

MONGOLIA'S ASIA POLICY

By G. Tumurchuluun (Mongolia)

Introduction

The Asia and Pacific region is one of dynamically developing regions with serious military-political potential. Its weight and influence upon overall international politics is steadily growing. It is also a challenging region in terms of economic perspective. The region, however, has a considerable conflict-breaking ground as it still remains in a tight grip of unresolved Cold War legacies. The increasing rivalry among regional powers, inherited historical problems, territorial disputes such as the divided Korean peninsula and Taiwan issues add to the complexities of regional inter-state relations. Mongolia views that all controversies existing in the region must be resolved peacefully. For this reason, Mongolia supports the six –party talks on Korean Peninsula.

Traditional threats to security still dominate the region, and coupled with non-traditional challenges, represent serious security risks. New non-conventional threats to security that are transnational in nature and do not recognize any borders or cultures are yet to be addressed by the nations of the region. The traditional and new security issues are pushing the countries of the region towards regional dialogue and negotiations.

Asia -Pacific

At the beginning of the 21st century the world witnesses a further process of deepening globalization, interdependence and integration between and among nations. The Asia Pacific region is no exception. It has become a world largest part involved in this process. Such a trend in the developmental search of countries and peoples provides both opportunity and challenge to humanity. Likewise this process and other changes bring about a history-making external environment which affects foreign policy and international behavior of different Asian nations, including Mongolia.

It is natural that any country in formulating its foreign policy proceeds from many factors of political, economic and even geographic nature. It is indeed a geographic location of a country making up one of the factors, which has the influence upon the elaboration of its foreign policy and upon the conduct of its international activities. Notwithstanding the very fact that every independent nation decides its own affairs by itself, it is true for government

and leadership of any country to respect genuine and common interests of its neighbours as well as to consider immediate problems of the region in which a given country finds itself. It is obvious especially for a small- and medium-size nations to play a role in the settlement of issues in its own region before it takes up and participates in the solution of far away problems in remote distance. At the same time nobody can deny a right of any such nations to contribute to the solution of larger global problems and to preservation of the world wide stability and values of democracy and human rights through their active participation in the international collective efforts to resolve these global problems.

Moreover, every nation to promote its development and prosperity tends to gain economic benefits and profits from international cooperation, integration and international specialization, particularly in its own region rather than in distant parts of the world.

Being an Asian nation, Mongolia naturally pays a particular attention to the solution of existing issues and concerns in the Asia Pacific region. The Mongolian Government outlined its foreign policy goals and objectives in the Government Policy Action Program which the Parliament adopted in 2004. The Action Program formulates a security policy of the new Government to expand bilateral relations between Mongolia and Asia Pacific countries, participate in the multilateral dialogue and integration evolving in the region as well as contribute to promotion of stability and cooperation. Being a medium-size Asian state, Mongolia thus attaches special significance to the solution of pressing issues and urgent problems still existing in the region. It is particularly important in this context to have a clear vision of Mongolia's role in the Asian affairs of bilateral and multilateral efforts, its capability potential to contribute to the settlement of the regional issues as well as its present and future participation in the process of ongoing integration. To nurture such a vision we must bear in mind various factors and trends of events in the Asia Pacific region, which make up important vista of the external environment for Mongolia's foreign policy.

Mongolia is a sixth largest Asian country in terms of its territory on this huge continent. There is a general understanding that Asia might be divided into a number of different geographical sub-regions, including East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and sometimes West Asia. Each sub-region has its own peculiarities and specifics. In terms of its location Mongolia belongs to the East Asia.

East Asia

East Asia is a region where a majority of Newly Industrialized Countries (NIC) exist. Politicians, economists and researchers recognize this region of rapid economic development as resounding success stories. Additionally, East Asia and the Pacific region has other special features. Despite ethnic diversity of the region, there are also world most ethnically pure nations such as Japan and the two Koreas with tiny minorities. Likewise diverse religious populations who believe in Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucism, Islam and Christianity live in the Asia Pacific region. Spoken languages include Chinese, Japanese, Javanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Thai, Mongolian and others. In addition, English is widely spoken as a second language in many areas of the region. These are but a few characteristic features of East Asia.

