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Mongolia: The Horizon Does Not Choose

From COP17 to the Art of Becoming Indispensable

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Photo: UNCCD COP17

Mongolia

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Executive Summary

In the space of three days, Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh moved from closing a United Nations summit on desertification to meeting Xi Jinping over fuel-supply security. This sequence is no accident of scheduling. It sums up the method by which Ulaanbaatar is converting its position between two giants into a regional function. This analysis examines how Mongolia mobilises environmental diplomacy, sustains its rapprochement with Beijing while watching its dependence on it, adopts a more cautious posture towards Moscow on matters affecting its energy sovereignty, diversifies its partnerships toward Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea and France, and cultivates, down to the symbolic register, an autonomy that its size and geography deny it materially. It asks, in the end, what it would take to move from buffer state to hinge state.

Introduction

Some countries are condemned by geography to choose. Others learn, through patience, to turn that geography into a resource. Between Russia and China, Mongolia never had the luxury of the first. For thirty years, it has trained itself in the second.

On 28 August 2026, in Ulaanbaatar, Khürelsükh presided over the closing of COP17, the United Nations conference on combating desertification. Three days later, the same man was in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit, discussing barrels, pipelines and energy security in turn with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Between the two engagements, the vocabulary changed entirely: restored soils and rescued herds gave way to energy corridors and supply security. Yet nothing about this shift is improvised.

It is a grammar, patiently learned, that allows a landlocked country to speak, in turn, the language of climate resilience and that of energy power politics, and to make a policy out of that very ambivalence. This grammar also has a quieter chapter, one in which Ulaanbaatar learns to say no, politely, to one of its two neighbours when a project touches on what it regards as its national security. From COP17 to the standoff over the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline to the methodical opening toward Southeast Asia, the same intention runs through these few months: turning a position one endures into a function one negotiates.

I. A Vulnerability Turned into Diplomatic Capital

For Mongolia, desertification is not one issue among others. About 77% of national territory is now considered degraded to varying degrees, according to data from the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification[1]. In a country where extensive livestock farming retains considerable economic and cultural weight, this degradation directly affects rural employment and the exodus to the capital, which now concentrates close to half the population, under the combined effect of droughts and dzuds, the extreme winters capable of wiping out entire herds.

It is this vulnerability that Mongolian diplomacy has chosen to internationalise rather than simply endure. The country had already secured the proclamation of 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and

[1]UNCCD. (2026). 17th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP17), Ulaanbaatar, 17-28 August 2026.

Pastoralists. Hosting COP17 continues that approach: the conference placed pastoral rangelands, which support close to two billion people worldwide, at the centre of the global land agenda, and led to the launch of a Rangelands Flagship Initiative worth 1.2 billion dollars, folded into a broader 1.3 billion dollar package for land restoration across 23 countries.

This is a classic mechanism in the diplomacy of middle powers and small states: converting a national fragility into recognised expertise, in the way Norway has done with mediation or certain island states with climate change. Around the steppe and pastoralism, Mongolia is building its own diplomatic niche[2].

II. A Success in Visibility, a Mixed Normative Record

It would nonetheless be excessive to present COP17 as a multilateral triumph. Negotiations on an international instrument on drought, already stalled two years earlier in Riyadh at COP16, failed again: American representatives opposed it[3], and the matter was pushed to COP18, scheduled for 2028 in Sharm el-Sheikh. A diplomatic source cited by Reporterre summed up the mood by describing a summit that had simply been "saved" rather than a success[4].

For Mongolia, this mixed normative record does nothing to diminish the success of the exercise as a matter of image. The conference drew more than 25,000 participants, making it the largest international event the country has hosted since the 2016 ASEM summit[5]. The University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy explicitly analysed the event as an exercise in "conference diplomacy"[6]: hosting a global summit lets a landlocked country gain visibility and showcase its own initiatives, such as the presidential "One Billion Trees" campaign.

III. The 'Third Neighbour' in the Age of Green Hedging

This success of image belongs to an older strategy: using climate engagement as a vector of soft power to ease the geopolitical vulnerability of a country wedged between two neighbours who account for the bulk of its trade, with China alone absorbing about 90% of Mongolian exports.

