

How the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security Serves as a Conflict Resolution Platform

By Bolor Lkhaajav

Bolor Lkhaajav, Researcher specializing in Mongolia and Northeast Asia at The Diplomat and Founder of MONUS.Ed mentorship program, explains that "Mongolia's geostrategic position, coupled with its democratic institutions and non-nuclear-weapons (NNW), status makes Ulaanbaatar a stable actor uniquely positioned to advance regional conflict resolution mechanisms."

Mongolia has sought to address Northeast Asian security issues through multilateral dialogues since the late 1980s. Although no clear consensus exists among international institutions on which countries constitute "Northeast Asian actors," based on geographical specificity, Russia, Mongolia, China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea are the main actors concerning regional security affairs. Mongolia's geostrategic position, coupled with its democratic institutions and non-nuclear-weapons (NNW) status, makes Ulaanbaatar a stable actor uniquely positioned to advance regional conflict resolution mechanisms.

In 2012, Mongolia's leading foreign policy pundit, the late Batchimeg Miggeddorj, wrote that Mongolia could capitalize on its NNW status and establish a mechanism that supports denuclearization efforts in Northeast Asia. A year later, in 2013, the Ulaanbaatar (UB) Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security was launched during the Elbegdorj Tsakhia administration. Since its first international conference in 2014, the UB Dialogue has served as a multilateral venue that succors in solving pressing security issues in the region. These capacities are embedded in Mongolia's multi-pillared foreign policy that promotes diplomacy, dialogue, and soft power. The country's multi-pillared foreign policy principles are also typified in the UB Dialogue.

Between 2013 and 2022, Northeast Asia's external geopolitical and security environment changed dramatically. Albeit Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not directed toward Northeast Asia, countries that have historically intractable disputes or carry hegemonic agendas are on edge. China's economic warfare with the United States certainly impacts economic mechanisms across the region. Moreover, North Korea's intermittent missile tests only contribute to destabilizing the region's post-Cold War status quo, which has kept the region relatively peaceful in many ways.

At the same time, the lack of organized regional security architecture in Northeast Asia necessitates an open dialogue platform such as the UB Dialogue. As an open international platform, the UB Dialogue allows the exchange of ideologies and perspectives within a framework that aims to strengthen multilateral discourse. Moreover, the UB Dialogue provides windows of opportunity at which conflicting actors can engage, making the initiative a confidence-building mechanism under the larger peace-building framework.

While academics, scholars, diplomats, and country representatives are open to sharing their findings and perspectives, actual cooperation and the formulation of policies remain dependent on bilateral ties, diplomacy, and negotiation between states. An open dialogue, such as the UB Dialogue, a multilateral venue that gathers representatives from all continents, is quite rare, but it is a mechanism that is much needed in the current stage of international relations. Three major factors underpin the significance and the conflict-resolution capacities of the UB Dialogue.

First, Mongolia is seen as an independent and fair actor. While balancing between its traditional partners, Moscow and Beijing, Ulaanbaatar maintains strong diplomatic ties with all states in Northeast Asia and does not have intractable disputes belaboring its international relations. Subsequently, the mechanisms of the UB Dialogue mimic Mongolia's balanced approach to foreign affairs. This advantage, coupled with Ulaanbaatar's peaceful foreign policy, prompts conflicting actors to choose dialogue over confrontation.

The second factor is that the UB Dialogue creates a space for non-Northeast Asian actors such as the AUKUS countries (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States), European powers, France, and Germany to participate in the dialogue. With respect to each country's interest and foreign policy goals, the UB Dialogue serves as a meeting point where ideologies, perspectives, and certain policies can clash or collaborate.

The third and perhaps the most important element of the UB Dialogue is that Mongolia, as the host of the dialogue, cannot be deeply enmeshed in regional disputes. Mongolia and, by extension, the UB Dialogue are relatively free from the entanglements of regional conflict and thereby well-positioned to advocate for international and multilateral collaboration in pursuit of peace and stability.

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From a strategic perspective, Mongolia's NNW status and its advocacy for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula are significant indicators of Ulaanbaatar's approach to maintaining the region's peace, security, and stability. With limited military influence for mitigating or impacting regional conflicts, Mongolia's foreign policy will remain dependent on utilizing its diplomacy and conflict resolution tactics via dialogue, engagement, and negotiations. As former foreign minister of Mongolia, Tsogtbaatar Damdin stated in his opening remarks for the 2018 UB Dialogue, "Mongolia has been firm in its beliefs that there is no solution other than talks and engagement."

The foundation of the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security envisages the formulation of policies that minimize medium to long-term risks. The long-term goal of the UB Dialogue is to construct positive understandings between conflicting parties through engagement, the exchange of ideas, and the sharing of perspectives. Lastly, Mongolia's impartiality is equally essential in maintaining a high level of confidence between the involved parties.

Moving forward, Mongolia's multi-pillared foreign policy will continue to support dialogue mechanisms on pressing regional issues such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and maritime territorial disputes between Russia and Japan in the Northern Territories as well as those between China and Japan in the East China Sea. While other emerging regional issues, such as energy connectivity, cyber security, climate change, and continentalism, to some extent, are areas that still need in-depth research, dialogue, and understanding. To Mongolia, the peace, security, and stability of Northeast Asia remain extremely important to its own democracy, stability, and development. Ulaanbaatar deeply understands the significance of the challenges and opportunities the regional actors face when formulating policy. Subsequently, the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security is an open platform that enables dialogue and engagement over hard power and apprehension.

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