



# **MONGOLIA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: A BALANCING ACT WITH CENTRAL AND NORTHEAST ASIA**







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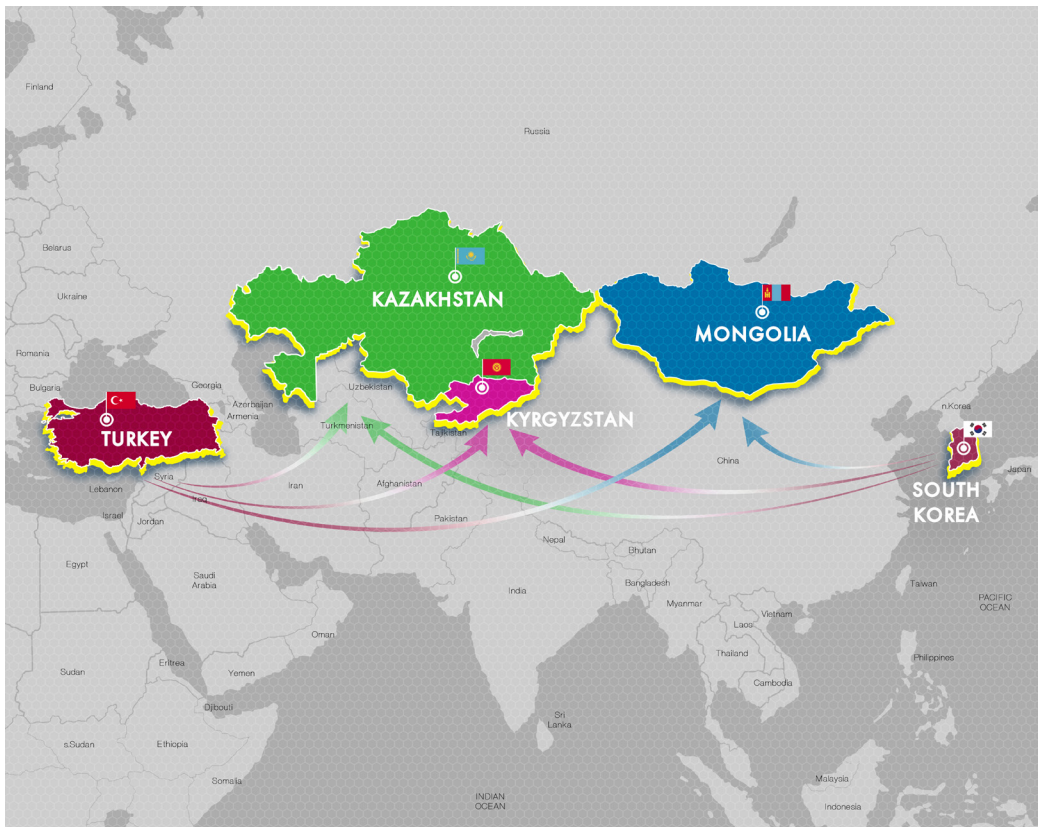
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### **Introduction**

As with many other countries, Mongolia's leaders and diplomats are grappling with foreign policy strategy in these complicated times. Russia, to the north, is engaging in geopolitical competition with the United States and its European allies over the sphere of influence in Ukraine. It is now far from a military operation: It has evolved into a costly war with uncertainty to its duration, scale and consequences. And while providing extensive support to Ukraine's war effort and strengthening its alliance in Europe, the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region are balancing against rising China, which is Mongolia's southern neighbour. Luckily, Russia and China are not at a war. That means Mongolian leaders do not have to be wary of balancing between the neighbouring great powers. Instead, they are worrying about the ongoing geopolitical competition between Russia and the West as well as the growing tensions between China and the United States. As these geopolitical competitions intensify, the role of international organizations, such as the United Nations, appears to be weakening to prevent and resolve conflicts. This is further complicating Mongolia's security and foreign policy strategies and manoeuvres.

In this paper, we argue that Mongolia should not abandon its multilateral diplomacy, which includes its Third Neighbour Policy. It should, however, initiate a new soft-balancing strategy with Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, both of which are experiencing similar foreign policy challenges.<sup>1</sup> This soft-balancing strategy should be projected as a partnership linking Turkey and South Korea through the core of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, building on their centuries-long heritage and new statehood. This paper explains Mongolia's overarching geopolitical setting, discusses three innovative multilateral policies and suggests the pursuit of a new strategy linking the two regions.



