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Mongolia's razor's edge relationship with Russia

The war in Ukraine has caused many Mongolians to fear the consequences of the existing historic and economic ties between Russia and their country

In purely geographical terms, in relation to Ukraine, Mongolia lies on the far side of Eurasia. But Mongolians have enduring ties with Ukraine and Russia that are evident in their responses to and engagements with the Russian invasion.

Recently, the Mongolian government has strengthened ties with Russia through top-level diplomatic meetings and infrastructure agreements – and it has maintained official neutrality in the conflict, abstaining in the two UN General Assembly votes naming and condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There have also been, despite initial suppression by police, growing demonstrations of support for Ukraine, which feature not only Ukrainian national symbols but Mongolian ones as well.

Strong historical and systematic links

Mongolia is still in Russian-language contexts referred to as the 'sixteenth Republic' (of the former USSR) causing many in the country to identify with the Ukrainian commitment to independence from Russia. As evidenced by the 'sixteenth Republic' label this independence is still all too often not recognised by Russian counterparts, with whom Mongolian and Ukrainians' history, social networks, and critical physical infrastructures are deeply entangled.

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy himself spent part of his childhood in the Mongolian city of Erdenet, where his father was involved in the establishment and early years of the Erdenet mining and metallurgical complex. At the time, this complex was the largest open pit mine of any kind in Asia, shipping copper concentrates directly to smelters in Kazakhstan and producing molybdenum necessary for high-grade steel alloys.

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Since the first democratic elections following a student-led Democratic Revolution in 1989-1990, Mongolia has built a system of wide-ranging international relationships. While maintaining 'strategic partnerships' with its two neighbours, Russia and China, Mongolia has also pursued a 'third neighbour' policy, maintaining strong relations with the United States and NATO countries, including fellow former members of the Warsaw Pact.

Mongolians in support of Ukraine

Up until 2020, since the hunger strike of 1989-1990 that pushed the Mongolian Politburo to call for elections, there had been a vigorous tradition of frequent demonstrations on Ulaanbaatar's capacious Sukhbaatar Square. Situated in front of the main government building, where the parliament now assembles and which until 2005 hosted the mausoleum of 'Mongolia's Lenin' Damdin Sukhbaatar and 'Mongolia's Stalin' Khorloogiin Choibalsan (nearly identical in appearance to Lenin's Mausoleum on the Red Square).

However, since the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2020 and 2021, which solidified the political dominance of the Mongolian People's Party (the rival of the Democratic Party founded by the 1989-1990 student demonstrators), the ensuing restrictions have affected the number of protests. The party enforced lengthy Covid-19 lockdown measures and the arrest of several prominent demonstrators-. While this resulted in demonstrations becoming smaller and less frequent, this has completely changed since the invasion of Ukraine.

The Mongolian government had lifted all Covid-related measures restricting assembly on 14 February. And on 28 February, a group of about twenty demonstrators assembled on Sukhbaatar Square with a long yellow and blue banner representing the flag of Ukraine. They were confronted by police and members of ultranationalist groups.

In the following days, a Ukrainian flag appeared on the storage silos of *Altan Taria*, a major Mongolian flour producer. According to a few Twitter users, the Mongolian police then visited *Altan Taria*. But all in vain, since the beginning of March, demonstrations have continued without reports of direct interference by police. Demonstrations were carried out on the square in front of the State Drama Theatre, diagonally adjacent to the Sukhbaatar Square.

Tough balancing act

On 25 March, demonstrators assembled at the Russian Embassy in Mongolia, also in the centre of Ulaanbaatar, a few blocks west of Sukhbaatar Square, calling for the Russian ambassador to Mongolia to leave the country. Apart from the Ukrainian flag, these demonstrators were also carrying the Mongolian, Buryat, Kalmyk, and Tuvan flag.

The demonstrations beginning on 25 March were precipitated by posts by the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Russian Embassy to Mongolia days prior, which directly challenged 'the Mongolian Democratic Party and other supporters of American liberal hegemony' and cited former Trump adviser Roger Stone's comments that there were American-funded 'bio-labs' in Ukraine.

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The latest phase is characterised by demonstrations asserting not only the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, but also of Mongolia, and solidarity with the republics of the Russian Federation that have often been included in pan-Mongolian formations, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva. There are reports that Russian soldiers are disproportionately recruited from these and other of the Russian Federation's poorest, 'ethnic' republics.

There's a certain overlap between these protesters and Mongolians who have voiced their support for 'neutrality', or even more strongly for the Russian government or Putin. Their statements are also often accompanied by concern about Mongolia's independence vis-à-vis China, or knock-on effects to the Mongolian economy that have already been felt as a result of sanctions against Russia: foreign currency has been nearly unavailable in Mongolia in recent days, and international flights, already heavily reduced because of Covid-19 restrictions, have been even further restricted as Europe-based lessors bar their planes from entering Russian airspace.



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