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Asia Policy, Number 17, January 2014, pp. 127-146 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0000>

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The Role of Peacekeeping in Mongolia's Military Strategy: A New Paradigm for Security

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NOTE ≈ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, the U.S. Department of Defense, or any of its components.

KEYWORDS: MONGOLIA; FOREIGN POLICY; MILITARY STRATEGY; PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines the military component of Mongolia's security strategy and argues that the Mongolian Armed Forces (MAF) have redefined their objectives and identity by creating a modern military centered on peacekeeping and global peace-support operations.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Mongolia is developing a unique military strategy that attempts to balance conventional and peacekeeping capabilities. Having moved away from its previous security arrangements with Russia, Mongolia now pursues a foreign policy that will facilitate global engagement while allowing the country to maintain its sovereignty, national identity, and diplomatic freedom of maneuver through a "third neighbor" policy. This policy seeks to expand ties with other democratic nations in order to both counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence and increase Mongolia's international profile. A relic of the Cold War, the MAF has discarded all but a few vestiges of its former makeup and embraced a new structure, doctrine, mission, and identity to complement this new foreign policy direction. The MAF has thus become a vital instrument supporting the third-neighbor policy by transforming itself into a modern military force focused on peacekeeping and global engagement.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Mongolia's peacekeeping deployment to South Sudan in 2012, its largest to date, has put the MAF on the global stage as a reputable and capable force that has built a capacity for diverse mission sets within the spectrum of peace-support operations. This capability will give the U.S. a reliable partner for future peace-related support operations.
- Mongolia's participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace program has signaled the MAF's desire and readiness to push beyond UN-sponsored peace-support operations, thereby providing the U.S. and regional states additional opportunities to improve interoperability.
- Mongolia's increased foreign military relations have complemented the country's third-neighbor policy, despite pressure from both China and Russia. The U.S. should capitalize on this window of opportunity to enhance Mongolia's peacekeeping capacity.

On a chilly early morning in June 2012, a group of Mongolian soldiers rolled onto Ulaanbaatar international airport's parking apron. Waiting there was a United Nations–contracted IL-76 cargo aircraft, preparing to transport the soldiers to the Unity region of South Sudan in Africa. The region is considered one of the most violent and dangerous areas along South Sudan's northern border with the Republic of Sudan. The soldiers were members of one of Mongolia's elite units trained specifically for peace-support operations, and deployment of the unit marked the largest peacekeeping mission in the country's history. This event established a high-water mark for the Mongolian Armed Forces (MAF) as they celebrated their tenth anniversary of supporting UN peacekeeping operations. Further, the unit's deployment constituted a truly remarkable achievement for a nation that just 25 years earlier had discarded 67 years of Communist rule and international isolation in favor of democracy and global integration.

Mongolia sits landlocked between two world powers, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Over the last quarter century, the country has abandoned its former alliance with Russia and managed to create a thriving democratic society and growing economy, despite its relatively small population of approximately 2.7 million people. In contrast with other satellite states of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia concurrently instituted a democratic political system, a market-driven economy, and a foreign policy based on balancing relations with Russia and China while expanding relations with the West. Mongolia is now pursuing a foreign policy that will facilitate global engagement, allow the nation to maintain its sovereignty, and provide diplomatic freedom of maneuver through a “third neighbor” policy.¹

The MAF is reshaping itself to complement this balanced approach to foreign policy and has become a vital instrument in Mongolia's global engagement. A relic of the Cold War with strong institutional attachments to Russia, the MAF discarded all but a few vestiges of its former makeup and has embraced a new structure, doctrine, mission, and perhaps most important, an identity centered on peacekeeping. Since 2002, Mongolia has significantly increased its participation in globally diverse UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations. Although only comprising approximately 8,000 soldiers, the MAF now contributes the second-largest number of troops from Northeast and

¹ The term “third neighbor” is used to describe the concept of Mongolia looking beyond its two immediate geographic neighbors (Russia and China) to develop strong relations with the world's democratic nations, including the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, Canada, Australia, and various European countries.

Central Asia.² Mongolian forces have also participated in multiple rotations supporting U.S.-led coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003. Despite pressure from both China and Russia, Mongolia has expanded its participation in global multilateral security organizations and partnerships, such as by joining the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), partnering with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and chairing the Community of Democracies.

