

STRATEGIC PARTNERS OF MONGOLIA





MONGOLIAN GEOPOLITICS #23

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Mongolia has declared comprehensive strategic partnerships with China and Russia and strategic partnerships with Japan, India, the United States and South Korea. Mongolian foreign policy experts have been advocating with their counterparts in Germany and Turkey to advance the respective bilateral relationship from the current comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership. There is no standard definition of a strategic partnership and no consensus on what it entails or how it should proceed. Some strategic partnerships, for instance with India, South Korea and the United States, appear to be set in a non-binding declaratory statement. Other strategic partnerships, such as with China and Japan, are declared in what looks like a long-term strategic planning document with a consultative mechanism for a regular update and mid-term implementation plans. The partnership with Russia, however, is a binding treaty.

For this paper, we define the strategic partnership as what is reflected in a declarative statement by two countries to identify their common interests at the global and regional levels and to indicate their mutual interest in committing to a long-term bilateral relationship in agreed areas of cooperation. For small, vulnerable States like Mongolia, a strategic partnership can be regarded as important political recognition of its independent, sovereign statehood by large States and also a method for advancing its interests and priorities in bilateral relations with these States. Therefore, a strategic partnership document is the result of the compromise of two countries' interests and/or expected behaviour towards each other.

This paper introduces Mongolia's strategic partners briefly, discusses Mongolia's categorization of each partnership, compares those strategic partnerships, examines how they reflect the defence cooperation and concludes with thoughts on future candidates (Germany, Turkey and Vietnam) for strategic partnership.

Mongolia's strategic partners

Russia – The intention for the strategic partnership was declared during the 2006 visit of Mongolian President Enkhbayar Nambar. At the 70th celebration of the Khalkhyn Gol Battle in 2009, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Mongolian President Elbegdorj Tsakhia declared a strategic partnership. However, the actual declaration document vaguely described the areas of that strategic partnership. A decade later, at the 80th anniversary of the same battle in September 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mongolian President Battulga Khaltmaa jointly declared a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership and signed a draft of a lengthy treaty that would replace the 1993 treaty, while invoking the 1966 treaty (without the mutual defence clause).¹ The Russian side apparently imposed the parliamentary ratification of the permanent treaty prior to the Mongolian prime minister's overdue visit to Moscow in December 2019. The Russian legislature ratified the treaty in the summer of 2020, and both foreign ministers exchanged the completed treaty in Moscow in September 2020.² The permanent treaty prioritizes bilateral consultations, renews traditional bilateral ties that include the energy sector, mining, infrastructure and defence technical cooperation and even requires Mongolia's adherence to the 1,520 mm (Russian standard railway gauge) for the railway extension.

China – In 2003, China and Mongolia declared a good-neighbour, mutually trusting partnership. Then, during the Mongolian prime minister's visit in 2011, both countries agreed to upgrade their bilateral relationship to the level of strategic partnership.³ In addition to respect of basic principles of sovereignty, three important commitments were highlighted: (i) not to join any military and political alliance and not let a third party use respective

territory against the other party; (ii) support the Chinese government's positions on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang-related matters; and (iii) regularize high-level talks and visits.

In 2013, both governments concluded mid- and long-term plans for developing the strategic partnership.⁴ The plan was overwhelmed with activities related to economic and trade cooperation as well as people-to-people exchanges. Soon after, in 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared to President Elbegdorj Tsakhia during his visit to Ulaanbaatar the intent to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with Mongolia. Despite a name change, the content of the previous declaration did not shift except for the establishment of a Strategic Dialogue Mechanism between the two Foreign Ministries.

Japan – The relationship between Mongolia and Japan has rapidly expanded since the Mongolian democratic revolution in 1990 and the withdrawal of the Soviet military. Initial discussions on the goal of establishing a comprehensive partnership between the two countries took place in 1996, which was officially declared in 1998. Both sides agreed to advance the comprehensive partnership to the strategic level within a decade, which was officially declared during the visit of Mongolian President Elbegdorj Tsakhia to Japan in November 2010. The strategic partnership emphasizes enhancing mutually beneficial relations in the following aspects: (i) cooperation in politics and security; (ii) cooperation in economic areas; and (iii) cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

From 2013, the leaders of the two countries agreed to develop a five-year mid-term action plan to give substance to the strategic partnership. The first five-year plan, Mid-Term Action Plan for a Strategic Partnership

(2017–2021), was concluded during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Mongolia.⁵ The 2017–2021 Mid-Term Action Plan was signed during the Japanese Foreign Minister's visit in March 2017.⁶ However, more focus has since been given to implement a bilateral free trade agreement.

