

Foreign Policy of President Kh.Battulga (2017-2020)¹

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Abstract: *Mongolia located between Russia and China has been the object of close attention not only for its geographic neighbors, but also for non-regional states called as “third neighbor”. That’s why Mongolian foreign policy has traditionally been an important part of its development strategy. One of the main roles in the process of determining Mongolia’s foreign policy strategy belongs to the President. Democratic Party candidate Kh. Battulga won at the Presidential elections in 2017. All his steps in the field of foreign policy can be divided into three main areas. Firstly, the President of Mongolia has established himself as a supporter of improving relations with Russia, primarily through intensifying trade and economic cooperation and active personal diplomacy towards the Russian side. Secondly, Kh. Battulga demonstrated diplomacy in the Chinese direction though he had difficult time to build cooperation with the southern neighbor of Mongolia due to his election campaign criticizing China... Thirdly, Kh. Battulga made some changes in the strategy of relations with the “third neighbor”. For example, he rejected an active participation in some global international events and stayed indifferent to the idea of “permanent neutrality” of Mongolia. Perhaps the most serious foreign policy initiative of the new President of Mongolia was the idea of joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a permanent member. This idea has caused serious political discussions in the country, dividing the expert network into supporters and opponents of the President’s initiative. However, despite certain changes in Mongolia’s foreign policy under the President Battulga, it is difficult to state a radical turn in the foreign policy strategy. Due to political and legal reasons, as well as the external conditions of social and economic development of Mongolia, the President is not able to change the main foundations and principles of foreign policy of the state formed in the post-socialist period. Meanwhile it could be admitted that in Mongolia’s foreign policy the rationality based on the ideological solidarity (“commonwealth of democracies”) is gradually giving way to the rationality of a geographical contiguity and economic pragmatism.*

Keywords: *Mongolia, Russia, China, third neighbor, multi-pillar foreign policy*

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Introduction

Mongolia, located between Russia and China, has been traditionally considered as a geopolitically significant state. During almost the entire XX century the “Russia-Mongolia-China triangle” has been the core of international relations in the region². For a long time, the fate of Mongolian statehood has depended on the nature of relations with the two great neighbors. Russian Empire / USSR has traditionally acted as the main ally and defender of the sovereignty and independence of Mongolia while China posed a threat to the security and independent existence of the Mongolian state. Until 1946, the Republic of China refused to recognize the independence of the Mongolian People’s Republic, considering it as a part of its territory. Only under direct pressure from the Soviet leadership, Chiang Kai-shek was forced to make concessions on this issue, establishing diplomatic relations with the MPR. During the aggravation of relations between the USSR and the PRC, Ulaanbaatar relied on a comprehensive alliance with Moscow, fearing the revisionist sentiments of Mao Zedong, who stayed

skeptical about Mongol sovereignty.

After the collapse of the USSR, the geopolitical balance of power in the region changed radically. Ulaanbaatar normalized relations with Beijing, and established close ties with Western countries and its Asian allies (primarily with Japan and the Republic of Korea) which provided Mongolia with the opportunity to choose a new foreign policy strategy, based on the principle of “multi-pillar” (Mong. “олон тугруурт”) one. Not wishing to be bound by allied obligations with any great power, Mongolia relied on partnerships and balanced relations with the main players - Russia and China as its geographical neighbors, as well as a group of non-regional countries (USA, EU, Japan, Republic of Korea, India, Turkey), called as the “third neighbor” (Mong. “гуравдагч хөрш”).³ As a result, a competitive environment arose around Mongolia, expressed in the rivalry of the great powers for influence in the region and access to the country’s large mineral deposits. In this regard, the question of the foreign policy preferences of the Mongolian ruling elite has become one of the main agendas of the political process in the country.

