

Closing the Blindspot between India's Look East and Look North Policies: Recent Developments in Indo-Mongolian Relations

Stephen P. Westcott¹

Abstract

Despite nearly 75 years of bilateral relations, India and Mongolia's engagements have been remained negligible throughout much of this time. This has been in part due to a lack of convergence in their shared interests and in part to disparate foreign policy priorities. Even after the Cold War ended and both states sought to expand their international relations, neither state considered the other a serious avenue for further partnership. India's Look East Policy and Look North Policy, in which it refocused its foreign policy towards South East/East Asia and Central Asia respectively, left Mongolia on the periphery of both regions. Mongolia for its part has adopted a 'third neighbour' policy that mostly focused on the USA and Northeast Asian states. However, since 2010, Indo-Mongolian relations have seen a notable surge in engagement, with increased frequency and depth of diplomatic, economic development and military engagements. This paper explores the recent growth in Indo-Mongolian relations in order to identify and explain the factors behind it. Specifically, I posit here that a blend of India's rise as a regional great power, the growth in Mongolia's resource sector, and China's increasing assertiveness has pushed both states into each other's circles and will likely sustain their engagement into the immediate future.

Key Words: India, Mongolia, Look/Act East Policy; Look North Policy; Third Neighbour Policy

Introduction

In May 2015, Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Mongolia, signifying a significant breakthrough in the two state's bilateral relations. During Modi's state visit, thirteen different treaties and Memorandum of Understandings were signed, India extended to Mongolia a US\$1 billion Line of Credit to construct an oil refinery and Indian-Mongolian relations were officially elevated to the 'strategic partnership' level (MEA, 2015). This flurry of activity has been built upon in the subsequent six years since Modi's visit, generating an unprecedented depth and breadth of Indo-Mongolian diplomatic and development engagement. Although India's economic and political engagement with Mongolia

¹ Stephen P. Westcott is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the College of Arts, Business, Law and Social Sciences, Murdoch University. Email: stephen.westcott@murdoch.edu.au

are dwarfed by Mongolia's neighbours, as well as Japan and the USA, both states are clearly placing increasing emphasis and effort into expanding their bilateral relationship (Krishna, 2020; Soni, 2016).

Geopolitically speaking, this is an interesting development. The two states are separated by approximately 3600 kilometres of mountainous terrain and open wilderness. Furthermore, Mongolia is a landlocked country far from the sea, completely surrounded by Russia to the north and China to the south. Naturally, this has limited India and Mongolia's ability to trade or establish strong channels of communication. Indeed, for most of their history as independent nations, there have been only fleeting and tokenistic engagements between the two states. Even after the Cold War ended and both states began actively expanding their foreign engagements, Mongolia existed in something of a blind spot for Indian foreign policy. Post-Communist Mongolia for its part indicated an interest in developing stronger ties with India but prioritised seeking friendly relations with 'highly developed' countries, a category it clearly did not consider India to be part of. This immediately begs the question: why have Indo-Mongolian relations seen such growth over the past decade?

Most scholarship on Indo-Mongolian relations identify the shared values of democracy and the cultural connection of Buddhism as the basis for the two countries post-Cold War relations (Batbayar, 2001; Kaplonski, 2004; Soni, 2015). Whilst these factors have clearly provided an important foundation and have been actively cultivated by India to foster a sense of bonhomie between the two states, I argue that they are insufficient to account for the recent uptick in diplomatic engagement. Instead, I posit here that three geopolitical developments have driven this expansion of Indo-Mongolian relations. First is India's emergence as a regional great power in the past two decades, which has seen it actively seek more of a leadership role in Central and East Asia. Second is Mongolia's mining boom which has seen it develop a sizeable mining industry and begin exporting minerals. Finally, China's increasing assertiveness in the region and towards India and Mongolia specifically has seen the two states begin to engage in hedging activities, exploring potential areas of security and political alignment without overtly seeking to balance their overmighty neighbour.