Mongolia’s geopolitical setting

Mongolia operates in two distinctive geopolitical settings: One is regional and shaped by interests and actions of two great powers, Russia to the north and China to the south. The other is the overarching international setting, where Mongolia has limited connections and capabilities to influence.

Mongolia is an isolated and vulnerable State. Its relationship with and the balance of power between China and Russia are of utmost importance for Mongolia’s security and foreign policy calculations and even the survival of its independent statehood. This geopolitical structure can lead to several scenarios (see the table). Mongolia has experienced each situation at some time in its history and would do well to avoid repeating some of them.

Scenarios for Mongolia’s balancing behaviour

Condition	Impact	Balancing requirement
Friendly neighbours	Favourable	Military neutrality
Distracted neighbours	Favourable	Military neutrality
Conflictual neighbours	Unfavourable	Pressure to balance
Unstable neighbours	Unfavourable	Need to balance
Neighbours conflict with distant great powers	Complicated	Pressure to balance

The most favourable condition for Mongolia is when both great powers have peaceful relations with each other or are distracted by events elsewhere and/or are caught up with their own domestic problems. In these conditions, Mongolia’s security and defence neutrality is very important for both Russia and China. Any attempts by either Russia or China to strengthen security ties with Mongolia (such as through the provision of a weapons system or by joining an alliance) would trigger a security con-



cern for the other power. Therefore, both neighbours commit to keeping Mongolia militarily neutral.

The most dangerous scenario is when Russia and China increase their hostility against each other. In this situation, either neighbour pressures Mongolia to balance against the other neighbour. Because of Mongolia's strategic culture and recent memories of colonial history, it is more likely to side with Russia-unless Russia threatens to take over militarily.

Another difficult scenario is domestic instability in either neighbour or, in the worst case, domestic instability in both great powers. This situation would easily overwhelm Mongolia's border security and make trading with and through both neighbouring countries difficult. If the instability occurs in one neighbour, Mongolia needs to work with the other to prevent humanitarian disasters, protect its borders and maintain law and order.

The final complicated scenario is when one of Mongolia's neighbours or both enter geopolitical competition and eventually engage in armed conflict elsewhere. In this situation, Mongolia's relations with the distant great powers would be complicated, if not impossible. Inevitably, Mongolia would be pressured to side with one or both neighbours against the distant great power. Resisting its neighbours' pressure is hard because both neighbours hold strong political, economic and even military leverage over Mongolia.

In the beginning of the previous century, Mongolia was devastated by its *unstable neighbours*. To the north, Russia experienced revolutions, civil war and the First World War, from 1905 until the mid-1930s. From 1900 to 1949, China likewise was overwhelmed with revolutions, civil wars and



the Second World War. Political instability on the domestic front for both neighbours had devastating consequences for Mongolia, which sat at the crossroads between the belligerent militaries, warlords and bandits.

In the periods of the 1930s–1940s and the 1960s–1980s, Mongolia sided with the Soviet Union. In the first period and despite Mongolian leaders' resistance to being dragged into the geopolitical competition between Japan and the Soviet Union, the Soviet leaders conducted a massive purge against Mongolian leaders and imposed a mutual defence agreement that resulted in the Soviet military deploying into Mongolia and taking control of Mongolia's politics.<sup>2</sup> As a result, however, Mongolia was the only East Asian State to escape Japanese colonial war and gained de facto independence from China, recognized through the Yalta Agreement.

In the second period, Mongolia became caught up in the competition between its *conflictual neighbours*. This time, pro-Soviet Mongolia leaders welcomed the Soviet military deployments, which strengthened the country's defence capabilities. Mongolia sought extensive developmental aid from the Soviet Union as well as the Socialist Bloc countries.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Mongolia was pressured to balance against the United States and its allies within the international system. Because Mongolia was not directly threatened by the United States and its allies, it was interpreted as a soft balancing against the Western world, even though the Mongolian political leaders were looking to develop ties with countries beyond the immediate neighbours. In other words, Mongolia was forced to take a position against its priorities.