East Asia geographically consists of two sub-regions, namely, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Against such a background Mongolia belongs to Northeast Asia. For Europeans Mongolia might well serve as a gateway to East Asia and Northeast Asia in terms of its geographic location. Northeast Asia region is also referred to as Northeast Asia and Pacific region comprising 8 nations – Japan, Mongolia, China, Russia, Republic of Korea, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea plus the United States of America and Canada which have deep rooted interests in and relations with Northeast Asia and which happen to be adjacent nations across the North Pacific sea route. Thus Mongolia is considered to be a part of Northeast Asia. As one may judge from the above, this sub-region to which Mongolia belongs embraces nations which are both economically and militarily powerful states. Economically, Northeast Asia and the North Pacific area have been and will continue to be a growth driving engine to the world economy. In addition, Russia and China occupy Northeast Asia’s largest territories.

Mongolia’s foreign policy activities *vis-a-vis* the Asia Pacific region can be attributed to its expanding bilateral relationship with Asia Pacific nations. At present Mongolia maintains diplomatic relations with 45 countries out of over 50 in the Asia Pacific community. Despite its large territory, Mongolia’s economy is not great and counts only about two and half million consumers. But in terms of per capita potential of natural wealth and resources are concerned, Mongolia can be considered one of the world’s richest economies.

Southeast Asia

Mongolia traditionally maintains friendly relationships with all Southeast Asia nations. Termination of the Cold War and Mongolia's reforms brought about new favorable opportunities for further boosting Mongolia's relations with ASEAN member countries. One of the first important events was the first official visit by the Prime Minister of Malaysia to Mongolia in 1997. At the time he was accompanied by seven government ministers as well as nine members of the Malaysian Parliament. A number of bilateral documents, including Agreements on Cooperation in the Economic, Scientific and Cultural Fields as well as Agreement between the Government of Mongolia and Government of Malaysia for Air Services were concluded. Afterwards Presidents of Vietnam and Indonesia made visits to Mongolia in 2000 and 2003 respectively. There were summit meetings of the delegations of Mongolia at the highest levels with heads of State or Government of Singapore, Laos, Philippines and Thailand over recent years. Trade and other relations developed between Mongolia and the ASEAN nations. The first Mongolian entrepreneurs in the early days of transition to democracy and free market economy often imported Singapore-made electronic merchandise and traded on the domestic market. Well-known Mongolian business companies started private business from Singapore and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. All this indicates there are ample opportunities and foundations for a further expansion of close relations and fruitful cooperation among Mongolia and Southeast Asia countries in the twenty-first century. Likewise Mongolia maintains and develops friendly relations with Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific community countries.

South and Central Asia

Mongolia traditionally maintains friendly relationships with South Asia nations. We in Mongolia call India a spiritual partner because the Indo-Mongolian cultural and spiritual relationship dates back centuries. Despite great geographical distance Mongolia-India relations are developing in different areas, including political, economic, cultural, humanitarian, communication and information technology cooperation. As a success story we usually cite Indian Government decision to lend assistance to Mongolia in establishing Information Technology Training Centre for Excellence in Ulaanbaatar and Community Information Centres in five rural provinces. Mongolia maintains traditionally good relationship with other South Asia nations including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mongolia's strategy vis-a-vis Central Asia new nation-building countries including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and others is another foreign policy dimension in Asia and Pacific region. Mongolia has observer-country status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes China, Russia and the Central Asian nations. Mongolia constitutes a bridge over East Asia and Central Asia both geographically and politically. There is a growing cooperation between Turkey and other West Asia countries.

Close and friendly bilateral relationship which Mongolia maintains virtually with all Asia and Pacific nations bring about a very favorable external environment for the foreign policy operations Mongolia undertake in this huge part of the world. Moreover, bilateral relations of Mongolia with Asian countries are legally reinforced by the conclusion of agreements or treaties. Mongolia has concluded Agreements on Mutual Protection of Investments with fifteen Asian countries. Similarly, it has signed treaties with Asian 10 countries on prevention of double taxation and avoidance of tax payment. Expanding bilateral relations might serve as a good foundation for Mongolia's future active participation in the multilateral and regional activities in Asia, especially in East Asia policy exercises.

