

MONGOLIA: COUNTRY OVERVIEW and FOREIGN POLICY

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Mongolia

Country Overview and Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This Briefing Paper marks the first in a series of EIAS Briefing Papers on Mongolia and its relationship with the European Union (EU). The preceding gap between the end of the Country Strategy Paper (CSP) 2007-2013 and the beginning of the CSP 2014-2020 as well as the signing of the yet to be ratified EU-Mongolia Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA), presents an occasion to reflect on the current state of Mongolia, the success of EU-Mongolia relations, the development of the relationship from 1989 until 2013 and the prospects for further areas of development cooperation between the two parties. As a result, this series of papers will look closely at the areas where cooperation has already been administered and the prospects for continued collaboration in the relevant areas in regards to the priorities of the EU and Mongolia as well as new areas which should be considered for cooperation from 2014-2020. This first paper therefore outlines the current situation in Mongolia as well as its foreign policy, in order to provide a greater understanding of where cooperation with the EU could be administered in the next few years. These areas will be individually analysed in later papers.

This paper expresses the views of the author and not the views of the European Institute for Asian Studies.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
COD	Community of Democracies
CSP	Country Strategy Paper
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
ICNRD	International Conference of New or Restored Democracies
MNT	Mongolian tugrik
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PCA	Partnership Cooperation Agreement
TNP	Third Neighbour Policy
UN	United Nations
USD	United States dollar

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Introduction

The end of the communist era in Mongolia sparked a steady implementation of economic and political reform, as the country quickly liberalised its currency, trade and economy, and adopted a policy of privatisation. In the eyes of the West, Mongolia was the first formerly communist state to become a democracy and a market economy in Asia. Mongolia's adherence to Western political ideologies, led to the establishing of diplomatic relations with the European Union (EU) in 1989. Mongolia then introduced the concept of a 'Third Neighbour Policy'. This concept, formulated and practiced from the 1990s, sought to deepen ties with key strategic partners. In fact as a result of this policy, Mongolia's relationship with the EU has gone from strength to strength. The success of EU-Mongolia relations culminated into the signature of the EU-Mongolia Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in April 2013. In regards to foreign policy relations, the PCA is expected to provide the legal framework for the intensification of EU-Mongolia cooperation on regional and international issues.²

Although Mongolia's foreign policy has succeeded in placing the country in a decent position within the global community, it is only in recent years, with the fortunate discovery of a copious amount of natural resources, that Mongolia has really grabbed the world's attention. Nevertheless, Mongolia still has many internal problems which will need to be overcome if it hopes to take full advantage of the financial rewards expected from exploitation of its natural resources. Consequently, the areas addressed in this first Briefing Paper are the internal and external development of Mongolia, particularly in regards to its international role in the 21st century in the background of its relationship with the EU. Research for this paper was mainly carried out through interviews as the paper required first-hand information, but some research was also conducted through consultation of official documents, press releases as well as recent academic and media publications.

Mongolia: country overview

Landlocked between China and Russia, Mongolia is the world's most sparsely populated country with a landmass of 1.56 million square kilometres and a population of only 2.8 million.³ Mongolia has an abundant supply of natural resources, including copper, silver, iron, gold and uranium. Mining accounted for 17.3 percent of Mongolia's GDP in 2011.⁴ Mines such as Tavan Tolgoi with its high grade coal deposit with six billion tonnes of reserves are of particular importance for economic growth.⁵ In fact, it is said that Mongolia has enough coal to supply China's economy for at least 50 years.⁶ As an example that illustrates the enormous potential of Mongolia's mining sector, a deal made with Rio Tinto to extract copper and gold from the Oyu Tolgoi mine in the Southern Gobi desert was concluded on 6 October 2009. The mine is estimated to be worth USD 1.2 trillion and expected to be one of the world's biggest copper producing mines. Mongolia owns a 34

² Information obtained through interview.

³ The World Bank. (2013). *Mongolia*. Retrieved from <http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=Mongolia&language=EN>.

