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Is Mongolia's democracy here to stay?

Located between Russia and China, Mongolia took control of its foreign policy by becoming a democracy. Now, this democracy is under pressure

Sandwiched between Russia and China, Mongolia became a democratic country in the early 1990s after a peaceful transition. It was in this period that the country was able to pursue an independent foreign policy, in contrast to its communist past when external relations were dictated by the Soviet Union. And still, in recent years an alarming degree of distrust in democracy emerged.

According to a survey by Sant Maral Foundation in May 2022, respondents were asked how satisfied they are with democracy and the present political system. Only 9.3 per cent of respondents were satisfied with democracy, while 35 per cent think that it is good to have a strong leader. But wanting a strong leader does mean that Mongolians will ultimately reject democracy. According to Dr.Tuyagerel Ganbat, a senior lecturer at the Political Department of the National University of Mongolia, the growing public frustration over democracy is caused by a strong distrust in the state and political institutions. It is mostly because the Mongolian state and its political institutions have failed to deliver on their promises - one of the reasons why young Mongolians held mass protests in April 2022.

The younger generations might have started to lose their trust, owing to increasing economic inequality, as believed by Mr. Badamdash Dashdavaa, an independent political scientist. The frustration over income differences between the poor and rich leads people to think that democracy does not work. On other hand, there is a strong belief in democracy among those who are in their 40s. Still, Mongolia will not easily give up its democracy, the values of which are already embedded in the minds of its people.

Mongolian neutrality explained

Despite domestic complications, Mongolia's foreign policy was able to

enjoy substantial liberties through the adoption of democracy. Finding itself in a geographically complicated position, the country had to choose one neighbour over the other due to the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1950s. But now, the democratic country maintains balanced relations with its two immediate neighbours. With the renewal of the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation in 1994, China has become the largest trading partner and investor.

For Mongolians, Russia has been a trusted partner for many years. Many believed that Russia is the country's closest ally, according to several opinion polls including the 'Young Mongolians and the World in 2021' survey conducted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia. This can be explained by the historical perception of Russia enabling Mongolian independence by pushing other powers to recognise the country's status quo during the Yalta Conference in 1945. Furthermore, the Soviet Union provided a considerable amount of economic assistance to Mongolia, helping it become a modern country. In contract, anti-Chinese sentiments were prevalent throughout history, since Mongolia lost a part of its territory to China under the rule of the Qing Dynasty causing poverty and misery. Till this day, many Mongolians share the view that Russia is the sole protector of Mongolian independence.

This positive perception of Russia has drastically changed due to Putin's war against Ukraine, causing Mongolians to split into three different camps. The first camp strongly condemns Russia's so-called 'special' military operation as an act of aggression or bullying against a less powerful country. While the second camp is supportive of Russia, perceiving the country as standing against NATO's enlargement to the East due to a lack of a proper understanding of NATO's mandate which is a legacy of the Cold War. The third camp, which is a substantial number of Mongolians, chooses not to voice their opinion. Seeing thousands of Russians flee to Mongolia to evade a military call-up has laid bare for the majority of Mongolians that Russia's actions were a mistake.

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On the official level, the government of Mongolia has taken a neutral position on what is happening in Ukraine. Without any delay, the government was quick to provide US$200 thousand in humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees showing a resolute position against any military action towards civilians. Yet, it has been challenging for Mongolia to overtly condemn the actions of the Kremlin due to a strong energy dependence on Russia. Mongolia's oil consumption is almost exclusively from Russian,

although it has some proven oil reserves in its eastern region. Furthermore, the Western provinces of Mongolia are dependent on Russia in terms of electricity, though the country has sought to build hydropower plants to diversify energy sources which have long been stalled due to Russian resistance.

Among Mongolians, there is strong sympathy for Ukrainians, as they constituted a substantial portion of the Soviet expats helping Mongolia for many areas. Starting with the Ukrainian President Volodymir Zelenskyy who spent 4 years of his childhood in Erdenet where his father worked as an engineer. The country's neutral position has been widely supported both by the government and the public, as 78.3 per cent of the public believes that Mongolia should stay neutral in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Consequently, Mongolia abstained on a UN resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops, becoming one of the 34 countries that acted in the same way.

Foreign policy validation

Mongolia's 'third neighbours' have renewed their interests in the country after 24 February through high-level visits which have proven that Mongolia's 'multi-pillar' policy is working. As of October, Mongolia has welcomed almost 20 foreign dignitaries. In April, the Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi paid an official visit to the country in the framework of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau visited Mongolia in June with the aim of intensifying the mutually beneficial cooperation between the countries. Also, the Inspector General of the Bundeswehr General Eberhard Zorn expressed his readiness to further expand cooperation with the Mongolian Armed Forces.

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The renewed interests by other countries indicates that Mongolia's 'third neighbour policy' works effectively in this difficult time. According to Mr. Mashbat Otgonbayar, Director of the National Institute of Security Studies, the war in Ukraine is a great challenge to the 'third neighbour' policy, but not a reason to limit it. In this sense, the policy, which aims to balance the interests of Russia and China with others, has produced the desired outcomes

for Mongolia.

Still, Mongolia might have to choose sides between immediate and 'third' neighbours due to its dependence on Russia and China. It was speculated that Sergey Lavrov's visit to Mongolia in July was intended to seek political support from Mongolia amid his country's diplomatic isolation. There were worries that his visit would bring setbacks to Mongolia's long-pursued 'multi-pillar' foreign policy. Despite the potential pressure, Mongolia can and will continue on its foreign policy path made possible through the adoption and continued pursuit of democracy.



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