



Examining **THE NUCLEAR WEAPON-FREE ZONE** and International Relations Through Theoretical Lenses





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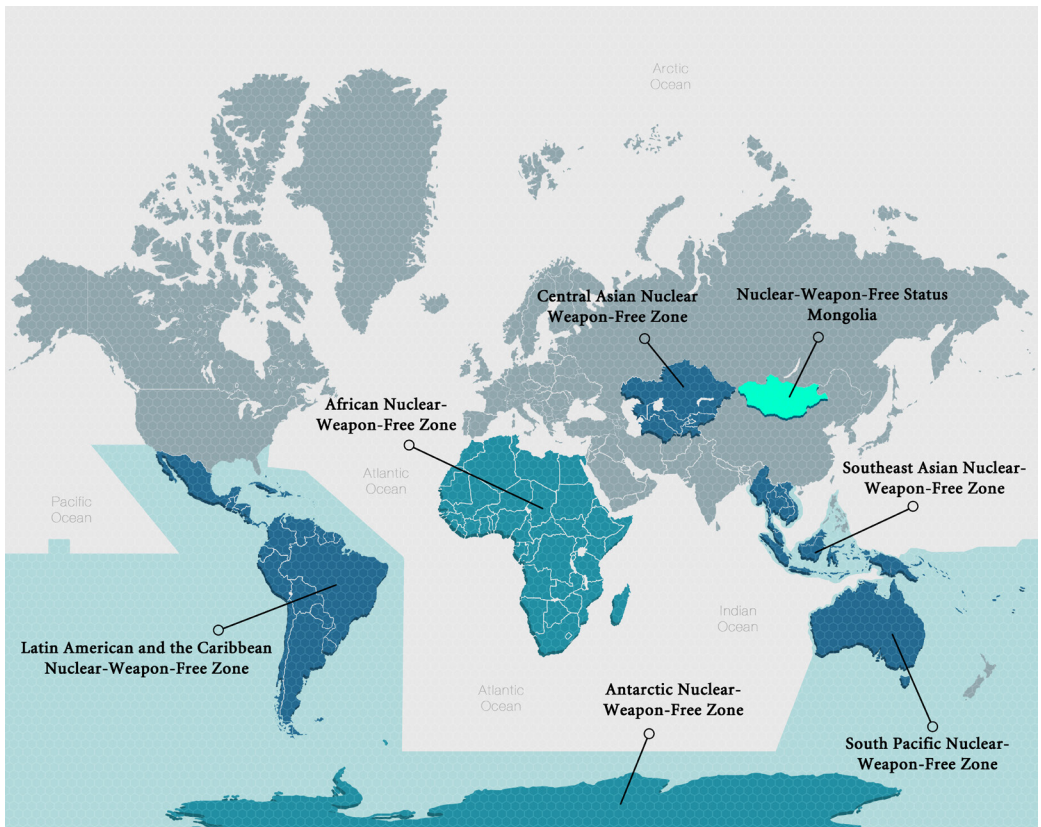
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Examining the Nuclear Weapon

-Free Zone and International Relations Through Theoretical Lenses

Mongolia's self-declaration as a nuclear weapon-free zone in 1992 was a major achievement of a small State's foreign policy aiming to strengthen its own security, to reduce the nuclear war risks between two populous, expansionist and neighbouring nuclear powers and to contribute to regional confidence-building and security. As a result of tireless diplomacy, Mongolia was recognized as the only single-state nuclear weapon-free zone. The United Nations General Assembly issued more than ten resolutions and agreed to discuss Mongolia's biannual report on its international security and nuclear weapon-free status. Nuclear weapon States issued joint statements in 1995 and 2000 and a joint declaration in 2012 regarding Mongolia's status.¹ Today, the nuclear weapon-free zone is associated with Mongolia, which has become an active promoter of non-proliferation and has been working to institutionalize the free zone process by concluding a legally binding trilateral instrument with Russia and China. For contemporary international relations study, Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone is an interesting case to examine through different theoretical lenses.