This article will unpack this argument in four main sections. The first two sections explore the Indian and Mongolian foreign policy and illustrates how their differing priorities in the initial post-Cold War period ensured that they rarely had much overlap. In particular it is illustrated here how Mongolia fell into a blind spot for Indian policymakers whilst Mongolia

simply had other priorities that required its limited resources. The third section focus on how the Indo-Mongolian relationship developed in the post-Cold War period, with specific emphasis on how bilateral engagements have grown in breadth and depth since 2010. Here it is shown how the relationship has grown from primarily cultural exchanges to more robust intergovernmental cooperation and executive level engagement on many projects. Finally, the three geopolitical factors of India's rise, Mongolia's resource boom and China's assertiveness are discussed, illustrating why India and Mongolia have grown increasingly close as their interests align yet still find an actual alliance infeasible and unattractive.

India Overlooks Mongolia

Throughout much of their history as independent states, Mongolia has represented something of a blind spot for Indian engagement with Asia. During the Cold War era, this was largely due the fact that they walked in different spheres of influence and allegiance. Since 1922, Mongolia acted as a loyal vassal state of the Soviet Union and remained firmly within the Communist bloc, even flirting with the idea of formally joining the USSR at several stages (Narangoa, 2009, p. 363). In contrast, since it gained its independence, India mostly pursued a non-aligned policy, seeking to maintain its strategic autonomy even as it increasingly favoured the Soviet Union (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009). This ensured that even though India was the first state outside of the Communist bloc to formally recognise Mongolia in December 1955, actual diplomatic engagements between the two states were kept to a minimum. Indeed, India neglected to establish a diplomatic mission in Ulaanbaatar until 1971 and, other than India sponsoring Mongolia's entry into the United Nations in 1961, significant bilateral or multilateral interactions between the two states were rare (MEA, 2021).

Although the potential for greater breadth and depth of India-Mongolia relations was opened following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the geopolitical shockwave ensured that India was focused on other priorities. Specifically, India's largest source of trade and military supplies disappeared almost overnight, leaving it on the verge of default. In response, India radically reformed and restructured its economic and foreign policies, most notably developing the 'Look East' policy. Essentially, the Look East policy involved India coordinated pivot from its previous focus on great power politics and the Non-Aligned Movement to actively engage with its previously neglected Asian neighbourhood. Initially, the impetus of this policy was to develop trade partnerships to make up for the loss of the USSR and attract investment in India to assist with the modernisation of its increasingly obsolete infrastructure. Whilst in theory this policy could have seen India engage with all of the Asian-

Pacific region, the clear focus for India was the ASEAN states as well as the ‘Asian Tiger’ economies which in the 1990s were at their height (Acharya, 2015, pp. 455–457; Sikri, 2009, pp. 132–133).

The ‘Look East’ quickly became the flagship foreign policy for Indian diplomacy in the 1990s and 2000s as successive governments embraced it. As it matured, the Look East policy increasingly developed political and strategic as well as economic objectives as India sought to utilise the policy as its main framework for engaging with Asia and deepen the connections that it made (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009, pp. 13–14; Sikri, 2009). It was also expanded to cover non-ASEAN states, notably deepening relations with China, Japan, South Korea and later Australia. Shortly after their election in 2014, the Modi government rebranded the policy as ‘Act East’ indicating that it wanted to inject more dynamism into the policy. However, this rebranding has proven to be little more than a public relations stunt as there has been no significant change in level or focus India’s engagement with Southeast and East Asia (Bajpae, 2017; Ganapathi, 2015).