This article will focus on the military component of Mongolia's global-engagement strategy and argue that the MAF has redefined its security objectives and identity. By creating a modern military force centered on peacekeeping and global peace-support operations, Mongolia has reinforced its sovereignty and independence despite the country's geopolitical constraints. The article is divided into the following sections:

- ≈ pp. 131–34 consider Mongolia's historical dependence on Russia for security and examine its sudden political transformation after the former Soviet Union's disintegration and withdrawal from Mongolia.
- ≈ pp. 135–36 describe Mongolia's third-neighbor policy and significant military reforms and modernization programs as the country attempts to become globally engaged with UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations. The section argues that the MAF, with support from the United States, has chosen a path of reform centered on improving its capabilities for peace-support operations.
- ≈ pp. 137–39 examine U.S. policy toward Mongolia's defense reforms and argue that U.S. military aid has significantly improved the MAF's capabilities. The expansion of foreign military engagement is not only supporting Mongolia's third-neighbor policy but has also enhanced the country's sovereignty and sense of national identity, while improving regional security.
- ≈ pp. 139–41 discuss the course that Mongolia has set toward military modernization and force transformation and assess the challenges the MAF faces in balancing conventional and peacekeeping responsibilities.
- ≈ pp. 141–44 examine China's and Russia's reactions to Mongolia's global military engagement. Mongolia has expanded not only its military programs but also its strategic partnerships with other nations as well as with multinational security organizations.
- ≈ pp. 144–46 describe Mongolia's challenges in balancing its military transformation and modernization programs and analyze how the MAF has become an instrument of foreign policy.

² United Nations, "Contributors to UN Peacekeeping Operations," August 31, 2013 ≈ http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2013/aug13_1.pdf.

MONGOLIA'S HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOVIET UNION

Mongolia's struggle for security, independence, and sovereignty has largely been viewed through the construct of Russian and Chinese influence over the last century. It is therefore impossible to appreciate where Mongolia is today without understanding this historical background. With assistance from the Soviet Union, Mongolia secured its independence in 1921 after a little over two hundred years under the rule of the Qing dynasty of China and a decade of political turmoil. The Mongolian People's Republic was established in late 1924 and accepted socialism as its political foundation under heavy influence from the Soviet Union. Mongolia built its economy, social structure, and governance under the single-party leadership of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), which lasted until 1991. Under the MPRP, the country maintained close relations with the Soviet Union and was considered a nominal Soviet ally leading up to World War II. In 1939, the battle of Khalkhin Gol brought Soviet and Mongolian forces together under the leadership of General Georgy Zhukov against a large Japanese force in the eastern province of Dornod. While the forces mainly consisted of 57,000 Soviet troops, some 3,000 Mongolian soldiers also participated in this battle, which resulted in the defeat of Japan's highly capable Kwantung Army on the eve of World War II.³ At the time, this battle marked Japan's worst military defeat in its modern history.⁴ Mongolia and Russia's combined victory contributed to an enduring relationship between the two countries that continued through the Cold War and beyond.

The influence of this relationship with the Soviet Union on Mongolia's defense and security perspectives cannot be overstated. During the height of the Sino-Soviet rift in the late 1960s, Mongolia sat precariously between these two superpowers. In 1963, its conventional armed forces numbered approximately 14,000 (air and ground forces) and were incapable of effectively defending the country from a modern military attack by China.⁵ Mongolian leadership recognized this vulnerability, leading the MPRP to propose joining

³ Jonathan S. Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States: A Diplomatic History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 22–23.

⁴ Stuart D. Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 149.

⁵ See "Record of Conversation between Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal and the PRC Ambassador to Mongolia, Zhang Canming, 24 September 1963," in Sergey Radchenko, trans., "New Documents on Mongolia and the Cold War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 16 (2007/8): 361–62. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHPBulletin16_p4.pdf.

the Warsaw Pact in 1963. Although this never came to fruition, Mongolia clearly took steps to improve its strategic security posture and reduce its vulnerability to China. In December 1965 the Politburo of the MPRP's Central Committee passed a resolution formally requesting that a combat unit from the Soviet Union be stationed in Mongolia to augment the Mongolian defense forces.⁶ During the same year, the Soviet leadership conducted a substantial military buildup along the entire Sino-Soviet border, which included the deployment of forces inside Mongolia.⁷ The Soviet Union was preparing units for operations to contain potential outbreaks of local conflict as well as for the possibility of major military operations—either conventional or nuclear—against China.

The Soviet Union's decision to shift forces to the east was driven by three main factors: China's continued progress in developing strategic and nuclear weapons, the country's internal instability as a result of the Cultural Revolution that had begun in 1966, and the failure of the Soviet regime to moderate the Sino-Soviet dispute. These issues forced the Kremlin to develop defensive and offensive contingency plans for areas bordering China.⁸ To enhance its defensive posture along the border, the Soviet Union signed an agreement with Mongolia in 1966 known as the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. In addition, it deployed as many as 12 divisions to its border regions with China, bringing the total Soviet presence in the Far East to nearly 26 divisions. According to CIA declassified intelligence estimates, this deployment was equivalent to the size of all Soviet forces stationed in Eastern Europe during the same period.⁹ By 1967, the Soviet Union had nearly 6 divisions stationed in Mongolia proper, consisting of approximately 80,000 personnel. With this augmentation of forces, Mongolia was now integrated into the Soviet Union's defensive plan for the Eastern Military District. The 1966 treaty also placed all Mongolian forces under the operational control of the Soviet Far Eastern High Command, while the Soviet forces deployed in Mongolia remained under the operational control of the Transbaikal

⁶ "Information about the Visit of the Soviet Party and Government Delegation to Mongolia Headed by Brezhnev [Excerpt]," January 1966, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive AVPRE, fond 0111, opis 48, papka 287, delo 12, listy 21–38, trans. Sergey Radchenko for Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars ~ <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/11770.1>.