Following the Sino-Soviet rapprochement, Mongolia entered a period of living with *distracted neighbours*, from 1990 to 2000, when Russia and



China were intertwined with their domestic and foreign policy challenges elsewhere. This required that Moscow and Beijing keep their strategic rear (Mongolia and Central Asia) as peaceful and neutral as possible.

Building on this peaceful period as *friendly neighbours*, Russia and China gradually upgraded their amicable relations with Mongolia to a strategic partnership, which continues to this day. Except for Russia's move to conclude the Permanent Comprehensive Partnership Treaty with Mongolia to secure its traditional geopolitical interests, neither Moscow nor Beijing has pressured Mongolia to side against each other.

Now, as the United States, a distant great power, intensifies its geopolitical competition with Russia over the war in Ukraine, Mongolia is yet again confronted with another difficult moment. On one hand, the United States requires Mongolia to soft balance against Russia. On the other hand, Russia is pressuring Mongolia to maintain loyalties as it did during the Second World War and the Cold War.

But the current situation looms far worse for Mongolia, with the prospect of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region intensifying their containment strategy against China. Even though Mongolia is not caught up in the middle like many Southeast Asian States, it eventually will be pressured by China and the United States or Japan to take a side.

### **Innovative multilateral policies in support of soft balancing**

In the Mongolian case, building up its defence capabilities to deter any aggression from either neighbour (internal balancing) is economically costly and unsustainable. And any attempt at external balancing, such as joining a military alliance, is not possible due to the current *friendly neighbours*



situation. Getting closer to Russia militarily or welcoming the Russian military into Mongolia's territory would quickly trigger security concerns among Chinese military planners, and the opposite would be true with the Russian military planners. The provision of a security guarantee for Mongolia, such as concluding an alliance treaty or sending military hardware, would be politically unsupportive in Western capitals or even in Ulaanbaatar. Western leaders and governments will want to avoid any unnecessary military conflict with either Russia or China over Mongolia. Similarly, Mongolian leaders want to avoid hard balancing (or militarily allying) with the distant great powers, especially the strategic competitors of Russia and China because such a move would trigger security concerns and competition among them. And that would turn Mongolia into a geopolitical battlefield or proxy State.

The primary security and foreign policy strategy of Mongolia must remain military neutrality with all great powers while pursuing soft balancing to avoid falling back into a geopolitical quagmire-being isolated between two expansionist great powers.

Mongolia was able to pursue such a policy in 1992, after the complete withdrawal of the Soviet military forces from its territory. It began first with the 1992 Constitution and subsequent national security and foreign policies that banned the access of foreign military forces to Mongolia for stationing, staging or even transiting. It also prohibited Mongolia from joining any military alliance.<sup>4</sup> Then, in 1993, Mongolia and Russia annulled the mutual defence article (military alliance) from their bilateral treaty. Mongolia declared it would not permit use of its territory for purposes against a third party. Finally, Mongolia joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1993. This was Mongolia's foreign policy ambition since its emergence



in the 1950s, when the country was supported by the founders of the movement. Despite that ambition, Mongolia militarily balanced with the Soviet Union against China and the Western Powers in the 1960s-1980s.

Since then, Mongolia has embraced three innovative foreign policies to strengthen its neutrality while increasing the international visibility of its soft balance against its powerful neighbours.

### **Nuclear weapon-free zone status**

As soon as the Soviet military withdrawal was completed, the Mongolian president declared at the United Nations General Assembly in September 1992 that the country's territory would be a nuclear weapon-free zone.<sup>5</sup> Along with banning the deployment or transit of foreign troops from its territory, the country forbid nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction to enter or pass through Mongolian territory. It sought assurance of compliance from the five nuclear weapon States-China, France, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom, which were also permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Although it did not fully achieve assurance from all five States, Mongolia made progress on several fronts.