This approach extends the so-called "third neighbour" policy, theorised at the turn of the 1990s and commonly linked to a remark by former US Secretary of State James Baker[7], who observed that Mongolia might have only two neighbours but could make the United States a third. Since then, the policy has consisted of widening Mongolia's diplomatic space through relations with extra-regional partners: Washington, but also Tokyo, Seoul, India, Turkey and the European Union.

What is changing in 2026 has less to do with the objective than with the instruments used. The third-neighbour policy initially rested on a balance between diplomatic and security partners. It now extends to more functional forms of interdependence: climate finance, critical minerals, digital infrastructure. This approach carries an advantage: it is less likely to be read by Moscow or Beijing as an attempt at outright rebalancing. A joint military exercise with the United States can breed suspicion; a forum on land restoration much less so, while still letting Mongolia diversify its partners, its financing and its international networks at a lower political cost. This method can be seen as a form of green hedging, a way of using environmental cooperation to diversify dependencies without directly challenging relations with either neighbour.

[2]WWF. (2026, 28 August). UNCCD COP17 lays foundation for land restoration but falls short on drought action.
[3]RFI. (2026, 26 August). COP17: the United States blocks negotiations on combating desertification.
[4]Reporterre. (2026, 28 August). COP17 on desertification ends without a decision.
[5]Council of the European Union. (2016). Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 15-16 July 2016.
[6]USC Center on Public Diplomacy. (2026). Conference diplomacy in action: what COP17 means for Mongolia.
[7]Campi, A. Brookings Institution. Mongolia's third neighbor policy and North Korea.

IV. Beijing, an Unavoidable but Not Exclusive Partner

The rapprochement with Beijing was especially visible during the conference. China had provided material support for organising COP17, and Chinese media presented the space devoted to its experience in land restoration as the event's "China Corner".

On the diplomatic front, the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Ulaanbaatar from 13 to 15 June[8], a few weeks before the conference, reaffirmed the Sino-Mongolian strategic partnership without appearing to dictate the agenda of an event partly designed to demonstrate Ulaanbaatar's diplomatic autonomy. The meeting between Khürelsükh and Xi Jinping in Bishkek confirmed how central the relationship remains: the two leaders mainly discussed fuel-supply security, with Xi Jinping reaffirming that China would remain a reliable partner for Mongolia on oil[9], including in a period of global market instability, a reminder of the landlocked country's persistent energy dependence.

The second structuring axis of this relationship is energy. The Power of Siberia 2 project, intended to carry up to 50 billion cubic metres of Siberian gas to China across Mongolian territory, illustrates how hard it is to separate political announcement from actual commitment. Politically endorsed since the signing of a Russia-China memorandum in September 2025, the project remains stuck on price: Beijing is reportedly seeking a tariff close to Russia's domestic price, around 50 dollars per thousand cubic metres[10], well below the 125-dollar break-even threshold estimated by Sergey Vakulenko of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center[11], and far under the 258 dollars China currently pays for gas from Power of Siberia 1. In late May 2026, Vladimir Putin travelled to Kazakhstan to discuss an alternative route bypassing Mongolian territory[12], an uncomfortable reminder for Ulaanbaatar that its position as a transit country is only as secure as the project itself. The transit revenues often mentioned for Mongolia, sometimes estimated at close to a billion dollars a year, should therefore be treated with caution: at this stage they remain projections rather than contractual commitments.

This centrality of the relationship with Beijing comes, on the Mongolian side, with growing vigilance. China alone absorbs about 90% of Mongolian exports, chiefly coal, copper and other minerals, a concentration that exposes the country to any shift in Chinese demand or any tightening of tariffs. This trade dependence feeds, within Mongolian national-security circles, a concern that goes beyond energy alone: retaining control over the country's own critical resources, copper, rare earths and lithium in particular, rather than seeing them absorbed entirely by a single outlet. Mongolia's participation, in January 2026, in the US-led Critical Minerals Initiative, alongside some fifty other countries, fits this logic: it is not aimed at sidelining China, but at ensuring that no partner, however dominant, becomes an obligatory point of passage[13].

