



Mongolia's New Strategic Vision by Steve Noerper

On Nov. 1, Mongolia's President N. Bagabandi received U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, and declared the arrival of a new era of "partnership and cooperation." Kelly noted the success of a political consultative meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and expressed gratitude for Mongolia's support on counterterrorism and Iraqi peacekeeping and restoration.

Kelly's visit follows a call by Secretary of State Colin Powell on Oct. 6 to Foreign Minister Ts. Monkhorgil which noted continued progress in U.S.-Mongolia relations. Mongolia, a "straddle" country like Afghanistan, has appeared increasingly important for U.S. strategic interests, located as it is between Russia and China, Northeast and Central Asia, and the Islamic and non-Islamic East. Its expansive natural resources and ready access to Siberia and northern China make Mongolia a renewed focal point for Russia and China, both of which are keen for minerals and energy sources.

Moscow and Beijing have encouraged Mongolia to be an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which focuses on counterterrorism and, increasingly, economic cooperation. To diversify its strategic reliance, Mongolia has maintained a strong third neighbor policy toward the U.S. and others.

The visit by Kelly and the call by Powell follow a visit by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage earlier this year. Mongolia was quick to offer support for the U.S. antiterrorism campaign: political statements of condolence and support and overflight of its western provinces for antiterrorism-related military flights. It is on its third rotation of troops in Iraq and has trained Afghan forces – contributions that were noted in Washington during the summer visit of President Bagabandi, and especially striking then given the announced pullout of Philippine forces. Mongolia's management of its Muslim minority in the west is instructive to those seeking a bridge to Islamic Asia. Mongolia sees itself as a potential leader of what Batbayar Bat-Erdene, foreign affairs advisor to the prime minister, once described as a Greater Central Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere – in this case for economic cooperation, democratization, and institution-building.

The Mongolian Parliament's approval late last month of its first coalition Cabinet speaks to significant gains in the consolidation of Asia's democracies. Recognition of the new Cabinet followed intense political wrangling, with the victorious Motherland Democratic Coalition and former ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party – which split seats in summer elections – jockeying for 18 ministerial seats. Prime Minister Ts. Elbegdorj noted that "the two opposing powers are to make joint decisions for the first time in Mongolian history. This is a chance for us to revise the traditional

understanding that one side builds while the other works in opposition."

Challenges remain. Coalition governments worldwide, devoid of national security crises, have not met with widespread success. However, Mongolia's ability to see through its election dispute and seat a prime minister and coalition Cabinet surprised those predicting only political battles. Further power-sharing and a large legislative agenda – to be addressed after a two-week parliamentary hiatus – loom large on the political agenda. Mongolia, with a decade of transitional experience from a Stalinist system, may offer Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and perhaps most importantly, North Korea, "lessons learned" on the path of transition.

The rise of members of Mongolia's Northeast Asia Association (NEAA) to senior advisory posts in the new government suggests a more solid integration of Mongolia into Northeast Asia fora. Mongolia's Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS) and new Mongolian Development Strategy Institute (MDSI) are similarly disposed toward enhanced performance in the sub-region.

The U.S., ROK, Japan, China, and others have noted Mongolia's unique positioning toward the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang and Ulaanbaatar have a longstanding political relationship that has seen recent upgrade, with reestablishment of DPRK representation to Mongolia in 2004. Mongolia has enjoyed vibrant political and economic relations with South Korea and is a key facilitator for North Korean refugees; Mongolia views itself as a potential quiet mediator in and contributor to Korean peninsular affairs. South Korean investment is rising in Mongolia, and North Korea's deputy foreign minister this summer suggested sending North Korean agricultural labor to Mongolia, a move that would aid inter-Korean cooperation and enhance agricultural sustainability in Mongolia and on the Korean Peninsula.

As a nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ), Mongolia also provides a model for the peninsula. Given its NWFZ status, transition from a Stalinist economy, and "low frequency broadcast" of democracy, Mongolia is seeking to position itself as a more relevant regional player. Progress in democratic consolidation through its newly named Cabinet, significant enhancement of its banking and foreign investment portfolio – particularly in mining – and its seeking of an enhanced role in Northeast Asia portend a new strategic vision for the mid- and long-term – a vision in the U.S. interest.

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