⁴ Journeyman Pictures. (2012) *The Big Dig – Mongolia*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkrXYMIMfdE>.

⁵ BBC News. (2011). *Mongolia targets global mining role as investments soar*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13078336>.

⁶ Journeyman Pictures. (2012) *The Big Dig – Mongolia*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkrXYMIMfdE>.

percent stake in the mine.⁷ In fact, when the mine reaches full capacity, it will account for about a third of Mongolia's GDP.⁸

Almost half of the population lives in the capital Ulaanbaatar, while around 40 percent of the country's workforce herd livestock in the countryside.⁹ Gross national income (GNI) per capita was USD 3,160 in 2012.¹⁰ Mongolia is now one of the world's fastest growing and changing economies, driven by foreign direct investment (FDI) in the mining projects. The country reported a 17.5 percent growth rate in 2011, although this decreased to a twelve percent growth rate in 2012¹¹ - on average the growth rate is between six and ten percent.¹²

Nevertheless, Mongolia's market is still small in comparison to its size¹³ and despite being rich in resources; the country lacks the technological expertise and investment to take advantage of them.¹⁴ The narrow base of the economy similarly makes it highly vulnerable to natural disasters and the volatility of world commodity markets. Commodity sales are the main source of income for the government's fiscal revenue, highlighting the difficulties encountered if prices are lowered.¹⁵ The evolution to a market economy has also led to rising social disparity (its Gini index is 44 percent)^{16,17} and considerable unemployment and underemployment.¹⁸ About a third of the population lives on less than USD 1 per day, a figure that has not improved since the 1990s. The current poverty line in the country is set at 30,000 Mongolian tugrik (MNT) (EUR 14) a month in Ulaanbaatar, and at MNT 24,743 (EUR 11.5) a month in other parts of the country.¹⁹ Mongolians who live in the countryside are particularly affected by high rates of deprivation, exacerbated by the extreme weather conditions and climate change. This has resulted in a rural exodus which has led to many nomadic herders living in shanty towns on the outskirts of the capital as they try to find work. These shanty towns are known as the ger districts because the majority of houses in these areas are traditional Mongolian ger tents.

Mongolia greatly struggles to provide social services, particularly health care and youth education. There are also occasional breaches of human rights in regard to treatment of prisoners, criminals, victims as well as gender discrimination. Lastly, in terms of child welfare, there are concerns about the use of on-going illegal child labour, directly linked to the poverty of mining families,²⁰ and UNICEF has recently expressed its alarm over the health and safety of child jockeys in the traditional horse racing competitions.^{21,22}

⁷ Reuters. (2013) *Rio Tinto puts Oyu Tolgoi expansion on hold, needs Mongolia finance nod*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/29/mongolia-riotinto-financing-idUSL4N0FZ1M620130729>.

⁸ BBC News. (2013). *Q & A: Mongolian presidential election*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23037804>.

⁹ BBC News. (2013). *Mongolia profile*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15384630>.

¹⁰ The World Bank. (2013). *Mongolia*. Retrieved from <http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=Mongolia&language=EN>.

¹¹ BBC News. (2013). *Mongolia profile*. Retrieved 29 July 2013 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15460525>.

¹² Information obtained through interview.

¹³ Information obtained through interview.

¹⁴ Information obtained through interview.

¹⁵ Information obtained through interview.

¹⁶ Measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution.

¹⁷ 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

¹⁸ European External Action Service. (2007). *Mongolia – European Community, Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, p.5.

¹⁹ European External Action Service. (2007). *Mongolia – European Community, Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, p.5.

²⁰ Child labour is banned by Mongolian law but due to extreme case of poverty, some mining families are forced to have their children work in the mines in order to sustain themselves.

²¹ The horse racing competitions are steadily becoming a business therefore opening the doors for exploitation.

