



## **Khaan Quest 2014: a small exercise with big implications**

by Mendee Jargalsaikhan

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Despite humble beginnings – ambivalent responses from the US Marines in Okinawa and the Pentagon – *Khaan Quest*, a small bilateral exercise, has survived for more than a decade to become the brainchild of the US and Mongolian militaries, a forum for Mongolia's diplomacy, and a unique peacekeeping training event in a complicated neighborhood.

After persistent Mongolian requests for bilateral training to help its military contribute to international peacekeeping efforts and facilitate the transformation of a Soviet-style training base into a regional peacekeeping training center, the Pentagon allowed US Marines to conduct a small training exercise with the Mongolian military while seeking ways to provide US military assistance to the Five Hills Training Center. This effort was further justified by Mongolia's contribution to US-led coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and UN peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, Chad, and South Sudan. After a decade, Mongolia is now able to share its expertise and is the largest contributor from northeast and central Asia given the size of its population, economy, and military. This makes *Khaan Quest* and the state-of-the art Five Hills Training Center exemplars of US-Mongolia military cooperation.

Both of Mongolia's neighbors view *Khaan Quest* suspiciously, however. PLA leaders and researchers have complained about Mongolia's increasing military interactions with the US and India, in particular, their annual military exercises in Mongolia. The PLA has increased its observers from the resident Defense Attaché to eight observers last year. Russia also maintains observer status at the Defense Attaché level while committing more resources to a large-scale annual bilateral exercise with purposes ranging from the maintenance of Mongolian military equipment to improving interoperability in counter-terrorism operations.

After a stream of invitations from Ulaanbaatar through bilateral and multilateral defense diplomacy, the South Korean and Japanese militaries are gradually increasing their participation, although Tokyo appears to be more cautious (due to bureaucratic and legal hurdles in Tokyo). South Korea became the first East Asian state to dispatch staff officers and a small military contingent for the exercise. Mongolia's partnership with NATO, deployments with Germany in Afghanistan, and renewed ties with post-communist Central European states, has meant that a number of NATO members,

including Germany, the Czech Republic, and Hungary also participate at different levels. *Khaan Quest* has also received the attendance of experienced peacekeepers from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, as well as newcomers such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and even Tajikistan. As the exercise evolves, it provides different types of forums such as staff-planning and field-training exercises, engineering projects like renovating schools and medical facilities, and providing medical aid to local communities. With inclusion of PLA troops, the exercise will be the only constructive tactical forum for militaries of NATO members and China.

Since the end of the Cold War, Mongolia, a state sandwiched between Russia and China, has employed ambitious foreign policy objectives to reach beyond Central Asia to the wider Asia Pacific, North America, and Europe. While Mongolia has turned down the invitation to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it became an OSCE member, a partner state with the EU and NATO, and applied to join the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). Increased collaboration with the US, through the US Pacific Command and exercises like *Khaan Quest*, helped Mongolia become a well-known contributor to international peacekeeping operations and brought its military closer to those of the Asia Pacific and NATO members. Surprisingly, this small exercise brings high-ranking Pentagon officials (e.g., the secretaries of the Navy and Army in 2012) and leaders of the US Pacific Command and services as well as military dignitaries from all participating states during the opening and closing ceremonies.

Beyond the exercise, Mongolian political and military leaders will have opportunities to explain national policies, introduce Mongolian culture, and exchange views. This helps Mongolia identify itself as a neutral forum for dialogues and cooperation because it is the only state with no territorial disputes with neighbors and maintains amicable relations with all East Asian states. Leveraging this neutrality, Mongolia hosts rounds of North Korea-Japan dialogues and is now advancing the newly announced Ulaanbaatar Dialogue. However, *Khaan Quest* presents more visible contributions mostly because of US military training assistance and Mongolia's defense diplomacy.

If China's tactical participation in this year's *Khaan Quest* were implemented as agreed at the planning conferences, it might have eased Japanese and Korean concern about provoking China by attending US military engagements in the heart of inner Asia. But, in bottom, *Khaan Quest* has important training value for all participating military personnel, military engineer, and doctors, while serving as a vital instrument of Mongolia's foreign policy and defense diplomacy.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*