



MONGOLIA'S EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN- PAST SUCCESS, FUTURE STRATEGY





MONGOLIAN GEOPOLITICS #14

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ISBN 978-9919-9696-9-1

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Mongolia's Experience in Afghanistan- Past Success, Future Strategy

It is tough to imagine what the locals thought when Mongolian troops showed up in Afghanistan in 2003. Eight hundred years ago, Mongols led by Genghis Khan devastated the once-flourishing empire in today's Afghanistan. This time, however, the Mongolian contingent arrived in an already war-torn nation to protect and support peace. And this experience likely will have lasting defence and geopolitical impacts on Mongolia in the years to come.

Whether the overall outcome of war in Afghanistan has been positive or not is still has not been settled yet. But Mongolians have certainly punched above their weight in the past 18 years by contributing nearly 6,000 troops¹ to the protection and peace-support missions in Afghanistan. This level of sustained sizable commitment was propelled by Mongolia's eager desire to bolster its sovereignty by being an active member of the international community.

The experience of Mongolia in Afghanistan and in other global hotspots is possibly an example for the Western point of view of an effective partnership model that could be replicated elsewhere. With geopolitical instability and climate change risks increasingly becoming threats throughout the world, improved defence and peacekeeping capability of small nations, such as Mongolia, will significantly contribute to the rule-based international order. Mongolia's experience also has an added relevance due to its sustained democratic governance and inherent foreign policy constraints.

Back to Kabul

The tomb of Babur in Kabul, who was a Mughal emperor and Genghis

Khan descendant, reflects the complicated and intertwined relationship that Mongols and their descendants have had with Afghanistan: An inscription in the tomb says, "If there is a paradise on Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this!"²

Historians note that Genghis Khan and his descendants' armies obliterated the complex irrigation system that allowed Afghanistan to support its sizeable population as well as its advanced civilization up until the thirteenth century. The human cost of these campaigns devastated the entire region, which eventually became part of the Chagatai Khanate—ruled by Genghis Khan's second son, Chagatai Khan. But one must also not forget that both Tamerlane, who held the Genghis lineage through marriage, and his great-great grandson Babur sought to unify and revive the region under one powerful ruler in the sixteenth century.

The second time Mongolians returned to Afghanistan was in 1978, when the Soviets aggressively pushed their agenda and rallied all the communist countries³ to open up their embassies in Kabul. From 1978 to 1992,⁴ the then Mongolian People's Republic maintained an embassy at the upscale Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood in northern Kabul, where until only recently the American, Canadian and German embassies were also located.⁵ When civil war broke out in the country in 1992, the Mongolian Embassy closed. Russian paratroopers reportedly evacuated embassy staff from Kabul. The situation must have been similar to what the world witnessed on news channels in late summer 2021.

Although the Mongolian Embassy was maintained mostly to show

communist solidarity with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, attempts were made by the Mongolian side to share their experience of “bypassing capitalism”—from feudalism straight to communism and defying the Marxist trajectory of historical development. The bilateral relations of the two countries culminated in 1982 with the visit to Mongolia by communist Afghan leader Babrak Karmal and the infamous intelligence chief, Assadullah Sarwari, serving as an ambassador to Mongolia for six years. By the early 1990s, these visits had become only curious footnotes in the diplomatic annals of the two countries.

Then came war in Afghanistan. In 2003, two years after the American invasion of Afghanistan and fresh out of a hugely successful partnership with the United States and Polish troops in the Iraq war, Mongolia sent two teams of instructors to train the Afghan National Army artillery unit. This marked the beginning of the Mongolian presence in Afghanistan for the third time in 800 years. Highly proficient with Soviet weapons, the Mongolian Armed Forces instructors were eventually invited again to train the Afghan National Army on the maintenance of their Soviet-made combat helicopters.

After proving that they are reliable partners, the Mongolian troops were requested to perform force-protection duties in various hotspots in Afghanistan. The Mongolian contingent, comprising one to three company-sized deployments at any given moment, ended its mission participation in June 2021, together with most of the NATO forces—just a month or two before the complete American pull-out in August.

When the Mongolian contingent arrived in Kabul in 2003, they certainly did not find the paradise that their ancestor Babur had described.

What they did find instead was a war-torn dilapidated country that had lived through two decades of continuous devastation, first waged by the Soviets and later by the Taliban. The Mongolian contingent's mission was to help rebuild the country into a peaceful and prosperous nation, together with the United States and NATO forces.