The Role of the Presidency in Mongolia’s Foreign Policy

Despite the fact that the most influential authority in Mongolia belongs to the parliament, the presidency plays a prominent role in the state political system, especially in the field of foreign

policy. According to the Constitution of Mongolia, the president represents the country in relations with foreign states and, in agreement with the parliament, concludes international treaties, appoints

2 See, Zheleznyakov A.S. Russia in the Mongolian Triangle // Political Journal. 2004. No. 8. P. 42-44; Luzyanin S.G. Russia, Mongolia, China in the first half of the twentieth century. Moscow: Publishing house of the Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2003. Pp.320

3 Concept of Mongolian Foreign Policy <https://www.legalinfo.mn/annex/details/3362?lawid=6340> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

and recalls the heads of Mongolian embassies in foreign countries, is the commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces, heads the National Security Council (Article 33)⁴.

A significant example of an active foreign policy position is the activities of Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, who had served as President of Mongolia for two terms (2009-2017). In particular, in 2012, with the active participation of the Mongolian president, the country joined the OSCE⁵ and joined the NATO Individual

Partnership Program⁶. On the initiative of Ts. Elbegdorj in Ulaanbaatar, starting from 2014, the international conference "Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Security in Northeast Asia" is held on a regular basis⁷. Finally, the head of the Mongolian state succeeded in establishing a trilateral format of negotiations between the heads of Russia, Mongolia and China on the development of economic corridors⁸. As a result, the President Ts.Elbegdorj was steadily associated with an active foreign policy of Mongolia.

Foreign Policy Aspects of Battulga's Election Campaign

In July 2017, Khaltmaagiin Battulga⁹ won the presidential elections and became the head of state until at least 2021. According to a widespread opinion, the foreign policy attitudes and preferences of Kh. Battulga, declared during the election campaign, were one of the factors of his final victory. First of all, it is worth noting that considerable emphasis was placed on criticizing Mongolia's contemporary relationship with China. On the one hand, in recent years, the PRC has been Mongolia's key foreign economic partner, ranking first in the country's trade turnover and in foreign investment¹⁰. Thousands of

Mongolian citizens annually visit China for trade, educational, medical and other purposes. Ulaanbaatar and Beijing have established a comprehensive strategic partnership. On the other hand, both for historical reasons and because of current circumstances, the Mongols are extremely wary of their southern neighbor, fearing, above all, one-sided economic dependence and ethnocultural assimilation¹¹. So, the fears of the Mongols in relation to China and the Chinese were actively exploited by Kh. Battulga's supporters during the election campaign.

Firstly, even a few years before

4 Constitution of Mongolia <http://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=33> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

5 Mongolia joined the OSCE <http://ru.rfi.fr/v-mire/20121121-mongoliya-vstupila-v-obse> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

6 NATO and Mongolia agree program of cooperation https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_85430.htm. (Accessed September 30, 2020)

7 Ulaanbaatar Dialogue <https://www.un.int/mongolia/mongolia/ulaanbaatar-dialogue> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

8 Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and President of Mongolia Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52211> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

9 Results of the second round of voting in the 2017 Presidential Election of Mongolia <http://gec.gov.mn/details/2188>(Accessed September 30, 2020)

10 Foreign Trade http://www.1212.mn/stat.aspx?LIST_ID=976_L14# (Accessed September 30, 2020)

11 Terentyev V.I. Images of China and Chinese in the national consciousness of Mongols // Bulletin of the Tomsk State University. 2016. No. 406. P. 152-157.

his nomination for the presidency of Mongolia, Kh. Battulga criticized the project to build a railway from the country's large mineral deposits to the border with China on a narrow-gauge standard. In his opinion, this might lead to deepening the raw material dependence of the Mongolian economy on its southern neighbor and negatively affect national security¹². Secondly, the campaign "accused" the main opponent, the Mongolian People's Party candidate M. Enkhbold, of his sympathy for China and his Chinese ancestry¹³.