⁷ U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Soviet Military Buildup along the Chinese Border*, Special Memorandum, SM-7-69, 1968, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Warsaw Pact Forces for Operations in Eurasia*, National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 11-14-71, no. 282, September 9, 1971, 30.

Military District.¹⁰ This placed all Mongolian forces under a higher authority for command-and-control purposes in the event of a conflict with China.

After nearly 30 years of Soviet military influence, the MAF had completely internalized Soviet doctrinal norms and structures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The Soviet Union further assisted in establishing Mongolian military academies, training programs, manuals, regulations, and doctrine. It also provided professional military education for officers and enlisted personnel, with nearly 60% of Mongolian personnel attending Soviet military academies and training facilities. By the late 1960s, the MAF, with support from Soviet units, was postured to defend against an invasion from China—an invasion that never came.

This mutually assured security arrangement with the Soviet Union was terminated in 1989, near the end of the Cold War. It was during this period that Mongolia independently initiated political and economic reforms. In December 1989, when a small group of proponents for democracy marched in Ulaanbaatar from the House of Youth to the main square (Suhkbaatar Square), the number of people demanding political change grew to several thousand. In March 1990, Chairman Jambyn Batmönkh announced that the entire Politburo would step down and a new government would be appointed. Mongolia then began to take tangible steps to transform its political and economic system and formally dismantle the socialist governing apparatus supporting single-party rule and a command-driven economy. In July 1990, the country held its first democratic elections, leading to the establishment of a multiparty legislative system and a new constitution. Within only two years, Mongolia was rapidly on its way toward a parliamentary democracy and a free-market system. As one analyst has noted, Mongolia's embrace of the democratic process "was remarkably rapid in historical terms, especially given seven decades of communist rule."¹¹

At the same time, Moscow's years of economic subsidies and political and military support to Mongolia came to an abrupt end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaving the future security environment uncertain. The Soviet Union had already agreed to withdraw 75% of its forces stationed inside Mongolia as a result of the 1989 Soviet-Sino summit in Beijing.¹²

¹⁰ Michael Sadykiewicz, *The Soviet Union and East Asia in the 1980s* (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1980).

¹¹ Stephen E. Noerper, "Land of the Rising Khan: Moving the U.S. Forward on a Mongolia Action Plan," Nautilus Institute, November 10, 2005.

¹² Lowell Dittmer, "China and Russia: New Beginnings," in *China and the World Chinese Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel Kim, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 94–112.

Its military support and presence in Mongolia continued to decline until the withdrawal of the remaining Soviet troops in 1991. By the end of 1992, 82,000 personnel had been withdrawn, along with thousands of tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery systems, and hundreds of fighters and helicopters.¹³ Since anywhere from a third to a half of Mongolia's annual budget came from Soviet aid, the sudden withdrawal of this support created shortages of fuel, equipment, spare parts, and technical assistance for the MAF. During a time of tumultuous political transition, Mongolia was now solely responsible for its own territorial defense.

It should be noted that during this period the Mongolian military chose to remain neutral and did not involve itself politically. At one point, the MAF pledged that it would not attempt a coup against the newly established government, and it refrained from exerting influence during the political transition.¹⁴ By 1992, the Mongolian military numbered approximately 24,500 soldiers, including the border protection forces that defended the country's 8,220-kilometer border. In this post-Cold War era, the MAF could no longer justify its mission, size, and budget in the eyes of the new political leadership. This was further reinforced by the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations as a result of the 1989 summit, which ended decades of tension and conflict in the border areas. No longer tied to a Soviet security alliance, and in the absence of a credible threat, the MAF had to decide what to do with its fleet of aging Russian equipment, outdated institutional structures, and doctrine. An army that was structured, equipped, and trained to fight a conventional enemy during the Cold War now faced an uncertain future. There were public discussions of dismantling the military in order to divert the defense budget to other economic priorities, but that option was ruled out when the new constitution specified a need for an armed force.¹⁵ Defining a new role for the MAF became a challenge for the military leadership and forced it to develop new strategies.

¹³ *A Concise History of Mongolian Military* (Ulaanbaatar NP, 1996), 495–96, as quoted in Jargalsaikhan Mendee, “The Military Training Assistance Program (MTAP): Merging Interests of Mongolia and Canada,” *Canadian Military Journal* 10, no. 1 (2009): 37n1.

¹⁴ “Reaction to the Soviet Coup Attempt,” *Montsame*, August 20, 1991, trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, DRIEAS, August 27, 1991.

¹⁵ Jargalsaikhan Mendee, “Mongolia's Peacekeeping Commitment: Training, Deployment, and Evolution of Field Information Capabilities,” National Defense Intelligence College, Discussion Paper, no. 15, May 2007, 2 ~ http://www.ni-u.edu/ni_press/pdf/Mongolia_Peacekeeping_Commitment.pdf.