In this paper, we use the theoretical approaches of realism, liberalism and constructivism to examine international relations and the nuclear weapon-free zone process and how these approaches help us predict the future. We explain the importance of establishing a nuclear weapon-free zone unit at Mongolia's National Security Council or within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote this important initiative domestically, bilaterally and multilaterally.

How do the theories explain the nuclear weapon-free zone?

Realism is a state-centred theory. Because States do not trust each other,

they constantly seek ways to maximize their security. In the realist world, great powers matter the most because their strategies and interactions shape or change the international system (or structure). International organizations are ineffective and mostly serve the interests of the great powers. War and conflicts are inevitable as the balance of power shifts. Secondary and small States must balance or bandwagon to survive in this anarchic international system. Realists argue the importance of the nuclear weapon for preventing the emergence of a major world war between the great powers, known as nuclear deterrence. Realists have difficulty incorporating domestic factors into their theoretical explanations.

The main drive for the nuclear weapon-free zone closely relates to Mongolia's experience during the double Cold War (the Soviet Union versus the United States and China versus the Soviet Union). Mongolia feared becoming a battlefield between the nuclear weapon States on several occasions. First, the United States consulted with the Soviets to carry out pre-emptive strikes on China's nuclear facilities (near the Sino-Mongolian border) as China began its nuclear weapon programme in 1963.² Second, the Soviet military installations in Mongolia were included in the United States targeting list if a war broke out between the Warsaw Pact and NATO countries in Europe.³ Many observers, including Mongolians, believed the presence of tactical nuclear weapons at the Soviet military bases in Mongolia. Because of the mutual defence treaty between the Soviet Union and Mongolia, there was no requirement for the Soviets to inform their Mongolian counterparts. This experience prompted the Mongolian authority to declare itself a nuclear weapon-free zone immediately following the Soviet military withdrawal in 1992 and to seek security assurances from the five nuclear weapon States that are Permanent Members of the UN Security Council.

Nuclear weapon States have been reluctant to provide security assurance to Mongolia unless all five of them agree to provide such assurance. Providing such security assurance to Mongolia, however, sets precedent for other States to also ask for it from the nuclear weapon States, which would then affect their long-term strategic calculations and moves (deployment of nuclear weapons, testing, transiting or transferring weapons). The United States refused to recognize Mongolia as a single-state nuclear weapon-free zone or to provide security assurance because some NATO members (Austria, Iceland or Baltic State) and/or defence treaty allies (New Zealand or South Korea) would then push for single-state nuclear weapon-free zone status.⁴ France opposed Mongolia's request because Francophone States could make a similar move. Even though Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone declaration reduces security concerns for China and Russia (as a neutral nuclear weapon-free zone), neither Beijing nor Moscow have agreed to conclude a trilateral treaty to institutionalize Mongolia's status.⁵ Following the same rationale of the United States and France, a deal with Mongolia would serve as a precedent for many other States that would then pressure China and Russia for a similar deal. The role of international organizations in this situation is not powerful when it comes to dealing with the great powers.

Liberalism argues that international relations can be collaborative and progressive. States are interdependent of each other. Therefore, they prefer to cooperate. The increased interdependence, especially economic ties, reduces the likelihood of war and conflict. Liberal theorists believe that States will institutionalize their relations through the international organizations and legal instruments; therefore, the role of international organizations is important and influential to encourage cooperation and to reduce fear and uncertainty. Unlike realism, liberalism examines

domestic factors, such as type of government and actors (individuals, interest groups, corporations, organizations and associations) and looks at the world in more cooperative ways. In democratic society, as the democratic peace theory stresses, the political system is transparent, and the audience cost is high for leaders who advocate war. This environment provides opportunities for interest groups to influence policy decisions.⁶ Interestingly, liberal theory de-emphasizes the role of nuclear weapons and defence capabilities.

Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone initiative has worked through international organizations. In September 1992, the Mongolian president used the UN General Assembly to declare its nuclear weapon-free zone initiative. This was one of Mongolia's first foreign policy decisions without consultation or directive from the Kremlin.⁷ Then Mongolia took the issue to the UN Disarmament and International Security Committee (also known as the First Committee). Because Mongolia's initiative closely links to or is in support of international nuclear non-proliferation efforts, its nuclear weapon-free zone status has been included in the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review conferences.⁸ In 1998, the UN General Assembly acknowledged Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone and directed Member States to discuss Mongolia's international security and nuclear weapon-free status. It also directed the UN Secretary-General to report on implementation on a biannual basis.⁹ Despite the reluctance from the nuclear weapon States (the great powers) to acknowledge Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone status and to each reciprocate with security assurance, Mongolian authorities have retained confidence in the international organizations, especially the United Nations.