A lesser-known regional policy of India’s was the ‘Look North’ policy, the *de facto* approach through which India attempted to engage with the Central Asian states. Fundamentally, the Look North policy sought to capitalise on the disintegration of the USSR by making coordinated diplomatic inroads into Central Asia, specifically with the former Soviet republics. India’s primary aims here were to cultivate the Central Asian republics as partners against religious extremism and to gain access to the rich resources and potential markets in the region (Kavalski, 2010, pp. 80–84; Krishna, 2020, pp. 109–110). However, in contrast with the Look East policy, the landlocked nature of the Central Asian states and the established influence of Russia and China in the region ensured that the Look North policy was produced few tangible results. In response, in 2012 India revamped its regional engagement by launching the ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ in an attempt to reinvigorate efforts to partner with Central Asian states to develop stronger trade and commercial ties. This revamped policy has seen closer military and economic cooperation between India and many of the Central Asian states, especially after Prime Minister Modi’s 2015 tour of the region. Nonetheless, problems with establishing a direct route for trade have ensured that India has been unable to

provide a genuine alternative partner for Central Asian states (Kavalski, 2015, pp. 429–430; Wani, 2020, pp. 20–25).²

Notwithstanding the success or failures of either the Look East or Look North policies, Mongolia was not an easy fit for India's main regional policies geopolitically speaking. Indeed, there was no clear consensus within the Indian government and pundits as to whether Mongolia should be considered to as part of Northeast Asia, Central Asia or both (Kavalski, 2015, p. 425; Krishna, 2020, p. 101), indicating that it has been on the periphery of both in India's perspective. Although the Modi government eventually included it under the umbrella of the Look East policy in 2015, Mongolia was more frequently simply overlooked and not considered in Indian engagement with either region. Thus, with little to draw India's gaze during the 1990s and 2000s, Mongolia effectively fell into a blind spot in India's foreign policy, thereby ensuring that Indo-Mongolian ties remained stunted and largely neglected during this period.

An Open and Non-Aligned Mongolian Foreign Policy

Generally speaking, Mongolia has been viewed by scholars and observers as more interested in developing a close relationship with India (Batbayar, 2001; Soni, 2016). However, initially post-communist Mongolia showed little interest in actively courting India. With the disintegration of the USSR, Mongolia effectively lost its suzerain which had underpinned its security and economy since 1922. Mongolia itself also bowed to popular domestic pressure in 1990 and transitioned relatively smoothly from a communist state into a multiparty democracy (Campi, 2018, pp. 62–63; Kaplonski, 2004, pp. 50–70). However, the new regime was initially focused upon stabilising its domestic situation and establishing its political institutions, ensuring that engagement with the international community outside of its neighbours and major organisations was limited. Indeed, it was only in 1994 that the State Great Hural (Mongolia's unicameral parliament) turned its attention in earnest to establishing the principles guiding how the new republic's foreign policy should be conducted. The result of this deliberation was the passing of its first 'Concept of Mongolia's Foreign Policy' which, despite some minor revisions in 2011, has provided the stable foundation and framework through which Mongolia has conducted its external affairs (Reeves, 2012, pp. 590–591; Soni, 2020, pp. 65–68).³

² To avoid confusion, the Look East and Look North policies will be referred to their original rather than their current names throughout this paper.

³ Mongolia simultaneously adopted the 'Concept of National Security' and in the following year the 'Fundamentals of Military Doctrine' which essentially just outlined what it would consider to be a threat to its

Whilst addressing a wide array of considerations, the salient points of Mongolia's Foreign Policy Concept is that it committed to maintaining a "open and non-aligned" stance in international relations whilst avoiding "becoming overly reliant or dependent on any particular country" (MJIA, 1995, p. 57). In outlining the political considerations, the Concept specified that Mongolia's independent foreign policy would focus first and foremost on developing good relations with China and Russia, maintaining "good neighbourly cooperation" and "a balanced relationship with both of them" (MJIA, 1995, p. 58). The second priority for Mongolia was to "develop friendly relations with highly developed countries of the West and East", before seeking to strengthen its political-economic position in Asia and engage with international organisations.