Domestically, the nuclear weapon-free status is enshrined in the National Security Concept and Foreign Policy Concept, and the Parliament enacted the Law of Mongolia on its Nuclear Weapon-Free Status. Bilaterally, Mongolia has succeeded in obtaining support for its nuclear weapon-free status in jointly issued documents and treaties. For instance, Russia pledged to respect Mongolia's nuclear-free status in a 1993 bilateral treaty. Internationally, Mongolia succeeded in issuing more than ten resolutions regarding "Mongolia's international security and nuclear weapon-free status" at the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, as a result of



Mongolia's tireless diplomacy, the five nuclear weapon States that were permanent members of the Security Council issued a joint statement on security assurances and affirmed "their intent to respect Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free status and not to contribute to any act that would violate it".<sup>7</sup> Mongolia has since become an active promoter of non-proliferation and nuclear weapon-free zones and has been working to institutionalize the nuclear weapon-free status by concluding a legally binding trilateral instrument with Russia and China.

The nuclear weapon-free initiative strengthened Mongolia's neutrality, and the recognition from the five permanent members of the Security Council as well as other members of the United Nations increased Mongolia's international engagement.

### **Third Neighbour Policy**

With the waning of Soviet geopolitical interests as of 1990, Mongolia lost the Soviet security guarantee and economic assistance. But it gained its freedom to conduct independent foreign policy. Despite the general enthusiasm to normalize relations with their southern neighbour, the Mongolian leaders at that time were cautious not to fall into the sphere of influence of China, whose leaders continued to make irredentist claims about Mongolia. Facing this reality, the Mongolian leaders reached out to all distant great and major powers in the 1990s to obtain political and economic support in joining the international system. Even though it was US State Secretary James Baker who introduced the term "third neighbour" when referring to the United States' relations with Mongolia, its origins as a Mongolian policy can be traced to the early 1920s and to foreign policy efforts during the Cold War when Mongolian leaders were trying to obtain recognition of its sovereignty and independence.<sup>8</sup>



Mongolia has since gained strategic partnership commitments from the United States, Japan, India and the European Union. With the support of these States, Mongolia became a member of the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other international initiatives and organizations. And what became its Third Neighbour Policy (after the Baker visit) resulted in Mongolia developing closer educational and cultural ties with many of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. This policy has no intention of designating any one single powerful State. Instead, it includes globally and regionally influential countries as well as developed economies. Mongolia has sought to attract economic interests and investments from these States. The notable investment successes include the Oyu Tolgoi copper mine and the new international airport.<sup>9</sup>

The Third Neighbour Policy excludes hard-balancing elements (military alliance and provision of military hardware for strengthening of defence capabilities). It focuses on the soft-balancing elements only: political, economic and cultural cooperation. Although Mongolia maintains partnerships with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its members, the defence cooperation is explicitly restricted to developing the peacekeeping capacity of the Mongolian armed forces and regular defence diplomacy exchanges (talks, visits and student scholarships).

### **Peacekeeping<sup>10</sup>**

The need for a militarized State disappeared as China and Mongolia normalized their relationship in 1989. Amid the economic difficulties of the 1990s, some Mongolian politicians and scholars argued for eliminating the military and seeking a security guarantee from the United Nations.



Ending this argument, the 1992 Constitution stipulated that Mongolia shall have an armed force, with foreign peacekeeping missions suggested as a way to employ military personnel in peace time.

Because deploying military personnel to United Nations peacekeeping operations is internationally competitive, Mongolia could not join a mission until 2005. However, Mongolia's deployment to United States-led coalition missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo beginning in 2003 helped the military get trained and equipped and gain experience to thus be considered for deployment to a United Nations peacekeeping mission. And the coalition deployments enabled the United States and other NATO members to increase the military opportunities for Mongolians to study at their educational institutions, to provide Mongolia with necessary equipment (communication gear, individual gears, vehicles, etc.) and to finance the multinational peacekeeping training events (seminars and exercises) in Mongolia.

Today, Mongolia is the second-largest troop contributor from the North-east and Central Asian region, after China, to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Mongolian military contingents and hospitals have deployed to United Nations missions in Chad, Sierra Leone and Sudan, with a battalion currently deployed in South Sudan. Interestingly, all the great powers have reacted favourably to the development of Mongolian peacekeeping capabilities: Russia has provided armoured vehicles, China has built a Recreational Centre for Peacekeepers in Mongolia, Japan has conducted military engineering training, Germany has provided equipment, and the United States established a state-of-the-art peacekeeping training centre (also in Mongolia) and now co-organizes the annual multinational exercise, Khan Quest.