In addition to the image of an anti-Chinese politician, Kh. Battulga is remembered as the friendliest to Russia candidate. Although all of the candidates declared the need for maintaining and developing friendship with the northern neighbor, it was Kh. Battulga who more actively exploited the positive image of Russia among the Mongolian population. According to opinion polls by the "Sant Maral" Foundation, Russia is by far the leader among the countries named as the most desirable external partner. So, in

2016 and 2017 to the question "Which country is the best partner for Mongolia?" Russia was named by 61.1% and 66.6%, respectively. By comparison, China got 1.6% and 0.6%, the US 6.8% and 6.5%, Japan 6.3% and 7.3%, respectively¹⁴.

The image of Kh. Battulga as a "pro-Russian politician" was formed several years before the election campaign. He was among those Mongolian politicians who openly supported the reunification of Crimea with Russia in the spring of 2014¹⁵. An important part of his election program was the thesis of increasing trade and economic ties with Russia as a condition for strengthening the country's national security¹⁶. The "Ardchilal" Democratic Party newspaper published a close-up photo of Kh. Battulga and Vladimir Putin. Both presidents share common interests in doing judo which is quite symbolic. In addition, there are some other important features that mark Kh. Battulga as a pro-Russian politician, among which are his knowledge of the Russian language and rumors about his wife whose origin is Russian.

12 Geopolitics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqXGQ4uCT28>(Accessed September 30, 2020)

13 The reason for Kh. Battulga's victory and M.Enkhbold's defeat <https://www.24tsag.mn/a/152935> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

14 Sant Maral Foundation Politbarometer <https://www.santmaral.org/publications>(Accessed September 30, 2020)

15 Khaltmaa Battulga: "Mongolia Supports the Results of the Referendum in Crimea." <http://www.unuudur.com/?p=28322> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

16 Democratic Party candidate Kh. Battulga's action plan <http://gec.gov.mn/details/2137> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

Relations with Russia and China

President Kh. Battulga started his first steps in the international arena with an ambitious initiative to intensify trade and economic relations with Russia. In August 2017, during the opening ceremony of the World Judo Championship in Budapest, for the first time as President of Mongolia, he met with V. Putin and announced his participation in the upcoming in September 2017 “Eastern Economic Forum” in Vladivostok¹⁷. During this Forum, Kh. Battulga proposed a project for transporting Mongolian coal to South Korea and Japan through the Far Eastern seaports of Russia, and also expressed his hope for signing a free trade agreement between Mongolia and the Eurasian Economic Union¹⁸. In June 2018 in Ulaanbaatar with the support of the Mongolian President, a series of events titled “Mongolian-Russian Initiative-2018” was held to strengthen trade and investment cooperation between the two countries. In addition, the task of Mongolia’s construction of a hydroelectric power station on the cross-boundary Selenga River and its tributaries which in recent years has been a stumbling block in Russian-Mongolian relations was actually removed from the current agenda. These actions of the Mongolian President confirmed many observers in their opinion

of Kh. Battulga’s intentions to pursue a foreign policy course, largely oriented towards the cooperation with Russia.

Relations with the PRC looked different in the first months of Kh. Battulga’s presidency. The image of a politician with anti-Chinese rhetoric clearly prevented the Mongolian President from establishing working contact with his Chinese partners. Moreover, shortly after taking office, Kh. Battulga in one of his interviews harshly criticized the position of the ruling Mongolian People’s Party, whose government, under the pressure from the Chinese side, refused to accept the XIV Dalai Lama in Mongolia in the future¹⁹. In particular, he stated that “the issue of the Dalai Lama’s visits to Mongolia is the exclusive prerogative of the Mongolian side, and the Chinese side should not try to put pressure on Ulaanbaatar”²⁰. Only a year later, in early June 2018, within the framework of the SCO summit in Qingdao, the first meeting of Kh. Battulga and Chinese President Xi Jinping took place, at which the parties discussed the prospects for the development of trilateral economic corridors between Russia, Mongolia and China. Kh. Battulga’s official visit to China in April 2019, during which a