MONGOLIA'S THIRD-NEIGHBOR POLICY

Mongolia's path to developing a democratic government during the 1990s required significant changes to its foreign policy. The quick transition to a market-driven economy created economic turmoil and forced the leadership to look outward for foreign investments and markets. During the Cold War, Mongolia's geographic location had politically and economically isolated the country from the rest of world and sustained its underdevelopment. By 1998, however, the government had codified a new foreign policy that stipulated an orientation toward foreign engagement and participation in international organizations and institutions both regionally and globally. No longer constrained by Russia, Mongolia was now free to engage other nations in order to develop its economy and counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence. This led to the development of the third-neighbor policy, which has become the cornerstone of Mongolia's modern foreign policy. This policy sought to ensure balanced relations with the country's two proximate neighbors while simultaneously reaching out to other states as well as the UN and multilateral organizations.¹⁶ In 1993, Mongolia published its first National Security Concept to complement this foreign policy with an emphasis on bilateral relations and multilateral cooperation beyond China and Russia. The document stated that "the priority of Mongolia's foreign policy shall be [the] safeguarding of its security and vital national interests by political and diplomatic means, and creating a favorable external environment for its economic, scientific and technological development."¹⁷

The National Security Concept was updated in 2010 to reflect Mongolia's continuing effort to balance relations with China and Russia. A provision was added stating that the government should pursue an open foreign policy of "consultation with influential countries on issues of strengthening world peace and security, of developing international cooperation, of enhancing the country's strategic significance and fostering strategic interests of major powers in Mongolia."¹⁸ In July 1999, Mongolia took a crucial step onto the international military stage when it passed Resolution 115, titled "Participation in Peacekeeping Operations," and signed a memorandum of understanding

¹⁶ Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States*, 46.

¹⁷ Ole Bruun and Ole Odgaard, *Mongolia in Transition: Old Patterns New Challenges*, Studies in Asian Topics, no. 22 (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 228.

¹⁸ "The Concept of National Security of Mongolia" is available from the Embassy of Mongolia in the United Kingdom http://www.embassyofmongolia.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=60&Itemid=75&lang=en.

with the UN on contributing to future peacekeeping operations.¹⁹ Three years later, in August 2002, Mongolia deployed its first peacekeeping observers as part of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

During these early stages of its participation, Mongolia contributed mostly observers and lacked sufficient capacity to deploy regular military units to conduct large-scale peace-support operations. The country began to look for foreign assistance, primarily from the United States, to help build its peacekeeping capacity. Although the United States and Mongolia established diplomatic relations in 1991, military-assistance programs were slow to start. They gradually emerged in the form of English-language training programs and evolved into more substantial military assistance. Such assistance increased after the September 11, 2001, terrorism attack against the United States. In April 2003 the Mongolian government decided to allow a contingent of soldiers to participate in the postwar disaster relief, reconstruction, and international humanitarian activities in Iraq following a request from the U.S. government. From 2003 to 2009, a total of 1,200 Mongolian troops in ten rotations served in the Multinational Division South-Central Iraq, led by Poland. This support was later extended to Afghanistan, where Mongolia deployed forces to assist both Operation Enduring Freedom and International Security Assistance Force missions, which it has pledged to continue to support through the withdrawal of forces in 2014. Given that Mongolia was among the first of 33 nations that came forward to support U.S.-led coalition operations in Iraq, the Pentagon decided to provide additional funding for training and deploying Mongolian forces through various programs such as the Coalition Support Initiative and Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI).²⁰ The Office of the Secretary of Defense held annual defense consultative talks that established military-to-military baseline programs and funding by 2003. The United States has now officially committed to assist Mongolia in deepening its military reform toward building a capability for peace-support operations.

¹⁹ Dashjivaa Ariunbold, "Why Has Mongolia Chosen to Participate in Peace Support Operations? An Analysis of Current Trends and Future Opportunities" (master's thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, 2012), 16.

²⁰ Nina M. Serafina, "The Global Peace Operations Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL32773, June 11, 2009.

U.S. CAPACITY-BUILDING

Support from the United States has played a key role in the MAF's process of transforming its force structure and doctrine from the old Soviet-era territorial-defense model into a more versatile force with significant capabilities deployable for peacekeeping. Among other initiatives, this process included reform of the General Staff, generation of a new doctrine for peacekeeping operations, refurbishment of peacekeeping training infrastructure, creation of new peacekeeping units, and development of the Peace Support Operations Training Center at Five Hills. Funding for Mongolia's peacekeeping programs primarily came from the U.S. Foreign Military Financing program and paid for nonlethal equipment such as night vision devices, uniforms, radios, and protective equipment, including Kevlar helmets and vests.²¹ International Military Education (IMET) funding has allowed Mongolia to send MAF officers to a wide variety of senior staff courses and junior and noncommissioned officers to training courses. Between 1992 and 2011, funding for this program reached \$13 million. Approximately 40% of the current IMET budget is spent on the English-language education necessary to facilitate Mongolia's participation in more advanced military training programs.²²

