

A Mongolian Perspective of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Mr. Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren & Dr. Mendee Jargalsaikhan, respectively a Research Fellow and the Dean of Research at the Institute for Strategic Studies of Mongolia, explore the questions of "why Mongolia's importance has waned in the overall Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategies and if there is any room for Mongolia to collaborate with FOIP countries."

A few days after announcing the US Department of Defense's first *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* in 2019, US Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark Esper visited Mongolia. During this visit, he stated that Mongolia is an important partner for the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy. In the same vein, the US State Department also included Mongolia in its *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision*. Similarly, during presidential meetings in Washington on July 31, 2019, [US-Mongolia relations were elevated to a strategic partnership](#), which endorsed the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative*. Moreover, Mongolia's joint statements during high-level meetings with Japan and India, respectfully, clearly endorse their Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategies up to 2020.

However, references to Mongolia are scarce in the Biden administration's key documents, such as the *National Security Strategy*, *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, and *Indo-Pacific Action Plan*. The same can be said for official documents issued during the Mongolian President's visit to Japan and by the Japanese Foreign Minister to Mongolia. These omissions raise questions about why Mongolia's importance has waned in the overall Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategies and if there is any room for Mongolia to collaborate with FOIP countries.

The answer is rooted in geopolitical reality. The realistic strategy for the United States is to focus on Southeast Asia, strengthen ties with India, and rely on treaty alliances in the region. In this regard, Mongolia is a faraway destination with little geostrategic and economic significance to the free and open Indo-Pacific regional architecture. For Mongolia, the strategy presents both opportunities and challenges. Mongolia's inclusion in these initiatives complements the country's foreign policy and desire to be integrated into the wider Asia-Pacific regional security and economic architecture. The country's National Security Concept (2010) and the Foreign Policy Concept (2011) emphasize the importance of developing close political, economic, and cultural ties with "third neighbors," such as Japan, India, the United States, Turkey, Germany, South Korea, Canada, and Australia. These strategic documents also call for active involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, Mongolia has special relations with Australia, India, and Japan—key supporters of the American Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. Australia has strong economic interests and ties evolving around the Oyu Tolgoi mine, one of the world's largest copper and gold mines. Building on historical, cultural, and geopolitical interests, India declared a Strategic Partnership with Mongolia in 2015. Japan was the first G7 nation to declare a Strategic Partnership with Mongolia in 2010 and entered into a free trade agreement with Mongolia in 2015. Interestingly, US Indo-Pacific Command has had a significant role in facilitating Mongolia's participation in the regional political and security network. Jointly with the Mongolian military, the US Indo-Pacific Command co-organizes a multinational

peacekeeping exercise, *Khaan Quest*, the only exercise that welcomes all Northeast Asian and other militaries, excluding North Korea, from the Indo-Pacific region.

Nevertheless, Mongolia is becoming quite cautious about endorsing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy—especially during this period of heightened geopolitical tensions. With acknowledgment of its other aims and justifications, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy is a long-term approach by which the United States and its key allies can protect their geostrategic and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region, where China’s growing economic and military clout would inevitably change the existing balance of power. Therefore, the core intent of this geopolitical strategy—to contain China’s influence—has remained the same even though the presidency has changed in Washington. Although Mongolia is naturally concerned about China’s growing economic and military power, Mongolia is largely dependent on China’s money, market, and infrastructure to trade within and beyond China. The same applies to Mongolia’s relations with Russia. Even though Mongolia has a very special relationship with Ukraine, leaders in Ulaanbaatar have been reluctant to oppose Russia’s war in Ukraine openly. Therefore, Mongolia has maintained a clear neutral policy towards the war from the start. The country’s economy could be easily disrupted as Mongolia is totally dependent on Russian fuel and electricity, especially during wintertime. In addition, most people, especially those from older generations, still consider Russia as a balancer against China’s political, economic, and demographic influence, given the collective memories of the early- and mid-20th Century. Therefore, operating in the Sino-Russian sphere of influence, Mongolia’s strategy is similar to many other small states—not to be caught in the geopolitical competition of Great Powers. Its location could easily turn the country into a pawn or a chessboard for reviving geopolitical competition.

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To walk on this tightrope, Mongolia should seek opportunities to deepen political, economic, and cultural relations with the United States and others promoting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, Ulaanbaatar should keep security cooperation at the current level of defense diplomacy, peacekeeping, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance. Connections with developed democracies are essential for supporting the country’s democratic institutions and human rights policies. Even though Mongolia is a destination on the fringes of the wider Indo-Pacific region, its approach parallels those of many Southeast Asian nations. Mongolia strives to engage all great powers and to increase the connectivity of people, cultures, and markets. In this endeavor, Mongolia’s neutrality plays a critical role, providing it the political capital to promote regional stability through events like the annual Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security and Cooperation.

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