Mongolia's foreign policy

Since 1990, Mongolia has pursued a peaceful, open, independent and multi-pillared foreign policy within the principles of internationally accepted norms and practices. While maintaining friendly and balanced relations with its direct neighbours - the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China - is one of the main priorities of Mongolia's foreign policy, its 'third neighbours' are also important players in strengthening a secure and stable external environment for the country. The Foreign Policy Concept, revised in 2011, officially acknowledged the 'Third Neighbour Policy' (TNP). The concept of 'third neighbour' is not about a single given country; it refers to a group of Western and Eastern democracies as well as international organizations. In a broad sense, these partners have an interest in Mongolia and support its democratic and market oriented policies.²³

The policy's purpose is to assist Mongolia in its position as a landlocked country and to ensure a balance with its neighbours, particularly China and Russia. In particular, Mongolia seeks to establish friendly relations with global and regional powers that support the development of its democracy. As a result, this policy is an important factor for providing scrutiny and advancing the development of the country through receipt of international mutual aid, loans and trade.²⁴ In this way, the policy also seeks to establish broad multilateral interactions, strengthening Mongolia's participation in international affairs.²⁵ Through the TNP, Mongolia has actively developed and deepened its relations with the EU, the United States (US), Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, Turkey as well as Central Asian countries and other South East Asian states.²⁶

The TNP is very relevant in light of Mongolia's geo-political position. The country has friendly relations with both Koreas, and is generally keen to develop its 'Asian' profile and involvement in the region and outside of Asia. It is therefore no surprise that many of President Tsakhia Elbegdorj's political speeches and programs, during the 2013 Presidential election campaign, highlighted his objective to improve Mongolia's global standing.²⁷ Mongolia has consequently striven to join certain multilateral organisations in order to further its interests in the world and ensure greater cooperation with the EU.

Mongolian membership in EU-led multilateral organisations

Mongolia hosted the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) meeting in 2005.²⁸ In 2006, Mongolia became a member of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, a forum for dialogue between Europe and Asia, officially joining it in October 2008 at the ASEM Summit in Beijing.²⁹ It encompasses almost 60 percent of the global population and trade - half of the world's GDP - and therefore has significant capacity to influence the global agenda.³⁰ Participation in ASEM brought Mongolia into the Asia-Europe political and economic

²² Information obtained through interview.

²³ Information obtained through interview.

²⁴ Information obtained through interview.

²⁵ Information obtained through interview.

²⁶ Mendee, Jargalsaikhan. (2012). *Mongolia's Quest for Third Neighbours: Why the European Union?*, *EUCAM*, 25, p. Retrieved from http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/MONGOLIA_QUEST_FOR_THIRD_NEIGHBOURS_WHY_THE_EU.pdf.

²⁷ Information obtained through interview.

²⁸ European External Action Service. (2007). *Mongolia – European Community, Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, p.3.

²⁹ European Commission. (2012). *FACTSHEET ASEM 9 SUMMIT*. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-819_en.htm.

³⁰ European Union @ United Partnership. (2007). *ASEM Foreign Ministers meet to further Asia-Europe relations*. Retrieved from http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_7062_en.htm.

cooperation framework, which further strengthened the country's relationship with the EU and allowed "it to contribute to deepening political relations and dialogue with the EU".³¹

At the 2004 ministerial meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Mongolia was admitted as a partner for cooperation and then in 2012, gained accession to the OSCE.³² The OSCE is the largest regional organisation with 57 Member States.³³ Its main objectives are to promote security, human development and cooperation among its members as well as to discuss economic and environmental issues.³⁴ As a Eurasian country, joining OSCE was an important event for Mongolia because it provides a unique platform for political dialogue and opens up new channels for cooperation and exchange of information with Mongolia's third neighbours.³⁵ The country therefore sees the OSCE as the essential forum through which it can make contributions to the dialogue between the East and West and ultimately become the link for the East and West in Asia.³⁶ The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton, stated that Mongolia's accession was "proof of growing Mongolian political engagement and integration with international organisations and institutions".³⁷