GPOI funds also provide a significant amount of peacekeeping funding to the MAF.²³ The unique feature of the GPOI program is that it works with countries to understand the specific peacekeeping capabilities and capacities they wish to build. In conjunction with standard security assistance from the United States, this program has allowed Mongolia to take advantage of U.S. aid to introduce its own institutional, organizational, and doctrinal reforms within the MAF in order to build and expand the military's peacekeeping capacity. A large portion of GPOI funding to Mongolia (\$5.7 million) has provided the foundation for refurbishment of the Five Hills facility, home to Mongolia's regional peacekeeping training center, along with supporting peacekeeping training programs for the MAF.²⁴

These programs have all contributed to Mongolia's ability to participate in U.S.-sponsored regional peacekeeping exercises that have further developed the country's self-sustaining peacekeeping training program. The MAF's goal

²¹ Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States*, 110.

²² Ibid.

²³ Serafina, "The Global Peace Operations Initiative," 8.

²⁴ Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States*, 104.

is to continue to upgrade its training center and by 2015 transform it into a training facility for regional peace-support operations.

Since 2006, the training center at Five Hills has hosted the peacekeeping exercise Khaan Quest, which is Mongolia's largest annual multinational exercise.²⁵ The first Khaan Quest was held in 2003 as a bilateral exercise between the United States and Mongolia. Beginning in 2006, it became a multinational exercise involving forces from many other countries, including South Korea, Japan, Singapore, India, Cambodia, Nepal, and Thailand, along with observers from China and Russia. Mongolia considers this exercise to be its most important annual military training event, providing an opportunity for the country to showcase its capacity to play a key role in regional peace-support operations.²⁶

Since 2002, the MAF has participated in UN peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, Chad, Sudan, and Georgia and in the NATO mission to Kosovo. In 2008, through the U.S. Foreign Military Financing program, Mongolia received a sophisticated expeditionary medical-support system, which is now deployed to Darfur with 68 medical personnel—many of whom are female soldiers—in support of the UN mission there. This Level II hospital provides medical support to all UN forces in Darfur and health services to the local population.

In all, Mongolia has deployed over five thousand personnel in fifteen global missions supporting both U.S.- and NATO-led coalitions and UN peace-support operations since 2002.²⁷ In relation to the size of its population, Mongolia's contribution is extraordinary; the country is ranked 26th on the UN's list of contributing nations.²⁸ Through these peacekeeping and coalition deployments, the MAF has built a small but growing cadre of experienced and competent commissioned and noncommissioned officers who are now redefining the military as senior training and staff officers. This group of emerging leaders is now having an impact on Mongolia's military ability to conduct increasingly complex peace-support operations in sometimes dangerous and demanding environments.

In Afghanistan, for example, Mongolian artillery, mortar, and helicopter maintenance teams have provided training to the Afghan forces as part of the

²⁵ Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States*, 107.

²⁶ Author's interview with General Bayarmagni, deputy chief of the General Staff, in Ulaanbaatar, June 2012.

²⁷ "Mongolia Marks Int'l Day of UN Peacekeepers," Xinhua, May 28, 13.

²⁸ UN, "Ranking of Military and Police Contributions to UN Operations," April 30, 2013 ~ http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2013/apr13_2.pdf.

NATO Training Mission. Upon concluding their mission in early 2013, these teams received high praise from NATO.²⁹ Mongolia continues to provide six personnel as part of an Mi-17 aviation mentors/trainers team at the Kabul International Airport.³⁰ In addition to its role in the technical training and maintenance program, the MAF has provided a company-size unit to northern Afghanistan to conduct outside-the-wire patrols with German units. Mongolia recently took the lead on that mission, with German support, demonstrating the improved operational capabilities of the MAF.

MONGOLIA SETS ITS OWN COURSE

The MAF has instituted its own defense development and modernization program called the Armed Forces Development Program Through 2015.³¹ Within the framework of this program, the MAF has set three goals: develop a capable force that can participate in sustained UN peacekeeping operations, enhance counterterrorism capabilities, and conduct internal humanitarian and disaster relief missions. The burden of implementing this program and modernizing Mongolia's peacekeeping capability rests on the J3 Peace Support Operations Division of the MAF General Staff. Military reforms center on building a core of peacekeeping units that will coalesce into a single brigade consisting of three main battalions totaling three thousand personnel. This brigade is scheduled to be fully operational by 2015 and will give Mongolia the capability for sustained peacekeeping operations by having one battalion deployed, one in recovery, and one in training. The brigade will additionally consist of a signal company, a logistics company, an engineering company, and a military police company to provide enhanced capabilities. Soldiers for these units are generally selected from conventional ground and air force units but also include members from border forces and the national police.³² Furthermore, the MAF has made professional military educational reforms to ensure that all officers and soldiers are properly trained and qualified to conduct peace-support operations. Recent reforms include a new curriculum that supports five leadership schools

²⁹ Jonathan Addleton, "With the Mongolian Soldiers in Afghanistan," Embassy of the United States in Ulaanbaatar, October, 28, 2011.