V. Moscow: The End of Automatic Deference

The Russian case illustrates this vigilance still more clearly, and it first played out on the most concrete ground imaginable: the fuel tank. Over the summer of 2026, repeated Ukrainian strikes on Russian refineries, which knocked out as much as 30 million tonnes of annual capacity, eventually caused fuel shortages as far as Mongolia. Russian exports to the country fell from 186,400 tonnes in June to 173,000 tonnes in July[14], and Moscow had to commit, in mid-August, to emergency deliveries to defuse the situation. Some observers

[8]The Diplomat. (2026, June). Wang Yi's visit and Mongolia's foreign policy balancing act.
[9]International Department, CPC (idcpc.org.cn). (2026, 1 September). Readout of the Khürelsükh-Xi Jinping meeting, Bishkek.
[10]Wall Street Journal. (2026). Putin, the junior partner. Cited in: Jamestown Foundation, Putin's PRC visit failed to advance Power of Siberia 2.
[11]Vakulenko, S., Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. Cited in: Asia Times (2026, July), Power of Siberia 2 deadlock belies Russia-China "no-limits" pact.
[12]Asia Times. (2026, July). Power of Siberia 2 deadlock belies Russia-China "no-limits" pact (on the Kazakh option raised by Putin).
[13]The Diplomat. (2026, 5 March). Can Mongolia Rewire Global Uranium Supply Chains?
[14]The Moscow Times. (2026, 17 August). Mongolia Says Russia Agreed to Send Emergency Fuel Supplies Amid Shortages.

have nonetheless qualified this reading: Mongolian domestic demand, driven by urbanisation and the mining boom, has grown by roughly 14% a year for two decades, pushing fuel imports from 500,000 tonnes in 2005 to nearly 2.7 million tonnes in 2025, a pace that even an unconstrained supplier would have struggled to absorb smoothly[15]. The shortage of summer 2026 therefore owes as much to the fragility of the Russian supply chain as to a more structural vulnerability: Mongolia imports all of its fuel and has never built its own refinery. A political agreement, however solid, is not enough to guarantee autonomy when no physical alternative to supply exists.

The pipeline dossier extends this lesson over a longer time frame. In August 2024, the "National Unity" coalition government, formed after the elections that June, published its action programme through 2028. The long-awaited text made no mention of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, then presented for years as one of the major infrastructure projects capable of transforming Mongolia's transit status[16].

The omission did not go unexplained. Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva, a former official of Mongolia's National Security Council, argued that Gazprom was seeking unilateral control of the Mongolian section of the project, a prospect that, in his view, would have produced a sudden and lasting increase in Russian influence on Mongolian territory, to Beijing's detriment. The observation deserves to be turned around: what Moscow saw as a simple export corridor, Ulaanbaatar read as a question of sovereignty over its own territory. A pipe one does not control oneself, even when it crosses one's own soil, does not necessarily bring the centrality it promises.

This energy caution has been compounded by a sharper domestic debate. A draft agreement meant to secure aviation-fuel supplies from Russian companies under Western sanctions drew opposition from the Democratic Party's parliamentary group, which saw it as deepening the country's external dependence at the very moment it was claiming the opposite objective[17]. Public sentiment has been further complicated by the war itself: the disproportionate losses suffered by ethnic Buryats, culturally and linguistically close to Mongolians, in the ranks of the Russian army in Ukraine, have fed an unease that official diplomacy prefers not to comment on, but which Mongolian civil society does not ignore.

It would nonetheless be excessive to speak of a rupture. Vladimir Putin's visit to Ulaanbaatar in September 2024, despite the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant, came with a 21% rise in bilateral trade and renewed commitments on oil supply and the reconstruction of the capital's TPP-3 thermal power plant. The two countries have also worked through some long-standing disputes in the uranium sector, around the Dornod Uranium joint venture, and the cross presidential visits of 2024 and 2025 rather confirmed a deepening of ties on the classic bilateral register[18]. Two years later, on 1 September 2026, it was Khürelsükh who met Putin again in Bishkek, on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit, where the two leaders reaffirmed their wish to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership[19]. Mongolia is therefore not seeking to distance itself from Russia in absolute terms. It applies to Moscow the same principle it applies to Beijing: welcome what serves it, resist what might turn a partnership into an unnegotiated dependence. The pipeline, precisely because it would have fixed the nature of that dependence for decades, illustrates the threshold beyond which Ulaanbaatar appears to fear that a transit function could turn into structural dependence.

