance of entrapment. Neither side is likely to romanticize the relationship. That may be precisely why it can endure.

[31] The White House, "Unleashing American Energy," January 20, 2025.

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