³⁰ Ariunbold, "Why Has Mongolia Chosen to Participate in Peace Support Operations," 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³² Mongolian Ministry of Defense, *Defense Legislation*, vol. III (Ulaanbaatar, 2004), section 36-4.

for noncommissioned officers and a course on UN peacekeeping for both commissioned and noncommissioned officers.

Complementing the Armed Forces Development Program, Mongolia recently requested assistance from the United States in purchasing three C-130 aircraft, primarily to serve as platforms to deploy troops and equipment to overseas peacekeeping operations. Since the end of the Cold War, the Mongolian Air and Air Defense Forces no longer possess any significant fixed-wing lift aircraft and have relied heavily on UN-contracted aircraft for transport. This method requires lengthy and complicated coordination with both Russia and China for airspace clearance. The MAF has argued that having its own sovereign lift aircraft would enable Mongolia to coordinate airspace clearance bilaterally rather than through third-party assistance, thus reducing the political implications of relying on external foreign coordination for military airlift in and out of Mongolian airspace. Historically, both China and Russia have denied or delayed requests for U.S. and NATO aircraft to enter their airspace. On one occasion, Russia delayed air clearance for NATO aircraft bringing ammunition to Iraq from Mongolia.³³ China has likewise refused U.S. aircraft permission to transport Mongolian troops to Afghanistan, forcing Mongolia to arrange for contracted civilian aircraft to transport soldiers.³⁴

Although the expense of purchasing and maintaining C-130s is extremely high, the MAF remains determined to acquire them despite budget constraints. In anticipation of acquiring these aircraft, and as part of its ongoing defense reforms, the MAF is in the process of creating a separate and distinct Mongolian air force by 2015.³⁵ Currently, the Mongolian Air and Air Defense Force is a small component of the MAF, with the responsibility of defending Mongolia's airspace. It does not possess any fighter aircraft but instead relies on ground-based surface-to-air missile systems. With plans to acquire fixed-wing aircraft from both Russia and the United States, Mongolia has demonstrated a desire to improve active control of its airspace, along with acquiring the strategic lift capability to support global peacekeeping operations.

It is evident that Mongolia has used various forms of security-related aid to fundamentally reshape and reform a large portion of its defense force to

³³ Jargalsaikhan Mendee, "Finally a New Era in NATO-Mongolia Relations," George Washington University, *Voices From Central Asia*, no. 1, June 2012.

³⁴ Ariunbold, "Why Has Mongolia Chosen to Participate in Peace Support Operations?"

³⁵ B. Bayarmagnai, "Reform of Mongolian Armed Forces and Peace Support Operations" (presentation at the fifth annual ASEAN Regional Forum Peacekeeping Experts Seminar, Ulaanbaatar, June 2012).

conduct peacekeeping missions. The country has taken broad steps, across all of its military institutions and units, to successfully build and reshape this capacity. Unlike similar nations in East Asia that are building capacities to participate in peacekeeping operations, such as Cambodia and Indonesia, Mongolia suffers from no existential security threat (internal or external) and is no longer dependent on establishing alliances with larger countries like Russia, China, or the United States for its security. In the absence of any credible threat to national security, the government cannot justify a large standing conventional force. Instead, the decision in 2002 to participate in peacekeeping missions provided an opportunity for Mongolia to reorient its defense forces by pursuing independent military programs with other nations.

In order to build and sustain this peacekeeping capability, Mongolia has redirected funding and personnel strength from its standing conventional forces, border forces, and national police to participate in peacekeeping operations.³⁶ This deliberate reduction in the MAF's conventional force is indicative of the current security environment that Mongolia has achieved. With nearly three thousand soldiers now designated as peacekeepers, the country has incrementally increased its participation in peacekeeping operations since 2002, recently pushing the limits of its capabilities in the latest large-scale deployment to South Sudan. Furthermore, civilian institutions in Mongolia have also committed themselves to developing a peacekeeping capability. More generally, Mongolians draw a sense of national pride from their country's successes over the last ten years in supporting overseas peace and stability, with nearly 70% of the population favoring participation in UN peacekeeping operations.³⁷

RUSSIAN AND CHINESE REACTIONS TO MONGOLIA'S GLOBAL OUTREACH

The MAF has established robust military-to-military programs with over a dozen countries worldwide, including eight signed bilateral defense cooperation agreements. The depth and scope of these programs vary from country to country and reflect Mongolia's desire to expand global engagement in concert with its foreign policy. Since 1993, the MAF has relied heavily on

³⁶ Ariunbold, "Why Has Mongolia Chosen to Participate in Peace Support Operations," 53.

³⁷ Munk-Ochir and B. Negui, "Peace Support Operations Impact on Patriotism and National Identity" (presentation at the fifth ASEAN Regional Forum Peacekeeping Experts Meeting, Ulaanbaatar, August 27–28, 2012).