India – Although Mongolia and India share a long historical, spiritual and cultural bond, the main legal document for the relationship between the two countries, a Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation, was signed in February 1994 during Mongolian President's visit to India.⁷ The bilateral relationship between the two countries was upgraded to the level of strategic partnership in 2015 during the state visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Mongolia on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the bilateral relationship. The strategic partnership emphasizes political and multilateral cooperation as well as people-to-people relations, the economy and trade, defence and security, and science and technology.⁸ In 2019, one of the highlights of the strategic partnership—the Indian investment to construct an oil refinery project—was finalized.⁹ India agreed to provide a large line of credit (US\$1.2 billion) for the construction of an oil refinery plant that would be capable of producing 1.5 million metric tonnes crude oil per year (equivalent to 75 per cent of domestic consumption).¹⁰ This is the largest investment in India's extended neighbourhood.

United States – In 1990, the United States became one of the most important relationships to help Mongolia overcome the challenges of the political and economic transitions and to gain international support from its allies in Asia and Europe. The first presidential level of joint statement of comprehensive partnership occurred during Mongolian President Bagabandi Natsag's visit to the United States in 2004. A year later, the statement was reiterated by then-US President George Bush during his visit to Mon-

golia. The essence of this partnership, as declared by both governments, is common strategic interests for regional and global peace and stability. Shared values of democracy and human rights were reiterated in later joint statements.¹¹ Despite Mongolia's constant request for upgrading the bilateral relationship and establishing free trade agreements, the United States has only agreed to develop a road map (Joint Statement and Roadmap for Expanded Economic Partnership), in 2018.¹² As the United States began to push its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, however, the Trump administration declared (in July 2019) a strategic partnership with Mongolia covering all areas of cooperation.¹³

South Korea – On 10 September 2021, Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa and South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared a strategic partnership, which is the first-ever such arrangement declared virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Albeit a late start in bilateral relations, South Korea has evolved as Mongolia's key trading partner in East Asia in terms of investment, imports and technology. The cultural and people-to-people ties with South Korea are stronger than with any other East Asian State. Some 40,000–50,000 Mongolians live in South Korea, while the number of South Korean citizens living in Mongolia ranks third after the Chinese and Russians.¹⁴ Because of the geographic proximity, the number of South Korean tourists and businesses in Mongolia has steadily grown since establishment of the bilateral relationship. The two countries' partnership has advanced through several stages, which also tie to the foreign policy initiatives of both presidents. In 1999, the two countries declared to develop a future-oriented complementary partnership, then a good neighbourly and friendly cooperative partnership in support of Mongolia's third neighbour policy in 2006 and a comprehensive partnership in 2011. The new strategic partnership declaration promotes bilateral ties in five areas

(politics and security; the economy, trade and investment; health, the environment, education and science; culture, tourism and people-to-people exchange; and international and regional cooperation). It is similar to the strategic partnership with Japan in that it emphasizes economic cooperation.¹⁵

Mongolia's categorization of the partnerships

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia, partnerships are classified into four categories: (i) initial partnership, (ii) extended or expanded partnership, (iii) comprehensive and (iv) strategic.¹⁶ The initial partnership is characterized with regular political interactions, establishment of trade and economic ties and increased exchanges in education, science, culture and humanitarian areas of cooperation. In simple terms, the partnership is one step deeper than normal bilateral recognition. The next category of partnership is extended or expanded partnership. In this stage, the political interaction reaches a slightly higher level and has some potential for deepening economic cooperation in specific sectors. Exchanges in education, science, culture and humanitarian areas are regularized and show potential to grow. Both sides begin to look for ways to expand bilateral cooperation in all areas of cooperation. The major difference of this category from the comprehensive partnership is that both countries have vested interests in particular sectors. For example, Mongolia established an extended partnership with Canada in 2004 and with Australia and Kazakhstan in 2007.

The second-highest category is comprehensive partnership. The key features are high-level political cooperation; conclusion of contracts and agreements for trade and investment; and increased cooperation in areas

of education, science, technology, culture, health and other humanitarian fields. Both sides begin to promote defence exchanges (information, training and education). Because both countries are developing bilateral ties in all areas of cooperation (political, economic, defence and cultural), the category is labelled as a comprehensive partnership. As noted, Mongolia established a comprehensive partnership with the United States in 2004, with Turkey in 2005, with Germany in 2008, with India in 2009 and with South Korea in 2011.