VI. Critical Minerals and Uranium: Diversification as Strategy

[15]The Diplomat. (2026, August). Mongolia's Fuel Crisis Is a Demand Problem, Not Just a Supply One.
[16]South China Morning Post. (2024, 21 August). Future murky for Russia-China pipeline as Mongolia omits project from long-term plan.
[17]IndraStra Global. (2025, May). Mongolia's Tightrope: Balancing Energy Needs and Geopolitical Neutrality.
[18]PIR Center. (2026). No. 10 (19). The Prospects for Cooperation Between Mongolia and the Russian Federation in the Energy Sector.
[19]Interfax. (2026, 28 August). Putin, Xi Jinping to discuss Power of Siberia 2 project in meeting in Bishkek.

This same logic of prudent diversification shapes Mongolia's mining policy, where uranium holds a special place. In October 2023, during President Khürelsükh's state visit to France, a memorandum of understanding paved the way for the $1.6 billion investment agreement ultimately signed in January 2025 for the development of the Zuuvch-Ovoo deposit, one of the largest untapped uranium deposits in the world; construction began in June 2026[20]. For a country where 90% of exports rest on natural-resource extraction, diversifying mining investors is a standard tool of the third-neighbour policy, through which Mongolia seeks to build relationships with countries other than China and Russia[21].

Mongolian uranium is finding a particularly receptive market in the current context. As the United States seeks to cut its dependence on Russian enriched-uranium supplies, Mongolia has positioned itself as an alternative source for the West, provided, in one observer's view, that it moves carefully between Washington, Beijing and Moscow[22]. This diversification now extends across the entire critical-minerals chain, beyond energy alone: a Korean-funded rare-earths cooperation centre is due to become operational before the end of 2025, with the two countries conducting joint exploration of strategic deposits through their respective research institutes.

VII. Southeast Asia, the Forgotten Frontier of the Third Neighbour

Southeast Asia remains the least discussed dimension of the third-neighbour policy, even though it is one of its most advanced fronts. Vietnam is its keystone. Khürelsükh travelled to Hanoi as early as November 2023; the return visit of Vietnamese leader To Lam to Ulaanbaatar, on 30 September and 1 October 2024, marking the seventieth anniversary of diplomatic relations, raised the relationship to a comprehensive partnership, a first for Mongolia with a Southeast Asian state[23]. Hanoi sees this as a way of consolidating its role as Mongolia's gateway to ASEAN, a market of more than 700 million people, and supports Ulaanbaatar's ambition to become a dialogue partner of the organisation.

This long-standing relationship has recently been matched by broader institutionalisation. Mongolia joined ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation as early as 2005, but its embassy to the organisation had stood vacant since 2017. The appointment, in March 2025, of Enkhtaivan Dashnyam as Mongolia's ambassador to ASEAN marked the revival of an engagement that had long remained formal. Ulaanbaatar now looks to Thailand, Laos and Singapore as a new economic front, at a time when several Southeast Asian economies are showing resilient trade growth despite international tariff tensions[24].

The parallel with Singapore, another small state facing far larger neighbours, sheds light on this approach. Diplomatic survival there does not rest on size, but on the ability to remain a good neighbour while making friends further afield. A trade forum or a state visit in Southeast Asia arouses, in neither Moscow nor Beijing, the suspicion that a military exercise with the United States would provoke. It lets Mongolia diversify its trade outlets and its diplomatic partners at the United Nations, without ever placing that diversification on the security ground that alone would draw a reaction from its two neighbours.