The peacekeeping policy serves Mongolia's objective to become an active international player and reinforces its soft-balancing strategy with its powerful neighbours. The deployments to the United Nations and coalition operations allow Mongolia to contribute to the international efforts for global peace and security. They also provide a platform for bilateral and multilateral peacekeeping training. Welcoming militaries of geopolitical competitors to exercise together in Mongolia for the United Nations peacekeeping objectives is a modest example of confidence-building measures. Building up the military capabilities for the United Nations peacekeeping missions justifies the maintenance of the armed forces in the absence of imminent military threat and thus has not triggered any security concerns in Moscow or Beijing.

All three policies can be characterized as soft-balancing behaviour for Mongolia to increase its international visibility and strengthen its political, economic, and cultural connectivity with the distant great and major powers while remaining militarily neutral to its neighbouring great powers. As the geopolitical competitions intensify between China, Russia and the United States, Mongolia needs to pursue a new soft-balancing strategy – in other words, to broaden political, economic, and cultural ties, excluding the defence and security cooperation.

### **A new soft-balancing strategy to bridge two regions**

Mongolia needs to strengthen its ties with Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, building on their centuries-long history and shared interests of surviving between expansionist great powers (Russia and China). Historically, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic were closely linked due to similar nomadic lifestyles despite their religious differences. Although these old ties were interrupted when both Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Re-



public became Soviet republics in 1936, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened opportunity for Mongolia to develop bilateral relations directly with the newly independent Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic. With that independence, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic crafted a foreign policy strategy similar to Mongolia's Third Neighbour Policy while keeping equidistant from Moscow and Beijing. Unlike Ulaanbaatar, however, Astana and Bishkek are politically, economically and culturally integrated with Russia. Both are members of the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Organization military alliance and the Eurasian Economic Union. Yet, both States are now concerned with Russia's use of military force against Georgia and Ukraine. It is good timing for Mongolia to reach out to Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic to deepen their political, economic and cultural ties.

With all three States being landlocked, it also would be important to welcome Turkey and South Korea and thus increase the connectivity between the two regions. Turkey has been pursuing a strategy to increase its economic and cultural influence in Eurasia and Central Asia, especially building on its Turkic cultural heritage and roots.<sup>11</sup> Turkey also wants to deepen its economic cooperation with China. South Korea, on the other hand, is interested in increasing economic cooperation with Central Asia, especially building on ties through its Korean communities in Central Asia (in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan).<sup>12</sup> As G20 economies, Turkey and South Korea also want to avoid upsetting their relationships with Russia and China-both have avoided taking a harsh stance on Russia despite their military treaty alliance with the United States.<sup>13</sup> South Korea is also taking cautious steps concerning the United States' containment strategy against China.<sup>14</sup>



A new balancing strategy has potential for several reasons. For one, it would exclude the competing great and major powers (China, Russia, the United States, Japan and Germany). Two, all targeted States share cultural and historical ties, such as the Altaic language. Three, all States are looking for economic opportunities. Turkey and South Korea are major trading economies, possess technology and are in demand of natural resources. And four, all States want to avoid triggering security sensitivity or negative reactions from Russia and China; therefore, all are reluctant to hard balance against Russia and China. In a nutshell, all five States seek ways to promote political, economic and cultural ties, or in line with our argument, a soft balance. For further expansion, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Uzbekistan would be other potential candidates to strengthen this soft-balancing strategy.

### Conclusion

As the geopolitical competitions intensify, the realist theories of international relations appear to be more useful for examining the international relations than the liberalism, constructivism or English school of international relations. In the realist world, great powers compete for power, and the trade-off of their competition shapes the overarching international and regional settings or structure for secondary States. If we follow the current geopolitical dynamics, the United States—a conveniently located offshore “balancer”—is engaging in two competitions: one in Europe, the other in the Indo-Pacific region. Russia has ignored international laws and rules by bullying its neighbours as if it is following the old geopolitical or imperial logic of the sphere of influence. China, which is seen by the West as a revisionist power, is also openly declaring its intentions for territorial expansion and is engaged in an arms race with the West, not only in traditional terms but also in the new horizons of the cyber world and outer space.