Russian support for the majority of its conventional military equipment and training. In 2008, Mongolia and Russia resumed joint training programs during their annual exercise named Darkhan, which was originally designed to teach Mongolian military experts to repair and restore equipment in field conditions.³⁸ The exercise was renamed Selenge in 2009 and evolved into a counterterrorism exercise. This year, it will be held in Doityn Shar Nuur, Mongolia, and will again focus on counterterrorism training. Russia has also extended opportunities for Mongolia to send soldiers and officers to various Russian training academies, and approximately 60% of Mongolian military personnel now train in Russia.³⁹ This ongoing close relationship reflects Mongolia's desire to anchor its friendly ties with Russia while expanding military relations with other nations and organizations. Activities with Russia have steadily increased since the resumption of joint training programs in 2008. The new equipment and training that Mongolia receives from the relationship will help the MAF meet the requirements of a modern military and equip it with the capabilities for both conventional self-defense and peacekeeping operations. There are a number of explanations for this increase in military activities between Russia and Mongolia. First, Russia does not want to lose its former ally to the United States, China, or NATO. Second, the MAF understands that the easiest way to modernize its arsenal is through Russian assistance.

In addition to its agreements with the United States and Russia, Mongolia has signed bilateral defense and cooperation agreements with China, Germany, South Korea, Turkey, and India.⁴⁰ Bilateral agreements with these nations provide the MAF with varying degrees of support, ranging from new equipment and weapons to opportunities for joint training and exercises. Beyond the annual exercise with Russia, Mongolia now conducts annual peacekeeping and counterterrorism exercises with China and India. Its defense relationship with China is still primarily focused on confidence-building activities, but China, too, has recognized Mongolia's desire to build its peacekeeping capacity and provided \$40 million in funding for the MAF's peacekeeping recreation center in 2011.⁴¹ China also has provided military engineering equipment for Mongolia's newly established construction and engineering battalions that

³⁸ Sharad K. Soni, "Russia and Mongolia: Recent Upsurge in Ties," *Defence and Security Alert*, February 2011, 47–49.

³⁹ Alicia J. Campi, "Mongolia and Russia Show Military Sheen," *Asia Times Online*, March 21, 2013.

⁴⁰ Bayarmagnai, "Reform of Mongolian Armed Forces and Peace Support Operations."

⁴¹ This recreation center is located just outside Ulaanbaatar and was built as a retreat center for the exclusive use of Mongolian soldiers and their families who deployed for peacekeeping or coalition operations.

are designated for peacekeeping.⁴² In November 2011, Mongolia hosted the highest-ranking delegation from China in ten years when the vice chairman of the PRC's Central Military Commission, General Xu Caihou, conducted an official visit. This visit signaled China's renewed interest in expanding military relations with Mongolia by establishing regularly scheduled joint training programs such as the Steppe Leader exercise, which was held in September 2013 at the Five Hills training center. This exercise primarily focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and included nearly four hundred soldiers from both Mongolia and China.⁴³

Mongolia's position seems to be that integration into the world beyond its immediate neighborhood will help increase national security. At the same time, Mongolia's official foreign policy pledges to "pursue a policy of refraining from joining any military alliance or grouping, allowing the use of its territory or air space against any other country, and [allowing] the stationing of foreign troops or weapons, including nuclear or any other type of mass destruction weapons in its territory."⁴⁴

This policy has so far seemed to reassure both Russia and China that their interests are not threatened by Mongolia's expanding bilateral relations with Western nations. Since 2004, Mongolia has been an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with the support of both China and Russia. Although both countries have urged it to become a full member, Mongolia has chosen to maintain its current status primarily due to concerns over the SCO's undefined purpose, function, and role in East Asia.⁴⁵ At the same time, Mongolia has taken steps to enhance the interoperability of the MAF with NATO forces through exchanging best practices and participating in a wide range of programs and training activities. On March 19, 2012, NATO announced that Mongolia would implement its first Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP).⁴⁶ The IPCP sets out plans to enhance interoperability, address global security issues, develop mechanisms for crisis prevention and management, and build capacity. Mongolia has already

⁴² Jargalsaikhan Mendee, "Mongolian Defense Diplomacy," University of British Columbia, Mongolia Focus, web log, October 9, 2013 ~ <http://blogs.ubc.ca/mongolia/2013/mongolian-defense-diplomacy>.

⁴³ "The 'Steppe Leader' Mongolia-China Joint Military Exercises Have Started," InfoMongolia.com, September 16, 2013.

⁴⁴ "Concept of Foreign Policy of Mongolia" is available from the Embassy of Mongolia in the United Kingdom ~ http://www.embassyofmongolia.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=76&lang=en.

⁴⁵ Author's interview with Mashbat Otgonbayar Sarlagtay, Ulaanbaatar, August 28, 2012.