VIII. France, Japan, Korea: Diversifying Without Breaking

[20]World Nuclear News. (2025, January; 2026, June). Investment agreement signed for Mongolian uranium project; Orano starts construction at Mongolia uranium project.
[21]bne IntelliNews. (2024, 12 January). Mongolia's uranium exports are foreign policy gold.
[22]TIME. (2024, 14 May). How the Promise of Nuclear Energy Draws the West to Mongolia.
[23]VNA / Tuoi Tre. (2024, 30 September-1 October). Vietnam, Mongolia issue joint statement on establishing comprehensive partnership.
[24]The Diplomat. (2025, August). Mongolia Expands Third Neighbor Links to Southeast Asia.

In this reshaping of external partnerships, France occupies a long-standing and concrete place that goes beyond the uranium file alone. Engie has operated a 55-megawatt wind farm in the Gobi Desert since 2018[25], one of the first sustained Western investments in Mongolian power generation. In May 2023, Emmanuel Macron became the first French president to visit Mongolia, a symbolic stopover on the way back from the G7 summit in Hiroshima: received under the presidential ger, he championed an energy partnership built on Mongolian rare earths and uranium, while Khürelsükh described France as an "important third neighbour"[26]. Five months later, the Mongolian president's return visit to Paris finalised the investment agreement with Orano for the Zuuvch-Ovoo deposit mentioned above, along with a letter of intent from France's Bureau de Recherches Géologiques et Minières for a Mongolian lithium exploration project[27].

Japan and South Korea illustrate another dimension of the third neighbour, built on technology and climate cooperation rather than large infrastructure projects. At the end of June 2026, Japan and Mongolia took a further step in their climate cooperation with the issuance of JCM credits compliant with Article 6 of the Paris Agreement[28]. Seoul, for its part, took a still more striking step: the state visit of President Lee Jae-myung, from 9 to 11 July 2026, the first by a South Korean head of state in fifteen years, concluded with a joint declaration opening a "golden era" of bilateral relations and the signing of twenty-one documents covering, among other things, critical minerals, health, education and transport[29], in addition to the rare-earths cooperation centre already mentioned. What these partnerships have in common is that they ask for neither a military base nor diplomatic alignment in return, which explains their compatibility with Mongolia's caution toward its two immediate neighbours.

IX. Central Asia: An Assertive Regional Geometry

The trend also extends to Central Asia, where Mongolia has waged a genuine diplomatic offensive since 2025. In April 2026, Khürelsükh travelled to Kazakhstan on a state visit, the first by a Mongolian president to the country in nearly twenty years, on the margins of which he took part in the Regional Ecological Summit[30]. Eighteen agreements and memoranda were signed there, covering trade, finance, energy, urban development, science and health[31], continuing the coordination already under way since October 2024 between Mongolia's "One Billion Trees" programme and Kazakhstan's "Two Billion Trees" programme[32].

This rapprochement with Kazakhstan is only the most visible tip of a broader movement. Over thirteen months, between June 2025 and April 2026, Mongolia hosted or paid state visits to every Central Asian republic. Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov visited Ulaanbaatar in early June 2025, where fourteen bilateral documents were signed[33]; Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev made, in late June, the first visit by an Uzbek head of state in the history of bilateral relations[34]; Khürelsükh then travelled to Kyrgyzstan, and, for the first time since diplomatic relations were established in 1992, to Tajikistan in late July[35],[36]. No single one of these exchanges alters the regional balance on its own. Together, they trace a diplomacy that is systematic, almost protocolary, whose function outstrips the content of any single agreement.