17 Vladimir Putin met with President of Mongolia Khaltmaagiin Battulga http://news.mongolnow.com/29_08_a01.html (Accessed March 28, 2020)

18 Vostochny port in Primorye is already ready to receive Mongolian coal ITAR-TASS, 09/05/2017. <http://tass.ru/transport/4532128> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

19 See, Rodionov V.A. The Dalai Lama XIV Factor in Contemporary Mongolian-Chinese Relationship // *Vlast*. 2017. No. 9. P. 153-157.

20 Kh. Battulga: I am not anti-Chinese. But... <http://itoim.mn/index.php/site/news/10541> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

number of important bilateral agreements were signed²¹, finally dispelled doubts of skeptics about the importance of relations with Beijing for the Mongolian president. The PRC's role as one of the key partners for Mongolia was confirmed by the short-term visit of the Mongolian President to China in February 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this visit, Kh. Battulga expressed support for the Chinese people in difficult times and announced the provision of 30,000 sheep to China as aid from Mongolia²².

It is worth noting that Kh. Battulga's diplomacy in the Chinese direction

is developing, first of all, within the framework of a trilateral format, i.e. Mongolia's cooperation with Russia and China in the SCO, in the "Economic Corridors" project, which includes Mongolia's long-standing dream of becoming a transit country for Russian gas to China²³.

In general, the geography of foreign visits and international meetings of the Mongolian head indicates the priority of relations with the closest neighbors - Russia and China.

Table. Kh. Battulga's meetings with leaders of foreign states

2017	2018	2019	2020
Vladimir Putin (Budapest)	Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin (Qingdao)	Xi Jinping (Beijing) Lee Nak Yeon (Ulaanbaatar)	Xi Jinping (Beijing)
Vladimir Putin (Vladivostok)	Vladimir Putin (Vladivostok)	Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin (Bishkek)	
	Vladimir Putin (Baku)	Donald Trump (Washington)	
		Vladimir Putin (Ulaanbaatar)	
		Vladimir Putin (Vladivostok)	
		Ram Nath Kovind (New Delhi)	

21 Documents signed during the state visit of president Battulga to China <https://president.mn/en/2019/04/26/documents-signed-during-the-state-visit-of-president-battulga-to-china/> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

22 China Focus: Xi says China, Mongolia help each other in face of difficulties http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/27/c_138824927.htm (Accessed September 30, 2020)

23 Gazprom and Mongolia to create a joint venture to develop a feasibility study for the construction of a gas pipeline to China <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/9282045> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

Third Neighbor Policy

In addition to relations with geographical neighbors, the expert community is no less attentively following the new president's approach to the strategy of the "third neighbor". In this regard, Kh. Battulga cannot avoid comparisons with his predecessor in this post, Ts. Elbegdorj, who earned the reputation of a pro-Western politician.

On the one hand, Kh. Battulga continued the general foreign policy strategy for developing the "third neighbor" policy. In late July 2019, he paid an official visit to the United States, during which the Mongolian-American Declaration on Strategic Partnership was signed²⁴. As a result, the United States became the fifth country (after Russia, Japan, China and India) with which Mongolia has established strategic partnership relations. He also paid a visit to India (called Mongolia's "spiritual neighbor") in September 2019 and had a meeting in Ulaanbaatar with the Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea Lee Nak Yeon.

On the other hand, a number of steps taken by Kh. Battulga in the international area demonstrate a departure from Ts. Elbegdorj's policy towards the "third neighbor". A striking feature of the first two years of Kh. Battulga's presidency was his refusal to be engaged in the work of global international organizations. He ignored the regular meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2018, which was regularly visited by former

president Ts. Elbegdorj. Also, the present Mongolian President did not attend the plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly 72nd session. Though Kh. Battulga explained his non-involvement in these events due to the country's domestic issues, it can be regarded as shifting away from the strategy of former president Ts. Elbegdorj, who used the platforms of these global organizations for positioning Mongolia as a liberal democratic country.