Thus, Mongolia developed a pragmatic multitiered foreign policy with the explicit aim of ensuring it avoids becoming dominated or beholden to any one state (Campi, 2018; Soni, 2015). Although there has been some debate about whether to declare Mongolia a 'permanently neutral' country like Switzerland (Campi, 2018, p. 88; Soni, 2020, pp. 71–73), the primary manifestation of this goal has been Mongolia's 'third neighbour' policy. In essence, the third neighbour policy has involved concerted efforts to cultivate close "bilateral and multilateral cooperation with highly developed democracies" (MFA, n.d., sec. 3.1.1.5). The clear aim of this policy has been not only to solicit economic and political investment into Mongolia, but also to balance or dilute the influence of its immediate neighbours Russia and China. Whilst India was explicitly mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept as a state with which Mongolia should establish 'friendly relations' with, Ulaanbaatar did not initially consider India a strong candidate to cultivate as a third neighbour. Indeed, for its first two decades as a democracy, Mongolia focused its diplomatic efforts on developing relations with the USA, the European Union, Japan and South Korea, clearly not considering India to be within the same league (Narangoa, 2009, pp. 372–376; Soni, 2015, pp. 41–44).

The Recent Explosion Indo-Mongolian Relations

Whilst India's and Mongolia's interests and international trajectories ensured that they rarely walked in the same circles, this is not to say that there was no notable engagement between the two states in the post-Cold War years. Indeed, there were several treaties signed between India and Mongolia during this period, including the 1994 Treaty of Friendly Relations and

national interests and how it sought to use its security forces to defend them. These documents complement the Concept of Foreign Policy in providing the foundational framework for Mongolia's independent international relations.

Cooperation and the signing of six separate agreements covering defence and law enforcement cooperation in 2001 (Krishna, 2020, p. 103; MEA, 2001). Arguably the most significant development in Indo-Mongolian relations during this period, however, was India's assistance in restoring Buddhist institutions to Mongolia. Buddhism was actively repressed under Mongolia's communist regime but was recognised by the new republic as part of "the Mongolian people's intellectual civilisation" and it was made a national security goal to "revive and develop Buddhist religion and culture" (MFA, n.d., sec. 3.1.4.7-8). Given India's historical-cultural inheritance as the birthplace of Buddhism and refuge of the Dalai Lama, it was in a unique position to assist Mongolia with this goal. India's inspired choice to appoint a Buddhist monk, Kushok Bakula Rimpoche, to act as its ambassador between 1990 and 2000 also helped strengthen bilateral relations as he helped establish several monasteries and expand the Mongolian ecclesiastical cadre (Soni, 2016, pp. 55–56).

These agreements and cultural interactions provided a strong foundation for India-Mongolia bilateral relations, generating significant good will between the two states and earning India the epithet 'spiritual neighbour' in Mongolia. Ultimately though, the Indo-Mongolian engagements during this era generated few tangible economic or strategic developments and mostly consisted of tokenistic gestures such as renaming institutions or gifting copies sacred documents. Bilateral relations gradually grew closer and deeper throughout the 2000s as defence and law cooperation, especially following the initiation of Operation Nomadic Elephant, a joint military exercise between the two states that has been held roughly annually since 2004 (Defence News India, 2019). Yet, Indo-Mongolian relations remained sporadic and overshadowed by their relations with other states. The bilateral relationship only began to take on more impetus for both sides after they came to a civil nuclear agreement in September 2009 in which Mongolia agreed to allow the sale of uranium to India (Chandramohan, 2015; Soni, 2016, p. 57). Whilst little tangible came from this agreement,⁴ it did act as the catalyst for the elevation of Indo-Mongolian relations to the 'comprehensive partnership' level and for Mongolia to identify India as a 'third neighbour' for the first time in 2010.