[25]ENGIE. (2017). ENGIE to develop its first renewable project in Mongolia (Sainshand wind farm, 55 MW).
[26]AFP / Euronews / Engineering News. (2023, 21 May). Emmanuel Macron, first French president to visit Mongolia.
[27]AFP, carried by Connaissance des Énergies. (2023, 12 October). Emmanuel Macron receives the president of Mongolia: development of a major uranium mine.
[28]Japan Ministry of the Environment. (2026, July). First Japan-Mongolia international ITMO transfer under the Joint Crediting Mechanism.
[29]The Korea Times / Asianews Network. (2026, 9-13 July). President Lee concludes Mongolia state visit, marking 'Golden Era' of bilateral ties.
[30]UN Kazakhstan. (2026). Regional Ecological Summit 2026 (RES 2026), Astana, 22-24 April 2026.
[31]zms.mn. (2026, April). State visit of President Khürelsükh to Kazakhstan: 18 agreements and memoranda signed.
[32]Presidency of Mongolia (president.mn). (2024, 29 October). Joint Khürelsükh-Tokayev communiqué: aligning the "One Billion Trees" and "Two Billion Trees" programmes.
[33]Embassy of Turkmenistan. (2025, 1-2 June). State visit of the President of Turkmenistan to Mongolia.
[34]TimesCA. (2025, 24-25 June). Uzbekistan - Mongolia: a new stage of partnership.
[35]Gogo.mn. (2025, July). Mongolian President U. Khurelsukh to pay state visit to the Kyrgyz Republic.
[36]Gogo.mn. (2025, July). Mongolian President U. Khurelsukh to pay state visit to Tajikistan.

This orientation had already been visible a few months before COP17, at the 11th Ulaanbaatar Dialogue (4-5 June 2026)[37], whose programme included, for the first time, an entire session devoted to connectivity between Northeast and Central Asia. Mongolia has stepped up presidential-level exchanges with all five Central Asian republics; Ulaanbaatar raised its relationship with Astana to a strategic partnership and concluded comprehensive partnerships with Tashkent and Bishkek; Kazakh President Tokayev, for his part, proposed a trans-Altai dialogue bringing together the four countries of the Altai mountain range. These initiatives trace a new regional geometry, linking the steppes of Northeast Asia to the Central Asian republics and, through them, to Europe.

The energy dimension of this geometry was also raised in Ulaanbaatar, with the presentation of ESCAP's Green Power Corridor framework, which envisages potential investment of 30 to 80 billion dollars for exporting Mongolian renewable electricity to China and Central Asia, on a structuring horizon set at 2036. Mongolia's position here is unambiguous: the country intends to sell its wind and its sun, not remain a transit territory for resources priced elsewhere.

The parallel with Kazakhstan remains instructive. Astana has spent three decades trying to convert its landlocked position into a transit function between Russia, China, Europe and Turkey, by building pipelines and rail corridors. Mongolia is pursuing a similar ambition, with more modest means: less to escape its landlocked position than to make its territory useful enough to become a space for passage and negotiation. The Kazakh precedent is nonetheless a reminder that this centrality cannot simply be decreed: it is built project by project, and depends on the choices of partners who themselves have alternative routes available.

X. Staying in the SCO Without Merging into It

Mongolia's continued status as an observer state within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation sheds light on this search for balance. Since 2004, the country has taken part in the organisation's work without crossing the threshold of full membership[38]. Despite the reform launched at the Tianjin summit in September 2025, the SCO's official documents still listed, in 2026, Mongolia and Afghanistan as its only two observer states.

This status lets Mongolia maintain direct political access to China, Russia and the Central Asian states without undercutting the logic of its external diversification. It is a characteristic feature of Mongolian diplomacy: remaining present within the regional frameworks structured by its two neighbours, while avoiding an integration that would narrow its room for manoeuvre.

The same logic runs through the way Mongolia uses hosting international forums as a foreign-policy instrument in its own right. The Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security, whose 11th edition brought together more than three hundred participants from forty countries under a Track 1.5 format allowing each to speak in a personal capacity, rests on a simple principle: offering a space where adversaries agree to sit in the same room, without that presence amounting to recognition, endorsement or precedent. Unlike the Shangri-La Dialogue, which remains above all a showcase for great powers, Ulaanbaatar offers middle and small powers a candour that more formal formats do not always allow.

This hosting function draws on an asset Mongolia explicitly puts forward: its democratic trajectory. Freedom House rates it "free" with a score of 84 out of 100, while its two immediate neighbours remain firmly authoritarian; the country has sustained democratic institutions for thirty years between two empires, with no foreign troops on its soil. Mongolia uses this argument to attract partners, European in particular, seen

[37]Leveau, A. (2026, 22 June). The Hotel and the Steppe: Shangri-La, Ulaanbaatar and two ideas of order. Asia Unfiltered No. 9, Asia Centre.
[38]Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (eng.sectsco.org). Observers and dialogue partners: Mongolia, an observer since 17 June 2004.

as offering technological and financial diversification that is less directly likely to translate into strategic dependence.