Foreign policy by other means

It is easy to conclude that both during the Soviet and American invasions, Mongolia found itself in Afghanistan as a result of prevailing geopolitical gravitational pulls. But a more careful look reveals that Mongolia, a landlocked democratic country wedged between the Russia and China, wilfully sent its troops to Afghanistan to carve out breathing space for itself by becoming an indispensable and reliable partner in international peacekeeping and peace support missions.

First coined by the United States Secretary of State James Baker during his visit to Mongolia in 1991, the Mongolian "third-neighbour policy" attempts to balance its two immediate neighbours' interests by forging close relations with advanced democracies around the world. Although the policy has its natural limitations, so far it has proven its versatility by ensuring the successful development of Mongolia's democracy in the past 30 years amid an authoritarian neighbourhood.

One of the cornerstones of the third-neighbour policy has been the increase of Mongolia's defence and peacekeeping capabilities. Now-retired Lieutenant General Molomjamts Luvsangombo once remarked that in a "direct sense, Mongolia neither has sufficient capability to protect itself nor to threaten others".⁶ This means Mongolia's in-

creased defence capabilities would not amount to any threat to its two neighbours—countries that are consistently among the top five in the world in terms of military spending. Instead, as the current Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Ganzorig Dovchinsuren, wrote in 2012, “using military as a public diplomacy vehicle is useful for Mongolia in order to strengthen its position in international affairs.”⁷

The reputation and goodwill that thousands of Mongolian troops have earned by serving in the most dangerous hotspots around the world enhance the country's reputation abroad and create invaluable foreign and economic policy leverage. It is not coincidence that the fact sheet⁸ on the bilateral relationship released by the White House stated the following two items on the same page: that Mongolian troops fought “side by side with American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan” and that Mongolia signed a \$350 million infrastructure grant with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an American foreign aid agency.

Because the Mongolian Armed Forces do not pose any threat to its immediate neighbours and by assuring Russia and China that its increased defence capabilities have only foreign policy aims, Mongolia managed to become a significant troop contributor to the war in Afghanistan and other United Nations missions throughout the world. Akin to the geopolitical strategies of small nations like Singapore, Mongolia strives to ensure its sovereignty by becoming indispensable to the international community. Unless Mongolia faces significant geopolitical or defence capability curtailment, this strategy will likely continue in the future.

A partnership model

Mongolia's experience in Afghanistan could serve as a model for Western nations to forge an effective defence partnership with small nations. Because the United States and other Western nations are increasingly trying to create a free and open Indo-Pacific region, success stories of countries such as Mongolia are crucial. In a recently declassified document that outlined the American strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific region, the National Security Council highlighted that the United States will "engage South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Japan and other regional democratic partners to demonstrate their own successes and the benefits they have accrued".⁹ In view of the American and NATO failure to reform the Afghan National Army, perhaps lessons should be learned from the Mongolian Armed Forces' successful 18 years of operations in Afghanistan without a single casualty.

One of the most important propellers of this successful defence partnership has been mutual political will. From the outset, Mongolian politicians created strong consensus on sending troops abroad to create leverage for the country's foreign policy. It made sense for the United States to support the ambitions of a newly democratic nation that was trying to bolster its peacekeeping and peace support capabilities. The fact that American ambassadors made sure to be present at the farewell ceremony of the troops departing to Afghanistan and that Mongolian presidents personally awarded medals to the troops who successfully completed their mission is a testament to the sustained political will from both sides.

Another reason that has increased the effectiveness of the American defence training and assistance in Mongolia is its strong military heri-

tage. Even though the last time that the Mongolian army had engaged in large-scale combat was in 1945, Mongolia has maintained military conscription to this day. Similar to Israel and Singapore, all eligible Mongolian males are required by the Constitution to serve either in the armed forces or in border defence.

Harsh discipline and training regimes are enforced among the enlisted, non-commissioned and commissioned officers with the belief that all military personnel are carrying on the military legacy of Genghis Khan. This is an environment vastly conducive to building defence capabilities. Any investment and training will yield far higher results in Mongolia than in many other countries. Leveraging the common unifying myth or ideal could perhaps be the most underrated requisite for building an effective army.

The foundation of this successful approach could be summed up with the assertion that if both sides can do less than they pretend, they can do much more than they fear. When it comes to the Afghan army, for example, both the American and Afghan sides pretended to accomplish a great deal. However, when it came to the actual defence of the country, all the efforts to build the Afghan army over the past 18 years vanished in a matter of days.