⁴⁶ NATO, "NATO and Mongolia Agree Programme of Cooperation," NATO, March 19, 2012 ~ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_85430.htm.

established military-to-military programs with many member nations of NATO, including Germany, the Netherlands, France, Poland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Turkey, Bulgaria, and the United Kingdom. The IPCP will further assist the MAF with aligning its military goals and objectives with its national policy of international engagement. In addition, select MAF units may take part in the Operational Capabilities Concept (OCC), which is designed to prepare NATO partners to work with the alliance on NATO-led operations. The OCC focuses on increasing military effectiveness and interoperability during peacetime and improving the alliance's capability to field an effective and sustainable multinational force with partners in a crisis.⁴⁷ The Peace Support Operations Training Center at Five Hills is also being prepared for consideration to join NATO's network of partnership training and education centers. The facility could host a multitude of NATO and non-NATO nations, including former Soviet states such as Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. This marks an important step in Mongolia's push for international engagement, and the MAF will likely benefit from this program through training support, exercises, funding, and perhaps additional deployment opportunities.

Across all these initiatives, NATO's recognition of Mongolia's military capability is a clear indication of the MAF's successful military reforms. Mongolia has demonstrated that it is actively seeking engagement opportunities with NATO, with or without Russia's or China's approval. Although neither country has officially issued a *démarche* or chastised Mongolia for this partnership, it can be assumed that both are wary of this burgeoning relationship. Balancing engagement with NATO and maintaining good relations with both China and Russia will likely remain a challenge for Mongolia in the long term.

MONGOLIA'S BALANCING ACT

Mongolia's peacekeeping-centric military has enhanced its global reputation as a capable and interoperable force that can conduct full-spectrum peace-support operations. Significant limitations remain, however, with respect to air mobility, equipment interoperability, institutional reform, funding, and personnel. Regarding personnel, the MAF still relies on conscription for both the military and border protection forces. At the age of eighteen, all male Mongolians are required to perform one year of military

⁴⁷ NATO, "NATO's Cooperation with Mongolia," March 23, 2013 ~ http://www.nato.int/cps/eu/natolive/topics_85297.htm.

service, resulting in significant personnel turnover across the services and reducing unit readiness. The MAF must work to maintain a balance between the size of its peacekeeping and conventional units as it attempts to preserve a small conventional force. The latter consists of small mechanized rifle regiments, garrisoned in various cities and towns around Mongolia, under the command of the General Purpose Force. Many of these units must contribute soldiers to deploying peacekeeping units, further reducing the MAF's manpower and readiness for the general defense of Mongolia. As a result, the MAF will likely seek out broader foreign military engagement to help train and properly equip its peacekeeping forces.

With respect to funding, the MAF is operating in a very constrained fiscal environment in which its budget only makes up 1.4% of GDP, despite record economic growth over the last few years.⁴⁸ Mongolia's GDP has risen to \$13.28 billion, but Mongolian law still restricts the amount of GDP that can be dedicated to defense spending. Current aid does not cover funding for new weapons or pay soldier benefits and salaries. This limited military budget will pose an ongoing challenge to the expansion of the Armed Forces Development Program. Nonetheless, the MAF will likely continue transforming its forces by building a fully modern peacekeeping capability. While reshaping its military internally, Mongolia has managed to reach out to individual Western countries for military support to modernize its force. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, the strategic problem that remains for Mongolia will be to determine how much outreach it can conduct with the West before tipping this balance and straining relations with either Russia or China.

As stated earlier, Russia's view of Mongolia's recent partnership with NATO is not entirely clear. Although Moscow has not publicly objected to Mongolia's partnership program, evidence suggests that this move, along with other global engagement activities, may explain the recent increase in Russian military activities and exchanges with the MAF. China, on the other hand, remains ambivalent about the MAF's participation in NATO activities and is content with building military training and security programs with Mongolia. The current foreign and defense policy of Mongolia states that "maintaining friendly relations with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China shall be a priority of Mongolia's foreign policy activity. It shall not adopt the line of either country but shall maintain in principle a balanced relationship with both of them and shall promote all-round good

⁴⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2012–13* (Washington, D.C.: CIA, 2012) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

neighborly co-operation.”⁴⁹ However, Mongolia’s global military outreach will likely challenge this balance in the future.

Weged between two authoritarian superpowers, Mongolia has achieved much in building a democratic state, strong economy, and international credibility through its third-neighbor policy. The MAF has complemented the latter initiative by building an internationally recognized professional military force with a global reputation for excellence in peacekeeping. The development of peacekeeping forces within Mongolia has raised its international profile and provided it with a sense of independence from both Russia and China in pursuing global military partnership programs. As a result, both countries have adopted measures to increase military programs with Mongolia, signaling a tacit recognition of its emerging regional stature and peacekeeping capabilities.

This recognition has indirectly strengthened Mongolia’s international status, sovereign identity, and freedom to contribute to global security. Realigning its forces for peacekeeping, revamping military education and doctrine, and expanding global engagement have thus far successfully improved Mongolia’s military capabilities. The country has emerged as an active proponent for regional security institutions and has encouraged attention from the United States, NATO, and others to expand military interoperability. Mongolia has thus shaped the MAF into a critical instrument of foreign policy that has successfully complemented its third-neighbor policy. Discarding the legacies of the Cold War, Mongolia has established a new identity and direction for its armed forces and has set an example for other emerging democracies in the region to follow. ♦

⁴⁹ See “Concept of Foreign Policy of Mongolia,” section II.