Mongolian diplomats have reached out to and cooperated with several in-

ternational organizations. The first is the Non-Aligned Movement, which, with its 120 country members, is the second-largest international forum after the United Nations. Although Mongolia sought membership in the 1960s, it was interrupted when Mongolia established the mutual defence treaty with the Soviet Union and became a military alliance. Following the withdrawal of the Soviet military forces from Mongolia and its declaration of non-alliance, Mongolia obtained membership in 1993. The Non-Aligned Movement welcomed Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone status and acknowledged it as "a commendable contribution to the regional stability and confidence-building".¹⁰ Another organization is the Conference of States Parties and Signatories of Treaties that Establish Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones. Mongolia became an active participant as of its first conference in 2005. The final outcome documents of these conferences express support for Mongolia's efforts to institutionalize the nuclear weapon-free zone. The last, but not the least, is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum. Mongolia became a member of the Forum in 1999, which expressed its support for Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone status in its 2000 Joint Statement.¹¹

Democratic government and non-governmental organizations and individuals have had important roles, as liberal theories have predicted. As a result of the joint push from experts, diplomats and parliamentarians, Mongolia's State Ikh Khural legislative body passed the Law on Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status in 2000. The law prohibits any State or individual actors from committing, initiating or participating in activities relating to nuclear weapons and requires an interagency review of its implementation.¹²

It is important to highlight the role of non-governmental organizations, especially the Blue Banner, in encouraging academic and policy debates in

the country and to reach out to international experts and non-governmental organizations that advocate nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Enjoying its non-governmental status, the Blue Banner initiated the track II dialogue process with the Northeast Asian regional network Global Partnership for Prevention of Armed Conflicts. Within this framework, Blue Banner organizes seminars, symposiums and roundtable discussions to influence policymakers, raise public awareness and collaborate with international partners.¹³ In support of the democratic peace theory, academics, experts and interested individuals have joined in efforts to strengthen the country's nuclear weapon-free zone status and have mobilized effectively. This would not be the case in autocratic regimes.

From the liberal theoretical perspective, Mongolia has trusted international organizations, especially the United Nations, and worked closely with like-minded States in the hope of reducing uncertainty through international organizations and legal instruments issued by these organizations. The nature of democratic governance appears to be a facilitating factor for encouraging non-governmental organizations and experts to advocate non-proliferation and nuclear weapon-free zone status in Mongolia and beyond. It could be argued that if Mongolia were under an authoritarian administration, it would be up to the authoritarian leaders whether to promote or oppose the nuclear weapon-free zone issue.

Constructivism considers ideas and social interactions as important variables to examine international relations. Through social interactions, state and non-state actors create a norm to constrain the actions of States that are more predictable and thus potentially reduce uncertainty. Because actors collectively hold ideas and beliefs, their interests and identities are based on the collectively held ideas and beliefs. Constructivist theorists

argue that the interests and identities of actors are not fixed and that they change as a result of interactions over time.

Mongolia became a norm entrepreneur by declaring the country's strong and clear stance against nuclear weapons without consulting its neighbours in 1992 and succeeded in gaining recognition as a single-state nuclear weapon-free zone.¹⁴ Until Mongolia was recognized as such, all nuclear weapon States only recognized a free zone if it involved two or more States that had concluded a multilateral treaty to provide security assurances (or conditional security assurances).¹⁵ Mongolia's case is unique because it cannot be included in other nuclear weapon-free zones, for example, of Southeast Asia or Central Asia. Its move to become a nuclear weapon-free zone is important for its two neighbouring nuclear weapon States as well as other nuclear weapon States (the United States) to constrain the strategic manoeuvring of China and Russia regarding nuclear weapons development and deployment.