Another deviation from Ts. Elbegdorj's line was actual closing down the work for promoting the Law on granting Mongolia the status of permanent neutrality. The draft of this law, developed at the initiative of Ts. Elbegdorj, assumed that Mongolia would be given the official status of a neutral country that did not enter any military-political alliances and organizations. This bill caused a mixed reaction from Russia and China. In particular, the former Russian ambassador to Mongolia V.V. Samoilenko, in his article on this topic, questioned the adoption of such a law: "What has changed in the world and in the region and has cast doubt on the strategic stability provided by the integration processes in Asia that are favorable for Mongolia? What new threats and challenges did Ulaanbaatar see, who do they want to ensure the neutrality between?"²⁵.

The initiative that was not formally related to foreign policy was the idea

24 MEDIA NOTE: Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia <https://mn.usembassy.gov/strategic-partnership-declaration-us-mongolia/> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

25 V.V. Samoilenko. Neutrality: an urgent need or a rudiment of the past? <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/neytralitet-aktualnaya-potrebnost-ili-rudiment-proshlogo/> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

of Kh. Battulga to return death penalty in Criminal code, abolished in due time on the initiative of Ts. Elbegdorj. The abolition of this punishment was considered as one of the main achievements by the former president and was positively noted in the West, which sees this step as an important attribute of the democratic development of Mongolia. In this regard, the idea of Kh. Battulga was considered by Western organizations and experts as a departure from democratic values. Thus, the international human rights organization Amnesty International, in its report on the situation of citizens' rights in Mongolia in 2017, specifically noted the draft law on restoring the death penalty law in the country as a negative aspect²⁶.

An even more resonant event in the internal policy of Mongolia, which

received a certain response abroad, was the amendments proposed by Kh. Battulga to the laws regulating the legal status of judges, the prosecutor general and the head of the anti-corruption agency. A number of Western media outlets described these steps by the Mongolian president as an offensive of authoritarianism and a step away from the values of democracy, hinting at the possible deterioration of relations between Ulaanbaatar and the "third neighbor"²⁷.

On the whole, the first years of Kh. Battulga's presidency were not the most effective in terms of developing relationships between Mongolia and the "third neighbor" and its positioning as "the only democracy in the region," which Ts. Elbegdorj was so concerned about.

SCO Initiative

Perhaps the most notable event that can become a serious turn in Mongolia's foreign policy is Kh. Battulga's initiative on the country's possible entry into the SCO. Since 2004 Mongolia has had the status of an observer in this organization. Russia and China, as the structure-forming members of the SCO, traditionally advocate granting permanent membership to Mongolia. However, in Mongolia itself, for many years, the issue

of the prospects of changing this status to the status of a full-fledged member has been the subject of public debate. For example, President Ts. Elbegdorj repeatedly stressed the need for Mongolia to maintain its observer status in the SCO. Against this background, the phrase uttered by Kh. Battulga in May 2018 at the Mongolian Economic Forum about "the expediency of raising the status of Mongolia in the SCO" sounded like a

26 Report: Mongolia 2017/2018 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/mongolia/report-mongolia/> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

27 See, Here's how democracy is eroding in Mongolia https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/03/heres-how-democracy-is-eroding-mongolia/?fbclid=IwAR1SSi1_4pOT50rTPUSPU-br7jOJ_8bLb8QEynLpY6jaNw4-unXl5gH5Chg&utm_term=.416cce8fc850 (Accessed September 30, 2020) ; Genghis Khan's Biggest Fan Is Testing Mongolia's Democracy https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-04-16/genghis-khan-s-biggest-fan-is-testing-mongolia-s-democracy?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&utm_campaign=Pol&cmpId=GP.Pol (Accessed September 30, 2020)

bolt from the blue and provoked another wave of disputes²⁸. Some representatives of the Mongolian expert community note that this initiative by Kh. Battulga may negatively affect the policy of the “third neighbor”, while others supported the President’s idea²⁹. The reaction of the Western expert community representatives is indicative in this regard. Some of them directly expressed

their skepticism on the issue, referring to the “authoritarian nature” of the SCO, membership in which is not advisable for Mongolia as “the only democratic country in the region”³⁰.