The highest level of bilateral relations is the strategic partnership, which declares the intention of developing a long-term, stable relationship. The following are some essential features:

- increased high-level political trust and visits;
- a regular consultative mechanism for international and regional issues;
- mutual investment agreements and free trade agreements;
- military and technical assistance, education and training;
- strong ties in humanitarian and social sectors, especially culture, education and health;
- mutual assistance during a disaster and mitigation of disaster impacts; and
- joint participation in United Nations and international peace support operations.

The strategic partnership categorization is a pragmatic assessment that is based on an evaluation of Mongolia's bilateral relations from the 1990s. Interestingly, China and Russia upgraded their respective strategic partnership with Mongolia to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Neither Mongolia nor those neighbours have sufficiently explained what the com-

prehensive strategic partnership means or how it differs from a strategic partnership.

Bold Ravdan, a respected diplomat and scholar in security studies, points out that the strategic partnership can be explained in correlation to the degree of trust, desire of long-term stable relations and avoidance of being interpreted as an alliance that it represents.¹⁷ He divides the strategic partnerships into three categories: (i) strategic partner relationship and cooperation, in which countries collaborate at the alliance level; (ii) strategic partner relationship, in which countries seek some type of limited collaboration and coordination; and (iii) strategic partnership, in which countries exchange information only to avoid misperception and misunderstanding.

Comparison of Mongolia's strategic partnerships

Mongolia's strategic partnerships with the major powers are not unique. They are also driven by the foreign policy objectives of those major powers. India, for instance, declared strategic partnerships with Russia (2000), China (2005), Japan (2005) and the United States (2015). China has been successfully promoting strategic partnerships all over the world. In Central, Northeast and Southeast Asia, China established strategic partnerships with South Korea (2008), Vietnam (2008), Lao People's Democratic Republic (2009) and Central Asia: Kazakhstan (2005), Uzbekistan (2012) and Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic (2013). In 2011, China upgraded its partnership with Kazakhstan and Russia to a comprehensive strategic partnership. In 2019, when Russia elevated its strategic partnership with Mongolia to a permanent and comprehensive strategic partnership, China made a similar move with Kazakhstan.

As shown in table 1, we can make some interesting observations of these partnerships. The timing of Mongolia's strategic partnerships with Russia, China and Japan occurred in a similar period. India's strategic partnership was concluded in 2015, just after China upgraded its relationship with Mongolia to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014. The United States' declaration of strategic partnership occurred amid the Trump administration's trade war with China. Russia's upgrade could be perceived as a response to China's upgrade and the American declaration of partnership with Mongolia.

The prioritization of bilateral issues is different. In the declaration with China and Russia, bilateral issues are given higher priority than cooperation at the multilateral organization level. With India, Japan and the United States, multilateral cooperation is prioritized above the bilateral issues. In regard to specific concerns of these major powers, Russia wants to assert its influence over issues with geostrategic importance, such as defence, energy and railways. China desires Mongolia to uphold its policies concerning Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. At the same time, China requires Mongolia's assurance of non-alliance in military and political terms. Japan's emphasis appears to be Mongolia's economic development, especially the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's policies in the mid-term.

Similarly, South Korea prioritizes economic cooperation with Mongolia and, at the same time, looks at Mongolia as an important country for its dealings with North Korea and a strategy to reach out to Central Asia and Russia (known as the New Northern Policy). In contrast, the United States prioritizes Mongolia's commitment towards democracy and rule of law as a basis for the partnership.

India’s partnership with Mongolia highlights international cooperation as well as collaboration against terrorism while listing all possible areas of cooperation despite the challenges of geographic distance. Interestingly, the strategic partnership documents with India, Japan and the United States consider Mongolia a part of their new Indo–Pacific while Russia and China, on the other hand, emphasizes collaboration through its regionalization efforts, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Table 1. Comparison of the strategic partnerships

	Russia	China	Japan	India	United States	South Korea
Years	Strategic partnership (2009) Comprehensive strategic partnership (2019)	Strategic partnership (2011) Comprehensive strategic partnership (2014)	2010	2015	2018	2021
Issue area ranking	Political Defence & security Economy Cultural exchange Multilateral Cooperation	Political Defence & security Economy Cultural exchange Multilateral Cooperation	Political Multilateral Cooperation Economy Cultural exchange	Multilateral cooperation Defence & security Economy Cultural exchange	Democracy Security Economy Cultural exchange	Political Economy Health, environment & education Cultural exchange International & regional cooperation
Specifics	Traditional relations (alliance)	No political & military alliance	Indo–Pacific	Indo–Pacific	Indo–Pacific	Korean Peninsula Northeast Asia
Core	Protect Russian geostrategic interests	Uphold One China policy (Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet)	Economic development (IMF policy implementation)	Terrorism Geopolitics	Democracy	Economic cooperation

Reflection of defence cooperation in the strategic partnership documents

Mongolia's defence cooperation with its strategic partners expanded through reciprocal visits of high- and mid-level defence officials in the recent years. Defence talks and consultative and joint working group meetings between the Ministries of Defence have become regular. Cooperation in the fields of bilateral and multilateral military exercises, military education and training as well as military grant and assistance noticeably have increased, although these areas are not equally worded in the strategic partnership documents (table 2).

