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The peace of Ulaanbaatar

Mongolia's historic chance to broker peace in strife-ridden North-East Asia

Mongolia is due to hold its first presidential runoff vote on 9 July after all three candidates failed to secure an absolute majority in the election. First-round winner Khaltmaa Battulga of the opposition Democratic Party will face social democrat Miyeegombyn Enkhbold of the ruling Mongolian People's Party (MPP).

Campaigning ahead of the first round was short, intense and often dirty. All sides were mired in corruption allegations, dubious leaks were bandied around and a politically polarised press duly fanned the flames.

Whoever wins the run-off will face enormous domestic challenges. The country's economy is ailing. The boom years fuelled by commodity exports have preceded rapid economic decline, due to a price slump on the world market. This spring only an IMF bailout saved the country from bankruptcy. Many voters have lost trust in Mongolia's parties and politicians. The country has enjoyed a stable democracy since 1990's Mongolian Revolution. It may now be facing its biggest test yet.

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Despite upheavals on the domestic front, the two second-round candidates have vowed to maintain the direction of Mongolia's foreign policy. This is good news. Land-rich but sparsely populated, and weak in economic and military terms, the country can hardly be considered a major player in the region. Yet since the 1990s it has worked assiduously towards peace and security in North-East Asia.

Mongolian governments have a knack for turning weaknesses into strengths. The country is lodged precariously between two political heavyweights, Russia and China, meaning that to maintain its independence it must balance the interests of both major powers. This has led to friendly and resilient relationships with both countries. At the same time, Mongolia's physical isolation, its weak economy and paltry

armed forces exclude it from North-East Asia's many geographical conflicts.

Yet Mongolia's colourful past serves as an important foreign policy resource. Its time as a medieval world power, Manchurian province, Soviet satellite state and its transformation to democracy offer points of contact with countries as diverse as Russia, China, North and South Korea. Since the 1990s, Mongolia pursued a policy of international integration, allying itself with "third neighbours" around the world that balance both Russian and Chinese influence.

The end result is a credible neutrality. This makes it possible for Mongolia to act as an honest broker for peace and security in North-East Asia.

Relations with North Korea

Mongolia's close contacts with Pyongyang go back to the communist era. Its embassy in North Korea remained open even during the Korean war. The country has supplied the north with food and livestock since the 1950s. Today, government delegations are welcomed in Pyongyang, while Mongolians are allowed to travel to North Korea without a visa. Hundreds of North Koreans toil away (sometimes under disgraceful conditions) on Mongolian construction sites. In 2013, the Mongolian president even gave a speech to students at Pyongyang's Kim Il-Sung University.

Mongolia's favourable relations with North Korea explain why bureaucrats, mayors, scientists, and business representatives from across the region readily accept invitations to the capital, Ulaanbaatar. The country is now playing host to less formal meetings between North Koreans and other guests – South Koreans, Japanese, Americans – below government level. Away from the main stages of global politics, dialogue continues even during turbulent times.

An OSCE for North-East Asia

The long-term goal of the Mongolian initiatives is to build trust between neighbours. North-East Asia urgently needs peace and its own security architecture. Just as Finland followed a policy of "active neutrality" during the Cold War fend off threats from Moscow, so Mongolia has managed to keep its powerful neighbours on side. Many hope the country will play a key role in establishing a new, security oriented intergovernmental organisation for the region – a sort of North-East

Asian OSCE. They see in such an arrangement the possibility of diffusing the region's many border disputes, and perhaps even tensions with North Korea.

There is a long way to go. But the goal is likely one the new president will keep in sight. And future generations will perhaps remember Mongolia not for Genghis Khan’s rampaging troops of horsemen, but instead for the peace accord of Ulaanbaatar.



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