Thus, the above-described allows concluding that President Kh. Battulga is quite clearly trying to move away from the foreign policy line of his predecessor in this post and to outline new priorities.

Drivers of Change in Mongolia Foreign Policy

Can some of the adjustments in Mongolia’s foreign policy be explained solely by personal preferences of the present Mongolian President? Obviously, one cannot deny the fact that President Kh. Battulga sympathizes with Russia and repeatedly noted his respect for the Russian President. It is also evident that he, unlike Ts. Elbegdorj, is less affiliated with Western liberal institutions, and rather tends to more conservative views. However, the ongoing changes are hardly due to this circumstance alone.

World politics has been characterized by an increase in the level of confrontation between the great powers in recent years. The core of the new conflict is the relationship between the United States (more broadly, the collective West), the Russian Federation and the PRC. All these centers of power traditionally play a key role in Mongolia’s multi-pillar foreign policy. Until recently, Ulaanbaatar has managed to successfully maneuver between its

northern, southern and “third” neighbors. However, current trends are narrowing the field for Mongolia’s foreign policy maneuver, forcing it to re-prioritize. For a number of objective reasons, most of Mongolia’s trade and economic ties fall on Russia and China. Most of Mongolia’s large economic projects (gas transit pipeline, economic corridors, construction of new railways) are linked to Russia and China. Against this background, the role of other countries looks much more modest.

Speaking of the “third neighbor” role in Mongolia’s foreign policy strategy, it should be noted that this is, first of all, an ideological structure, which is based on the principle of “common liberal democratic values” of the Western world and Mongolia. Committing to this principle since the early 1990s specifically guaranteed Ulaanbaatar grant and soft loans from the “third neighbor”. In other words, the stake on active cooperation with the “third neighbor” was

28 President Kh.Battulga participated in the discussion “SCO Perspectives: Mongolia’s Participation” <http://montsame.mn/read/91208> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

29 It is right and wrong for Mongolia to join the SCO <http://dardas.mn/news/pview/774> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

30 Jargalsaikhan M., Dierkes D. Mongolia doesn’t need to join the SCO <http://blogs.ubc.ca/mongolia/2018/mongolia-sco-qingdao-membership/> (Accessed September 30, 2020)

also Mongolia's economically motivated choice. Meanwhile, the trends of recent years show a gradual decline in the role of shared values as a factor in economic development. Moreover, the principle of ideological solidarity is getting replaced by pragmatics and a new version of "real politik". And Mongolia does not stay away from these trends. In Mongolia's foreign policy, rationality based on ideological solidarity ("commonwealth of democracies") is gradually giving way to the rationality of geographic proximity and economic pragmatism. And this, in turn, cannot but affect the role of the "third neighbor" in Mongolia's foreign policy.

Of course, one should not forget that Mongolia remains a parliamentary republic, where the main role is assigned

to the legislative branch of government and the government accountable to it. Accordingly, the head of the Mongolian state is very limited in his powers to implement foreign economic tasks on which the fundamental interests of the country are based. In addition, many foreign policy initiatives by Kh. Battulga may crash against the opposition parliament and government members. The final decision on the issue of Mongolia's accession to this or that international organization (for example, the SCO) remains the prerogative of the parliament. However, the trends that have emerged in recent years may receive their further development, and the ideas of the priority in relations with Russia and China may become more popular with the Mongolian political elite.