Mongolia seeks to actively contribute to the multilateral peace and security efforts of other Asia and Pacific nations. Mongolia's foreign policy strategy reinforces this contribution. Globalization stimulates and accelerates the integration process and increasing interdependence of nations particularly at regional level. Accordingly there is a growing number regional organizations. This process is clearly noticeable in East Asia. Mongolia's foreign policy strategy coincides with this desire and will be closely involved in the multilateral machinery and integration in Asia Pacific region. Mongolia exerts efforts to become a member of existing multilateral regional forums, becoming a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1998. Since its admission Mongolia actively participates in the work of this forum which constitutes a major venue of regional harmony and stability as well as a forum of confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia Pacific region. Another important structure for promoting cooperation among Asian nations, originally initiated by Thailand in 2000, is the Asia Cooperation Dialogue in which Mongolia has had membership since June 2004.

Since 1991 Mongolia was interested to join the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC), a non-governmental forum for promoting economic and scientific cooperation as well as collaboration of regional

business communities. Mongolia established its national committee – MONPECC (1997) and sought further participation, gaining associate membership in April 2000. Now Mongolia wishes to elevate its status of an associated member into a full-fledged PECC member-country. This wish represents Mongolia's sincere desire to take active part in the common efforts of the other East Asia nations search for stability, development and prosperity.

Despite these positive initial steps in foreign policy, however, Mongolia is no longer satisfied with a current state of affairs. Mongolia's foreign policy concept adopted by the Parliament 12 years ago stipulates that "Mongolia shall strive to become a member of the Asia and Pacific Economic Cooperation Council." Accordingly, Mongolia submitted its application to become a member of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (APEC) as early as 1993. Mongolia has sought to join this forum at different levels and took part in APEC meetings of working groups as observer. Today Mongolia makes a strong appeal to APEC member-countries to approve Mongolia's membership since Mongolia's two neighbours - China and Russia - already have full membership status. The East Asia and Pacific countries account for the most substantial portion of Mongolian foreign trade while this trade passes through the Pacific Rim. Mongolia looks forward to APEC entry in 2007 when the moratorium on new members' admission is suspended. Likewise Mongolia wishes to attend meetings of ASEM (Europe - Asia Meeting) hopes that other Asian countries will lend their support. There is another East Asia structure which incorporates ASEAN countries, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). This forum is known as ASEAN plus three plus Australia, New Zealand and India or East Asia Community, and Mongolia sincerely wishes to contribute to East Asia Community efforts as well as to stability and economic prosperity in East Asia.

Mongolia's Asia Pacific policy priority is a search to promote solutions to pressing issues which affect Asia Pacific. Mongolia views that a number of existing issues in East Asia can be resolved peacefully and amicably. The end of Cold War did not end regional controversies. Still there are such issues as North Korea's nuclear program, territorial disputes, other outstanding bilateral differences, as well as new threats and challenges such as international terrorism, human and drug trafficking, etc. On the Korean Peninsula problem Mongolia supports the Six-Party Talks mechanism which can lead to successful completion in years to come. International terrorism does not shun Asia and Pacific region. There were numerous attacks in Asia Pacific region where international terrorists struck, including the Philippines.

Natural Disaster Reduction constitutes another urgency for the Asia and Pacific agenda. On December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami caused loss of thousands of human lives and a tremendous material devastation and destruction to Asian nations. Mongolia raised assistance to the tsunami-stricken areas. Likewise there was a strong civil society movement launched in Mongolia to mobilize and collect humanitarian assistance to fellow Asian countries. There should be common efforts made to mitigate natural calamities and to reinforce future disaster preparedness in Asia and elsewhere in the region. Mongolia appeals to establish in different parts of Asia international early warning network as well as risk management systems.

There is a variety of environmental issues on Asia, particularly East Asia and Pacific. nations agenda. Deforestation, desertification, yellow-sand storms afflict great parts of Southeast and Northeast Asia.

There is a serious human health security problem facing East Asia and Pacific. Extreme poverty, pandemics and infectious diseases are threats in themselves which make more likely the emergence of other threats, including civil conflicts. In all of these efforts, Mongolia can make a contribution.