⁴ This author has been unable to find any evidence of Mongolia actually exporting uranium or nuclear related material to India or that there has been any serious investment from India into its uranium mining sector. Indeed, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, Mongolia's trade with India is still dominated by the traditional agricultural sector, with wool, hides and other animal products being the predominant exports throughout the 2010s (OEC, 2021).

As a result of this elevated relationship, Indo-Mongolian relations saw a marked explosion in engagement throughout the 2010s under the mantra of the ‘Three Ds’: Dharma, Democracy and Development. One sign of this has been the increased frequency and calibre of state visits that each has paid to the other (Campi, 2018, pp. 86–87). Indeed, according a report by India’s Ministry of External Affairs, there have been at least as many high level state visits in the past decade as there were in the previous 55 years of Indo-Mongolian relations (MEA, 2021). These state visits have also increasingly involved members of cabinet from both states’ governments, rather than visits from the largely ceremonial positions of President or House Speaker which led previous visits from both countries. The most notable of these state visits was the previously mentioned state visit by Prime Minister Modi, the first ever undertaken by an Indian Prime Minister to Mongolia. Additionally, India’s External Affairs Minister and Home Affairs Minister both separately visited Mongolia in 2018. Key members of Mongolia’s government have also been increasingly visiting India, including the Deputy Prime Minister (in 2016), the Foreign Minister (in 2016 and 2019), the Defence Minister (in 2018) and the Minister of Mining (in 2018).

Beyond this spate of high-profile visits, the Indo-Mongolian relationship has also gained greater depth and breadth as the number of dialogues and conferences between officials has ballooned. Arguably the most important of these intergovernmental dialogues is the India-Mongolia Joint Committee on Cooperation, a ministerial level meeting started in the 2000s but held roughly biannually since 2011.⁵ The Joint Committee has been the primary mechanism used by India and Mongolia to coordinate the activities surrounding on their agreements and explore avenues where their partnership can be expanded upon (MEA, 2020, 2021). At time of writing, most recent meeting was the 7th Joint Committee Meeting which was held virtually in December 2020.

Intergovernmental department engagements have also been increasing. Of note, the Indian Border Security Force and the Mongolian General Authority on Border Protection have been frequently collaborating on issues of border management practices, conducting joint training exercises and other capacity building exercises since 2014 (MEA, 2021; PTI, 2018). India has also been active in assisting Mongolia develop other security capabilities including the assisting with the establishment of the Cyber Security Training Centre and conducting special forces training during Operation Nomadic Elephant and Mongolia’s annual military

⁵ Although the clear ambition of both sides is to make this an annual meeting, scheduling issues and other priorities have ensured that this dialogue has become a biannual event instead.

exercise ‘Khaan Quest’ (Campi, 2018, pp. 78–79). There have been a proliferation of similar agreements between the relevant government bodies for joint projects in fields as diverse as space exploration, agriculture and medical research since 2015 (Bayasgalan & Jargalsaikhan, 2021; Krishna, 2020, pp. 106–107).

Economic and development engagements between India and Mongolia have also been increasingly blooming. Trade between India and Mongolia has grown from less than US\$2.5 million in value in the mid-2000s to nearly US\$37 million in 2019 (De & Pan, 2017; OEC, 2021). Whilst the value of trade is heavily skewed in favour of India, with approximately US\$34.5 million, or 93%, of the trade coming from Indian exports to Mongolia, much of this trade involves finished industrial machinery destined for Mongolia’s mines (OEC, 2021). Furthermore, India’s extended a US\$1 billion line of credit to Mongolia in 2015 for the purposes of establishing the country’s first oil refinery so it can diminish its dependence on energy from Russia. This loan was expanded by a further US\$236 million in 2019, although construction has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic (MEA, 2021). India has also been keen to provide Mongolia aid, most notably drawing on its strong pharmaceutical industry to provide Mongolia with medical supplies and vaccines both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bayasgalan & Jargalsaikhan, 2021).