The American approach towards Mongolia has been much more practical, and they never pretended to accomplish grand goals. Instead, their focus was to build up the specific peacekeeping capabilities that would help Mongolia to accomplish specific missions. As a result, the United States has done much more than they had initially thought possible in Mongolia.

Mongolia after Afghanistan

What does the 18 years of experience in Afghanistan mean for Mongolia? On top of the mission experiences and the contribution to peace in Afghanistan, this almost two decades of deployment will have immense foreign policy implications on Mongolia—perhaps much more than many people currently realize.

A consensus that emerged long before the American pull-out from Afghanistan is that democracy-building in many parts of the world is a futile if not dangerous goal. Yet, it is also true that the world cannot turn a blind eye to oppressions by authoritarian governments against their own people. As many foreign experts and policymakers have repeatedly pointed out, what is remarkable about Mongolia is that the country has managed to successfully consolidate democracy in an infamously authoritarian neighbourhood. Mongolian democracy inarguably has its own issues, but Mongolia has managed to develop its own unique way over the past 30 years.

In the future, there is a possibility for Mongolia to leverage its successful experiences of participation in missions in Afghanistan and building democracy. Mongolia's lessons from successfully overcoming its challenges when building democratic institutions could be more applicable and relatable to fledgling democracies around the world. Democracy promotion might be more effective if supported by newer than by mature democracies.

For Mongolia, the country might be more ready than ever to engage in such a mission after Afghanistan. Mongolian troops are now deployed

only to South Sudan. Nearly 1,000 troops served in Afghanistan at any given moment in the past, which means at least that many troops can be ready to be deployed to anywhere in the world.

The experience in Afghanistan has given Mongolian troops an ability to operate together with many United Nations troops from contributing nations as well as NATO troops. If the Western nations are willing to provide more diplomatic leverage to Mongolia's third-neighbour policy, the available capacity in the country seems to suggest that it is ready to jump on the opportunity.

Even though Mongolian troops have left Afghanistan, one place where Mongolia is increasingly likely to continue to engage with Afghanistan is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Both Mongolia and Afghanistan have been observer States in the SCO for numerous years. Their possible accession to the SCO as full members is strongly speculated among analysts.

Yet, there seems to be many geopolitical forces in place that are preventing the two countries from becoming fully pledged members. As a country that is surrounded by SCO member countries, Mongolia has successfully staved off full membership proposals since 2004. Except Turkmenistan and Iran, which have non-membership and observer country status, respectively, the remaining four neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are already members of the SCO. Within this context, Mongolia might be a useful case study for the new Afghan rulers should they choose to chart their own independent path within the SCO.

Due to its inherent foreign policy constraints dictated by its size, it is unlikely that Mongolia will undertake any active foreign policy directly towards Afghanistan. However, within the framework of democracy promotion and the SCO, Mongolia could take on an important and pertinent role in the stabilizing efforts in Afghanistan. For policymakers in Washington and Brussels, this is a crucial fact that should not be ignored. Despite its size, Mongolia has the potential to continue punching above its weight.

About the Author:

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Endnotes

- 1 Over the past 18 years, Mongolia sent around 6,000 troops to peace-support missions in Afghanistan—more than 3,300 of them served with American troops, and more than 2,600 of them were deployed to missions with German troops. See <https://niss.gov.mn/archives/2304>.
- 2 Sandy Gall, *War Against the Taliban: Why It All Went Wrong in Afghanistan*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 165.
- 3 Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, “The organization of the communist camp, *World Politics*, vol. 2, No. 13 (1961), pp. 175–209.
- 4 Montsame, “Non-Resident Ambassadors have Presented their Credentials”, 3 April 2018. Available at www.montsame.mn/cn/read/85599.
- 5 It is said that legally, Mongolia still owns the old embassy building in Kabul under the then-address Wazir Akbar Khan Mena, Sarak T. House 8714, Kabul. Information on the state of the building today is scarce.
- 6 Ganzorig Dovchinsuren, *Mongolia’s Third Neighbour Policy: Impact on the Mongolian Armed Forces* (US Army War College, 2012). Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA561642.pdf>.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 United States White House, “President Donald J. Trump is expanding our partnership with Mongolia”, 31 July 2019. Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-expanding-partnership-mongolia/>.
- 9 United States White House, “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific”, January 2021. Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

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