Under the bilateral defence cooperation, the Mongolian Ministry of Defence established military and technical cooperation with five countries: Belarus, China, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine. In Mongolia's case, this cooperation is highly regarded and permits opportunities for receiving military weaponry and equipment while promoting all types of defence exchanges. In this context, Mongolia has prioritized such cooperation with Russia mostly because it had received much technical assistance from the Soviet Union before the 1990s. Even after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, Mongolia remained largely dependent on the military and technical assistance from Russia, and it is likely to continue. Further development of military and technical cooperation with other countries, especially with the third neighbours, may challenge Mongolia due to its geopolitical specifics.

Jointly with its strategic partners, Mongolia organizes bilateral and multilateral exercises for peacekeeping and anti-terrorism that respond to the interests of all parties. They entail: the Russia and Mongolia bilateral and annual Selenge Exercise (since 2008); the Chinese People's Liberation

Army and Mongolian Armed Forces Peacekeeping Exercise (since 2009); Japan and Mongolia capacity-building, road construction and engineering programme (since 2012); and the India and Mongolia Nomadic Elephant Exercise (since 2004). The peacekeeping exercise, Khaan Quest, has been annually co-hosted by Mongolia and the United States since 2003 and serves to reiterate the importance of peacekeeping exercises and demonstrate the partners' desire to support Mongolia for the purpose of expanding mutual understanding and trust among the militaries that participate.

Overall, Mongolia's defence cooperation is equally developed with the strategic partners to increase defence visits, consultative mechanisms, military and technical assistance, professional military education and training and the exercises. Russia and China, Mongolia's immediate neighbours, desire a defence cooperation focused on close bilateral relations, while India, Japan, the United States and South Korea prefer more inclusive cooperation that promotes regional collaboration.

Table 2. Reflection of defence in the strategic partnership documents

Russia	China	Japan	India	United States	South Korea
Military & technical cooperation	Military and technical cooperation	Defence talks	Defence talks	Peacekeeping	Defence talks
Military exercises	Military exercises	Exercises (engineering)	Exercise in India Exercise in Mongolia	Disaster preparedness, relief operations	Military exercises
Education	Education	Education	Military grant	Education	Education

Concluding thoughts

The strategic partnership is an interesting phenomenon in contemporary international relations. Based on Mongolia's strategic partners and relat-

ed partnership documents (joint statements, declarations, action plans and a treaty), it appears to be quite a fluid, flexible concept. Each partnership agreement is a result of compromise of differing interests and expectations of behaviour towards each other. However, both States in a partnership appear to have shared interests and expectations of long-term, stable bilateral relations.

An interesting future research angle for the strategic partnership would be a comparison of the major powers' understanding and categorization of their strategic partnerships. An important question here is how these powers, such as China, Russia, the United States, India and Japan, rank different types of partnerships by content, scope and timing. Although the major powers use the same strategic partnership concept for their close relationship, they assign different priorities, values and trust depending on the country's importance, power, capabilities and historical ties. This is certainly the case with Mongolia.

It is clear that Mongolia will develop strategic partnership with all important countries in the coming years. There are three potential strategic partners in this regard: The first is Germany. It is a key partner in Europe, with ties dating to the 1930s. Germany had an important role with Mongolia during the harsh economic transitions in the 1990s, in helping to strengthen its democratic institutions and develop partnerships with the European Union and with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Another candidate is Turkey. Based on growing bilateral ties and cultural links, Turkey is regarded as a third neighbour and, for Mongolians, as a gateway to the world, especially to Europe. The strategic partnership with Turkey would provide more opportunities to collaborate through the mul-

tilateral forums (United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and NATO) and expand bilateral ties in all areas of cooperation.

The other potential candidate is Vietnam. Both countries have maintained a close tie since 1954 in all areas of cooperation, especially trade and cultural and educational exchanges. Vietnam is one of Mongolia's strong supporters at the ASEAN Regional Forum and is a gateway to the South-east Asian market.

All three countries maintain embassies in Ulaanbaatar, collaborate within international and regional organizations and share concerns with Mongolia regarding its great power neighbours. Strategic partnerships, especially a comprehensive strategic partnership, with these countries would ameliorate Mongolia's permanent concerns about Chinese and Russian pressures.

Endnotes

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