XI. Cognitive Autonomy, SYMBINT and the Battle of Narratives

Mongolian diplomacy is not confined to the material instruments of minerals, corridors or hosted forums. It also invests in a quieter register: mastery of its own narrative, which might be called cognitive autonomy.

A seminar held ahead of the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, jointly organised by Mongolia's National Institute for Strategic Studies and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, notably highlighted the role of cultural references and historical narratives in interpreting regional strategic behaviour. It is this register that we propose to approach through the concept of Symbolic Intelligence (SYMBINT)[39]. In a region where strategic cultures draw on distinct historical repertoires, this attention to the symbolic is not an academic refinement: it is the very condition of the Mongolian method, which consists of making oneself useful without ever appearing to impose, and of having one's choices recognised as sovereign decisions rather than as adjustments endured.

This concern for narrative has a history of its own in Mongolia. Buddhist diplomacy is its oldest example: by cultivating a spiritual authority distinct from the one Beijing claims over Tibetan Buddhism or Moscow over Buryat and Kalmyk traditions, Ulaanbaatar retains a register of influence that depends on neither neighbour and that opens, notably with India, a channel of dialogue of its own[40]. Mongolian scholars have, more recently, theorised this continuity under the name of the "golden bridle" policy, a traditional principle of balance among powers now mobilised as the conceptual foundation of the country's contemporary soft power[41].

This cognitive autonomy is no decorative addition to the material diplomacy described above. It is the condition of its legibility. A climate vulnerability correctly narrated becomes diplomatic capital; a refusal opposed to Moscow over a pipeline becomes a sovereign decision rather than a bilateral incident; an opening toward Southeast Asia or Central Asia becomes the expression of a choice rather than the consequence of an abandonment. Mongolia lacks the material means to impose its narrative on its neighbours. It does, however, have a repertoire old enough and coherent enough for that narrative to remain its own.

From Buffer State to Hinge State?

The Mongolian steppe has no relief to defend itself with. It stretches, flat and unbroken, until a border decided elsewhere brings it to a halt. For centuries, this absence of obstacle was read as a weakness: nothing there stops armies, nothing there stops empires. From the closing of COP17 to the meeting in Bishkek, by way of the quiet omission of a pipeline from a government programme and the methodical opening toward Southeast Asia, these past few months trace another reading: that of a country that has managed to turn that argument around.

A buffer state exists through the space it maintains between two powers. A hinge state exists through the doors it opens among several. The difference is a single word, but it changes everything: the first endures its position, the second lives off it. Mongolia has not completed this shift. Its economy still depends on the Chinese market, its largest energy projects remain hostage to calculations made in Beijing and Moscow, and its autonomy remains, for the most part, an autonomy of manoeuvre rather than of means. But it has

[39]NISS-UNIDIR seminar, 2 June 2026, Military AI and the middle power dilemma, remarks on the concept of Symbolic Intelligence (SYMBINT).
[40]Rodionov, V. (2026). Buddhism in State Foreign Policy: Mongolia case.
[41]Jalbajav, N. (2026). The "golden bridle" policy and contemporary soft power. Journal of Security and Defense Studies.

understood, through COP17 as through the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, through a pipeline declined as through a fuel shortage weathered without rupture, through a reopened embassy to ASEAN as through agreements signed from Astana to Dushanbe, that a well-staged vulnerability, a well-declined project or a well-lent room can sometimes be worth more than a strength one does not possess.

A hinge never decides, on its own, who passes through the door. But without it, no one passes at all. Power of Siberia 2 is a reminder of this, in its own way: the geopolitical value of Mongolian territory depends not only on Ulaanbaatar's willingness to serve as a place of passage, but on the choice, always reversible, of its neighbours to use this door rather than another, and on the extent to which Mongolia itself agrees to remain merely its keeper. Between buffer and hinge, though, Mongolia has already made its choice, patiently documented in its restored steppes, its negotiated minerals and its carefully tended narratives: it would rather be the door than the wall.

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