Mongolia's selection of international venues to gain its nuclear weapon-free zone recognition is quite interesting from the perspective of how norm entrepreneurs select venues to create or advocate a new norm.¹⁶ In this regard, Mongolia did not consult with the nuclear weapon States before declaring its intention at the UN General Assembly because they likely would have exerted pressure against such a move due to the precedent it would set for other States to push for single-state nuclear weapon-free zone status and security assurances. By using the UN General Assembly and the Non-Aligned Movement to declare its intention and to gain backing for the initiative, Mongolia risked creating pressure on the nuclear weapon States to reject its follow-up diplomacy through bilateral and multilateral channels.

Mongolia's anti-nuclear weapon and non-proliferation initiatives align the country more closely with like-minded state and non-state actors—those that hold collective interests and identity against nuclear weapons and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Mongolian initiative also aligns with the confidence-building objectives of the Non-Aligned Movement and ASEAN and with countries that support the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Because Mongolia's initiative asks for a trilateral treaty and regulation with its two neighbouring nuclear weapon States, it falls into the agenda of the UN Disarmament Commission (First Committee), which is designated to propose treaties and regulations for disarmament, limitation or reduction of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.

From the constructivist theoretical perspective, Mongolia became a norm entrepreneur when it self-declared as a nuclear weapon-free zone, obtaining the single-state status and becoming the first-ever nuclear weapon-free zone in the northern hemisphere as well as in Inner Asia between two nuclear weapon States. As a result of its diplomacy, Mongolia strengthened its peace-loving identity. It has been accepted by the international community as sharing collectively held ideas, interests and identities as anti-nuclear weapon. Most importantly, Mongolia has gained a new identity in becoming a nuclear weapon-free zone. The changing attitude of nuclear weapon States, especially the United States, confirms the constructivist claim that actors' attitudes change as a result of social interaction. Although it requires a careful examination, we could make a similar assumption concerning the changing behaviours of other nuclear weapon States. For example, all nuclear weapon States have issued a joint statement respecting Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone initia-

tive. Even though the constructivist approach is not helpful in making a broad or specific predictions about the future, we can explain or predict behaviours of actors that we have identified within their social structures.

How do theories predict the future for nuclear weapon-free zones?

The future of nuclear weapon-free zones does not look good if we rely on realist theories. The great powers are backing off from their commitments of non-proliferation and even threatening each other with their nuclear arsenal. For instance, the Russian president threatened the United States and NATO members if they should involve themselves in the Ukraine war. Many people in Europe are fearful of Russia using its tactical nuclear weapons to win in the proxy war in Ukraine, while international experts, for example, at the International Atomic Energy Agency, are expressing concern about the safety of nuclear facilities. International organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have failed in preventing or stopping the war in Ukraine. The United States is aiming to contain China to prevent China from changing the current international order. Secondary States are struggling whether to balance against China or to sit on the fence.

Because a nuclear threat exists in South Asia (India versus Pakistan) and Northeast Asia (North Korea, China, Russia and the United States), political leaders and military experts will probably advocate strategies or policies to seek nuclear weapons or a nuclear umbrella. In the logic of the security dilemma, if one country increases its security, it will increase the insecurity of other countries. Therefore, States will engage in an arms race, including nuclear capability. For example, given North Korea's nuclear capabilities, rising China's military capacity and the likelihood of the United

States reducing its military presence, Japan and South Korea should think of acquiring nuclear capabilities to deter China and North Korea. From the realist perspective, the role of a nuclear weapon-free zone or non-proliferation efforts will be downplayed, but the role of nuclear capabilities and nuclear umbrella will be stressed. States are willing to spend more money to prevent the non-state actors from acquiring and using nuclear weapons.

Liberal theories present a “half-full glass” vision regarding the nuclear weapon-free zone. From the liberal theoretical perspective, we are still living in the interdependent world, and States should work together to strengthen the international organizations, legal regimes and cooperation at all levels to reduce the tensions and uncertainty. The UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the First Committee, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization for Security and Co-operation and specialized agencies like the International Atomic Energy Agency need to restrain the actions of warring States and pressure them to implement treaties, regulations and action plans against nuclear weapon proliferation.

