CHAPTER 10

Mongolia: Addressing the Risks and Promises of the Nuclear Age

Enkhsaikhan Jargalsaikhan

Introduction

Mongolia's Foreign Policy Challenges

In many respects, and certainly in foreign relations and diplomacy, Mongolian policies are affected above all by its geographical location and reflect the main events of a particular time period. In many cases, its policies can be understood as reactions to the events occurring in neighboring Russia and China, in their relations with each other as well as with other major powers. That is why Mongolia tries, within the limited possibilities and means at its disposal, and when circumstances allow, to play an active part in trying to influence events, either to avoid harm or to its advantage.

After the disintegration of the Mongol Empire, Mongolian tribes engaged in internecine wars, while Russia and China expanded their territories. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Mongolia found itself sandwiched and squeezed between the still aggressively expanding Russia and China. Isolated and with nowhere else to turn (in 1911–13 Mongols tried to gain support from the United States, Japan, and some other influential countries but without success) and mindful of China’s historical interest in absorbing its territory, Mongolia decided to seek Russia’s protection from the probable encroachments of China. This coincided with the period of revolutionary changes in Russia. Close relations with Soviet Russia took its toll. Mongolia had to toe the Soviet line in both its internal and foreign policies.

In the socialist period (1924–90), the notion of the nation's interest was supplanted by that of “class interest,” which in reality meant Soviet/Russian interest and virtual Soviet domination. This “class interest” transcended all domestic and foreign policy interests. Because of the “class” approach to all issues, including internal opposition to sovietization of Mongolian society, even national security came to be seen through the prism of “class interest” and “class struggle.” This approach divided Mongolian society into oppressed and oppressors. Hence, by the early 1930s the country was in a state of virtual civil war. This led to wave after wave of purges and repressions, and resulted
in the physical elimination of tens of thousands of Mongolians, especially the elites, the clergy, and independent-minded people. Thus, until 1990 Mongolian society was heavily under the influence of the Soviet Union, while its “class struggle” approach to foreign policy and virtual self-isolation hampered its ability to acquire friends and develop cooperation with other countries.

The end of World War II and establishment of pro-Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe, in China and the DPRK, were welcome developments for Mongolia since they to some extent reduced its isolation. However, it had to wait for 15 years to be admitted to the United Nations, which gradually reduced its ideological and political isolation. In the 1950s and 1960s Mongolia worked hard to overcome political isolation and develop normal relations with non-socialist countries. India was one of these to recognize Mongolia and establish diplomatic relations with it. The United Kingdom recognized Mongolia in 1963 and became the first Western country to establish diplomatic relations and open up its embassy. Establishment of the long-awaited diplomatic relations with the United States in 1987 signaled the end of Mongolia’s diplomatic and political isolation.

The next logical foreign policy goal was to promote mutually beneficial trade, economic and cultural relations with countries other than its neighbors or fellow socialist countries. This period coincided with the break-up of the Soviet bloc and disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. This in turn led to the fundamental reorientation of the country from socialist authoritarianism towards a democratic multiparty system and market economy. In foreign policy its priorities were to promote its own national interests as perceived and defined by Mongolians themselves and reflected in the new 1992 post-Cold War Constitution, and then in greater detail in three important policy-setting interrelated documents: the Concept of National Security of Mongolia, the Concept of Foreign Policy and the Fundamentals of the Military Doctrine of Mongolia. These documents, passed in 1994 by the State Great Khural (parliament) of Mongolia, set forth the following as the country’s foreign and security policy goals:

• Pursue a pragmatic, open, multi-track\(^1\) and multi-pillar\(^2\) foreign policy;
• Ensure a favorable external security environment primarily by political and legal means;

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\(^1\) Multi-track foreign policies are policies in political, economic, social, science and technology, cultural and other areas.

\(^2\) A multi-pillar policy is a Mongolian policy that gives priority to Mongolian relations with its immediate neighbors and the “third neighbors”. Other pillars are relations with the Asian countries, the United Nations and other international organizations, and other countries with which it had or has closer relations.