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Mongolia-USA: a paradoxical military partnership?



The military cooperation of the self-proclaimed global hegemon with a small and critically remote state turns out to be, upon careful consideration, multifaceted and profound. A number of facts, showing the active immersion of the United States in the defence sector of Mongolia, prove this to be evident.

Bilateral contacts

Bilateral contacts between representatives of the military establishments of the two countries date back to 1991.

US Defence Ministers visited Mongolia three times: in 2005, 2014 and 2019. Since 1999, the format of the Bilateral Advisory Council exists in the bilateral military cooperation between Mongolia and the United States. Since 2006, the parties have annually conducted the international Khaan Quest exercise in Mongolia. High-ranking representatives of the two countries participate in the work of the Mongolia-USA Strategic Dialogue, which has been held annually since 2022.

In 2023, the wife of the current US President Joseph Biden, as well as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, awarded the first female Mongolian Brigadier General the honorary IWOC award.

In a Pentagon review report published in May, 2023, Mongolia, along with Singapore, Taiwan and New Zealand, is mentioned as a «reliable, capable and natural partner of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region».

All these years, the United States has been intensively engaged in «experience exchange» and internships with the command staff of the Mongolian Armed Forces, which increasingly resemble ideological work.

Is Mongolia a «global partner» of NATO?

The partnership between Mongolia and the «Collective West» is also actively developing through **NATO**, a seemingly territorially localised (at least formally) alliance, whose member states are as far away from «Inner Asia» as possible. Since 2012, Mongolia and the alliance have been linked by an «Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme», within the framework of which the organisational and staff structures of the country's armed forces have been aligned with NATO standards. This programme was extended and deepened in 2020. During the alliance's very hawkish summit in Wales (2014), which clearly indicated the open anti-Russian position of its members, Mongolia was mentioned as a “global partner” of NATO. Also, at the same event, the “Interoperability Platform” of the Mongolian Armed Forces and NATO troops was launched. With the support of the bloc, Mongolia has reformed its system of professional military education in the Western manner as part of the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP).

Additionally, issues of defence cooperation are regularly on the agenda of meetings of high-ranking representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia, USA and Japan.

Defence Partnership between the United States and Mongolia

According to the Mongolian Embassy in the United States, posted on the **official website** of the mission, «Military partnership with the United States is an important tool for ensuring the national security of the country». The active participation of American advisers and specialists in the reorganisation of the Mongolian Armed Forces «in a modern way» is noted. One of the priorities in military cooperation between the two countries as declared by the Pentagon is «expanding Mongolia's participation in the main security mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region». During most bilateral meetings, representatives of the two countries proclaim «a common vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region».

In recent years, the “track record” of American military ventures in the Mongolian direction continues to be replenished with more and more interesting initiatives.

In August 2023, during the [visit](#) of the Prime Minister of Mongolia, L. Oyun-Erdene, to the United States, he had an official meeting with the head of the Pentagon, L. Austin. At the meeting, Austin announced the transfer of 20 lightly armoured combat vehicles to the Mongolian peacekeeping forces.

In February 2024, the Mongolian delegation visited the Stevens Training Centre of the United States Armed Forces, Alaska. The main direction of training for military personnel in this centre is to ensure combat capability of the armed forces in the Arctic.

What exactly are the Mongolian «batyrs» going to look for in the Arctic with the Americans, when they can do the same with their immediate neighbours, i.e. the Russians? and why should the United States, which boast of strengthening the functionality of Mongolian peacekeepers, prepare soldiers of the internal troops, who have nothing to do with peacekeeping missions? Many relevant questions arise and no adequate answer can be found. It is precisely such moments in bilateral defence cooperation that birth the assumption that the defence partnership between the United States and Mongolia has a number of non-obvious dimensions.

From a certain angle, it must be admitted that what is happening is beginning to take on more pragmatic and realistic configurations; for the Mongols, cooperation with the United States on defence matters is an important means of attracting a major non-regional partner. In addition, US assistance in training and recruiting Mongolian peacekeeping battalions can be perceived as contributing to the formation of a positive image of Mongolia as an advocate of peace and stability through the UN. After all, constant operational interactions with armies of various military formations (from Russia and China to India, Japan, the USA and the Republic of Korea), and even in the format of multilateral exercises, allow Mongolia to save budget funds spent on training military personnel, and, at the same time, ensure a high level of combat capability – what for remains a mystery.

Although it has a large reserve for its population size, Mongolia is a country with one of the least numerous armed forces of no more than 10-12 thousand regular military personnel. The country is surrounded by two superpower neighbours that are SCO members, relations with whom take on the shape of a comprehensive strategic partnership. The threat of terrorism and separatism in the country, as well as any other armed conflicts on its territory, should be considered one of the lowest on the entire planet. Why, then, would such a country look for a partner in defensive cooperation on the other side of the globe?

For the United States, Mongolia's support can be perceived as a tool to irritate China in its own backyard as a kind of «showcase» of the defence partnership, which, through international organisations, can be presented to other potential partners from among the countries of the «Global South» to prepare them to ensure Washington's global interests. In particular, an attempt to establish a military partnership according to the same «UN-centric peacekeeping» scheme can currently be witnessed in US foreign policy vis-à-vis Kazakhstan. The «substitution» factor is also important; with its initiatives, the United States limits the possibilities of developing military cooperation between Mongolia and its neighbours, namely Russia and China, thereby pulling some of the attention onto itself.

One must also take into account the dynamically changing nature of the threats that one state may pose to another. Instrumentation and radar reconnaissance technologies and unmanned aircraft are being intensively developed. Scandals related to US biological laboratories scattered all over the world persist. The things that previously seemed insignificant without armadas of armoured vehicles and air armies can now prove to be an effective means of deterring a potential enemy.

It cannot be ruled out that the United States hopes for a hypothetical scenario in which the Mongolian Armed Forces will be able to pull back a part of the forces and other means at the disposal of the PLA, for example if Mongolia is miraculously won over and a confrontation between Washington and PRC will begin in the Asia-Pacific region. Much can come to the mind of American geopolitical fantasiers, as well as those who are trying to understand the logic of their thoughts!

In any case, Mongolia's developing partnership with the United States continues to look very suspicious and certainly not constructive in relation to the country's natural partners in the face of its «eternal neighbours». It is obvious that the solution of private tasks in ensuring national security should not be undertaken in such a way that worsens the geopolitical position of the state.

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