Following Japan’s, Austria’s and Mongolia’s examples, States, even those in the military alliance, should push for single-state nuclear weapon-free zone status and seek security assurances from the nuclear weapon States. Liberal theories will expect an increased role of domestic politics and type of governance. In the liberal democracies, the general population will pressure their leaders to reduce spending on nuclear weapon programmes and to collaborate with like-minded States to strengthen their position against the use of tactical weapons. Authoritarian leaders will experience a difficult period for justifying their military and war spending at the expense of the welfare of their people. Liberal theories expect

the geopolitical competition, arms race and proxy wars will exhaust the political and economic resources of the governments. Some will be replaced by elections, others by revolutions. Unlike the realist theories that will suggest developing nuclear capabilities or seeking a nuclear umbrella, the liberal theories will promote international cooperation to create ways to reduce nuclear threats (nuclear war, tactical weaponry, safety of nuclear plants or terrorist use) and to increase the interdependence and trust among States. In this line, Mongolia should work actively through the United Nations and other international and regional organizations to further institutionalize its nuclear weapon-free zone status and collaborate with other likeminded States and nuclear weapon-free zone States.

Constructivism stresses the importance of ideas, norms and social interactions of actors, be they state, governmental or non-governmental actors. Unlike the realists who believe that structure drives state behaviour, the constructivists argue that actors can transform structures through social interactions. This might be another momentum for actors who promote the norms of nuclear weapon-free zones and non-proliferation. In turn, these norms can constrain the behaviours of state actors. As the danger of nuclear weapons increases, actors—state and non-state and national, regional and global—will cooperate for a better and safer world. In this thinking, we could expect Mongolian norm entrepreneurs will reach out to certain actors, for example, in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka through the Non-Aligned Movement, or in Austria, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine through the Organization for Security and Co-operation, to advocate the new norm of single-state nuclear weapon-free zone.

Mongolia also could reach out to the nuclear weapon-free zones in South-east Asia and Central Asia to institutionalize its own status as well as work

with Japan and like-minded actors in Northeast Asia to push for free zones there. We imagine Mongolia can work easily with Canada, Norway and other States promoting the nuclear weapon-free zone norm to the Arctic through the Organization for Security and Co-operation, in which all concerning States hold membership. From the constructivist theory perspective, Mongolia's identity as a nuclear weapon-free zone could be strengthened by moving out of its past decade of inactiveness and renewing its non-proliferation efforts more widely.

What should we do?

Mongolia cannot lose any of its soft power diplomacy tools. The nuclear weapon-free zone deserves to have a special unit either at the National Security Council or within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that advocates the nuclear weapon-free zone initiative domestically, bilaterally and internationally. Domestically, Mongolia needs to develop a national strategy that requires regular review. Two reviews of the implementation of the law on nuclear weapon-free status have concluded it to be unsatisfactory.¹⁷ Mongolia needs to prepare the biannual report seriously, which could include issues relevant to its security and would attract the attention of the UN Secretary-General. And Mongolia should propose that the UN General Assembly conduct a second comprehensive study of nuclear weapon-free zones. With the first study having been conducted in 1976–1977, another study is long overdue, given the growing danger of nuclear war.¹⁸

The much-needed unit should engage with the great powers (Russia, China and the United States) to renew discussions on security assurances and a trilateral treaty for verification and monitoring of Mongolia's nuclear weapon-free zone status. The unit should engage with the Non-Aligned

Movement, ASEAN, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation, the International Atomic Energy Agency and with United Nations committees and organizations to advocate the nuclear weapon-free zone and non-proliferation. It should organize international forums on nuclear weapon-free zones that include Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. It should resemble the Ulaanbaatar Process, which is an inclusive track II annual dialogue initiated by a Mongolian non-governmental organization in 2015. Research should be the key component of the unit, with focus on nuclear weapon-free zones, single States, institutionalization, disarmament and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Instead of simply celebrating the anniversary of its nuclear weapon-free zone status, Mongolia should act proactively to capitalize on its soft diplomacy. But it cannot be a marginal task of a Foreign Ministry department or mission abroad—such a unit deserves a dedicated staff and national strategy to research, network and advocate internationally.

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1

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