Mongolia is an example of many secondary but vulnerable States that are trying to survive in these emerging geopolitical competitions. In this setting, Mongolia needs to be innovative and proactive to increase its international connections and partners. Based on historical lessons, the best strategy for the country is not to become a pawn or even the chessboard for the next “great game”. Rather, Mongolia should strengthen its military neutrality and intensify its soft-balancing strategy. One such approach would be to join with its old partners Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic and build a political, economic and cultural bridge between Central Asia and Northeast Asia by welcoming Turkey and South Korea. Those countries already welcome Mongolians: Istanbul and Seoul, along with Frankfurt, offer a gateway for Mongolian international travellers because travelling through Beijing or Moscow has become impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic in China and Russia’s war in Ukraine. Mongolia needs more friends and networks.



## Endnotes

- 1 “Balancing” is the central concept in the balance of power theory. States balance against a powerful State to keep it from dominating the international system and threatening other States. A State pursues two types of balancing: The first is external balancing, which means a State will join or form a military alliance with other States. The other is internal balancing, meaning to build its own economic and defense capabilities. The new form of balancing is soft balancing, which means a State strengthens its political, economic and cultural ties with other States while abstaining from pursuing any external balancing strategies. For more on soft balancing, see R.A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” *International Security*, vol. 30 (2005), pp. 7–45; K. He and H. Feng, “If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and U.S. Policy Toward China,” *Security Studies*, vol. 17 (2008), pp. 363–395.
- 2 To strengthen the control over Mongolia, Stalin personally ordered the executions of Mongolian political leaders, including Prime Ministers Genden Peljid and Amar Anand, along with Minister of War Demid Gelegdorj and many other Soviet-educated Mongolian intellectuals who were critical about balancing with the Soviet Union against Japan. See S. Sandag, and H.H. Kendall, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921–1941* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 173.
- 3 M. Jargalsaikhan, *Small Islands of Democracy in an Authoritarian Sea: Explaining Mongolian and Kyrgyz Democratic Development*, (doctoral dissertation), Vancouver, 2019, pp. 53–54.
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- 6 For a more detailed background, see Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status of



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  - 8 Jargalsaikhan, 2019, p. 93; B. Ravdan, "Security Studies: Theoretical Basis," (a keynote speech in Mongolian) at the SIPRA Forum 2021, pp. 29-30; B. Tsedendamba, *Bodg Khaant Mongol Uls Guravdahi Khurshiin Erel* (Ulaanbaatar, 2011).
  - 9 Japan International Cooperation Agency, Press Release, 15 July 2021, [www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2021/20210715\\_30.html](http://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2021/20210715_30.html).
  - 10 Nyamsuren Chultem, and Mendee Jargalsaikhan, *Small-power Diplomacy: Mongolia's Peacekeeping Commitment*, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bue-ros/mongolei/18254.pdf>.
  - 11 "Turkey's Return to Central Asia," *RUSI*, 1 April 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/turkeys-return-central-asia>; "Turkey in Central Asia: Possibilities and Limits of a Greater Role," *FIIA Briefing Paper*, January 2022, [https://www.fii.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/bp328\\_toni-alaranta-kristiina-silvan\\_turkey-in-central-asia.pdf](https://www.fii.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/bp328_toni-alaranta-kristiina-silvan_turkey-in-central-asia.pdf); "Foreign Policy and Strategy of Turkey," in *Mongolia's Third Neighbor* (Ulaanbaatar, 2021), pp. 205–230.
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- 13 M. Colla, "Turkey Plays the Dance of the Go-betweens in Ukraine War," *The Interpreter*, 7 April 2022, [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/turkey-plays-dance-go-betweens-ukraine-war](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/turkey-plays-dance-go-betweens-ukraine-war); "South Korea's Bewildering Stance on the Ukraine Conflict," *The Japan Times*, 18 April 2022, [www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/04/18/commentary/world-commentary/south-korea-confusion-ukraine/](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/04/18/commentary/world-commentary/south-korea-confusion-ukraine/).
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## MONGOLIAN GEOPOLITICS #19



### Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia

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