Mongolia's international role

In the last ten years, Mongolia has also made efforts to take the lead on promoting democracy in Asia and beyond; values that the EU strongly supports. From 10 to 12 September 2003, Mongolia hosted the Fifth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD). Following the conference, the former European Development Commissioner, Poul Nielson, paid an official visit to Mongolia.³⁸ In October 2012, the EU Delegation in Geneva, in collaboration with Mexico, Mongolia and Switzerland, organised a panel at the United Nations (UN) to promote the international campaign against the death penalty. This event also marked the 10th anniversary of the establishing of an International Day against the Death Penalty.³⁹ In April 2013, Mongolia organised the Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies (COD), over which it has presided for 2 years, again confirming its commitment to the promotion of democratic values in the region and globally. Mongolia's leadership of the COD actually raised its profile substantially within the EU.⁴⁰ Finally, Mongolia hosted the UN World Environment Day in June 2013, highlighting its change of attitude towards the environment and a clear intention to move closer to the EU mind-set on climate change and protection of the environment.

During EU-Mongolia Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) negotiations, the EU and Mongolia discussed regional and international issues, particularly challenges to regional peace and stability. It was said that the PCA will be an "equal partnership",⁴¹ because there

³¹ Embassy of Czech Republic, Ulaanbaatar. (2010). *Political and Economical relations between Mongolia and EU*. Retrieved from

http://www.mzv.cz/ulaanbaatar/en/political_relations/european_union/political_and_economical_relations_1.html.

³² European External Action Service. (2012). *Statement by the Spokesperson of the High Representative on Mongolia's accession to the OSCE*. Retrieved from

http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/mongolia/documents/press_corner/statement_en.pdf.

³³ Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe. (2013). *Participating States*. Retrieved from <http://www.osce.org/who/83>.

³⁴ Embassy of Mongolia, Vienna. (2009). *OSCE studies Mongolia's bid to become a member state*. Retrieved 29 August 2013 from http://www.embassyon.at/news/news_473.html.

³⁵ Information obtained through interview.

³⁶ Information obtained through interview.

³⁷ European External Action Service. (2012). *Statement by the Spokesperson of the High Representative on Mongolia's accession to the OSCE*. Retrieved from

http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/mongolia/documents/press_corner/statement_en.pdf.

³⁸ European Union @ United Partnership. (2003). *Commissioner Nielson to address 5th International Conference of New or Restored Democracies in Mongolia*. Retrieved from http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_2726_en.htm.

³⁹ European Union @ United Partnership. (2012). *EU Delegation in Geneva co-hosts High Level Panel on 'Abolition of the death penalty – Ten years of joint efforts'*. Retrieved from http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_12684_en.htm.

⁴⁰ Information obtained through interview.

⁴¹ Stated by Markus Ederer, Head of the Resident EU Delegation for Mongolia and China in Beijing.

will be more dialogue and exchange of views on regional and political issues.⁴² For the period 2014 to 2020, the PCA will therefore facilitate collaboration on these issues, which includes fighting terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, areas in which the EU and Mongolia share values. For this period, one particular country of interest for the EU is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). As has previously been mentioned, Mongolia has good relations with the DPRK and therefore the EU can engage with Mongolia on issues raised in Mongolian-DPRK political dialogue.⁴³ In September 2007, Mongolia hosted a closed meeting between two Six-Party members, the DPRK and Japan⁴⁴ and Mongolia volunteered to help restart the Six-Party Talks with the DPRK in June 2009.⁴⁵ On 15 November 2012, an official intergovernmental meeting between the DPRK and Japan was held in Ulaanbaatar, under the auspice of the Mongolian President, Tsakhia Elbegdorj.

Conclusion

Despite the size of Mongolia, the country has a relatively small population. A significant proportion of the population lives in Ulaanbaatar, whilst the remaining citizens reside in the countryside and work as nomadic farmers. In spite of a substantial increase in FDI as a result of the discovery of an abundant supply of natural resources, the number of Mongolians living below the poverty line remains at around 30 percent, although the exact figure is not officially known. The transition from a communist, centralised economy to a market economy has in fact contributed to social inequality, substantial unemployment resulting in the rural exodus to Ulaanbaatar and the inadequate provision of public and social services. The economy's reliance on commodity prices and the lack of a sufficiently qualified workforce have also hindered the prosperous development of Mongolia. Finally the country suffers from adverse weather conditions, occasional human rights infringements, gender discrimination and child abuses. It is therefore clear that Mongolia has many internal hurdles that will need to be overcome if it hopes to continue its successful development.

The TNP has been the driving force behind Mongolia's foreign policy since 1990. Through this policy, Mongolia has sought to build up relations with external partners, to raise its 'Asian' profile through increasing its participation in multilateral organisations, and to establish it as a dependable, global political actor. The EU is a prominent feature of the TNP and is in fact one of the Central Asian state's strongest partners. Mongolia is a member of the majority of the EU-led multilateral organisations, has collaborated with the EU on various initiatives and has sought to promote values of democracy and sustainable development to the world, values which the EU greatly supports.

The EU ultimately sees Mongolia as an important partner to develop close ties with, particularly in terms of international political cooperation. Landlocked between China and Russia, Mongolia is in a key position for facilitating and mediating good relations between the EU and Central Asia as well as highlighting European values and interests in the region. In this regard, Mongolia has tried to share and promote respect of human rights and the rule of law in other Asian countries.⁴⁶ The TNP in particular looks to strengthen global peace and security, ensure sustainable development and assist the international community in achieving global social justice.⁴⁷ These are all objectives that the EU strongly supports and promotes. In addition, Mongolia's experiences in Central Asia mean that the country is an important source of knowledge for the EU.⁴⁸ The EU-Mongolia political partnership is likely to be greatly enhanced by the PCA, as it is expected to facilitate profound cooperation on regional and global issues.

⁴² Information obtained through interview.

⁴³ Information obtained through interview.

⁴⁴ Army Logistics University. (Date Unknown). *Mongolia*. Retrieved 29 August 2013 from http://www.alu.army.mil/ALU_INTERNAT/CountryNotes/PACOM/MONGOLIA.pdf.

⁴⁵ Bulag, U.E. (2010). Mongolia in 2009: From Landlocked to Land-linked Cosmopolitan, *Asian Survey*, 50 (1), pp. 97-103.

⁴⁶ Information obtained through interview.

⁴⁷ Information obtained through interview.

⁴⁸ Information obtained through interview.

Nevertheless, the evolution of Mongolia's geo-political role will depend on how it develops in the next few years.⁴⁹ The country has serious potential to become the regional centre for multilateral activities in Asia.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in light of the relatively recent discovery of a rich reserve of natural resources beneath Mongolia's Gobi Desert, the economic possibilities for Mongolia have taken a whole new dimension. With the foreseen success of the raw materials industry, Mongolia has the opportunity to take advantage of the predicted revenue and rectify its national issues. The key question, then, is how Mongolia will adjust to this new development. It could either take advantage of this extraordinary growth opportunity to develop a sustainable and equitable economy or it could follow in the footsteps of other countries which are resource rich but have an extremely high poverty and corruption rate. Ultimately the prospects for Mongolia will be endless if the country succeeds in reaching its development targets and establishing its role in regional and global activities. Within a decade and if all goes to plan, it should be expected that the country will become a firmly entrenched, prosperous and reputable member of the international community.

⁴⁹ Information obtained through interview.

⁵⁰ Information obtained through interview.

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The World Bank. (2013). *Mongolia*. Retrieved from <http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=Mongolia&language=EN>

List of Interviewees

Bruno Buffaria, Head of Unit, Neighbourhood Policy, Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development

Dolgion Aldar, Executive Director, Independent Research Institute of Mongolia (IRIM)

H.E. Ivana Grollova, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Mongolia

H.E. Khishigdelger Davaadorj, Ambassador of Mongolia to the EU and Benelux

Julianna Hyjek, Directorate General for Development and Cooperation

Laurent Bardot, Directorate General for Trade

Malgorzata Jankowska, Desk Officer for Mongolia, European External Action Service.



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