The Geopolitics behind Indo-Mongolia’s Growing Convergence

To a large extent, the recent growth of Indo-Mongolian relations does represent the evolution of the early efforts in the post-Cold War era to cultivate good relations. However, there have also been an increasing convergence of interests derived from three interlinked factors that have propelled bilateral relations forward since 2010: first, India’s emergence in earnest as a rising great power; second, Mongolia’s mining boom from the mid-2000s; and finally, a mutual desire to find alternatives to China’s increasingly overbearing behaviour in the region.

India has long maintained the pretence of being a great power, seeking to adopt the mantle of global leadership in several multilateral organisations such as the Non-Aligned Movement and often attempting to assert itself as the hegemon of South Asia. Indeed, a significant motivating factor behind India’s Look East and Look North policies was to gain influence and augment its potential leadership capabilities within Asia (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009, pp. 13–14; Kavalski, 2015, pp. 428–430). However, for the first fifty to sixty years of India’s independence, few states outside of its immediate local region took note or considered India to be a serious alternative to other powers such as China, Europe and the USA. It was

only in the late 2000s did India's economic growth start to make significant strides and its and military procurement and diplomatic efforts began to bear fruit. Hence, India was able to establish itself as a bonified rising power, recognised as such through the BRICs minilateral grouping of states and increasingly able to match its ambitions with actions (Takenori, 2017). As a consequence of India's newly developed capabilities, its potential for regional leadership and partnership have been taken more seriously by the host of minor powers in Asia, including Mongolia.

Whilst India's growth as a rising power attracted Mongolia's gaze, India became increasingly interested in Mongolia's potential as a source of resources to help drive its continued growth. After Mongolia passed a number of reforms incentivising foreign investment into its resource sector in the late-2000s, its mining sector boomed between 2009 and 2014, attracting many workers away from the traditional animal husbandry and textile industries (Dai & Gibson, 2012, pp. 3–4; Muller, 2019). Whilst the resource sector saw a global downturn when commodity price fell in 2014-2015, the industry has since rebounded and Mongolia's mines have continued to dominate its economy. Although economic statistics indicate that Mongolia's primary export to India is still wool and hides (OEC, 2021), India has shown great interest in procuring coking coal, uranium and copper as well as investing in Mongolia's energy sector (Bayasgalan & Jargalsaikhan, 2021, pp. 4–6; De & Pan, 2017, pp. 36–38). Indeed, the largest line of credit that India has extended to any country has been to develop the first oil refinery in Mongolia and both sides evidently keen to expand Indian investment and trade in Mongolia's resource sector (MEA, 2019). With construction work only recently started on the refinery, it remains to be seen to what extent this help open up opportunities for the export of mineral resources to India in the future.

Whilst India's rise and Mongolia's mineral wealth have increased the two state's mutual interest in each other, it is their shared concern over China's increasingly assertive behaviour that is arguably the most significant factor propelling bilateral engagements. Throughout the 2010s, India's relations with China deteriorated as confrontations along their shared border became increasingly common and violent, culminating in the lethal skirmish in the Galwan Valley in 2020. Additionally, India has been increasingly concerned with China's increasing efforts to establish Belt and Road projects throughout the Indian Ocean region, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Boon, 2016; Deepak, 2020). For its part, Mongolia has been evidently uneasy about the growth of Chinese influence over it. This concern has stemmed not only due to its established policy of avoiding becoming dependent on any one state but also

due to China's willingness to use coercion in response to policies it disapproves of. The most notable instance of this occurred when China briefly shut its border with Mongolia in 2002 in response to a visit from the Dalai Lama, temporarily crippling Mongolian trade (Reeves, 2012, p. 594). Hence, Mongolia has been seeking options since the late to dilute and/or curtail Chinese presence and influence without destroying their economy.

However, openly attempting to ally or otherwise balance against China is not an option for either state. Despite the recent tensions, China represents India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade between the two expected to reach US\$100 billion in 2021 with Indian exports improving (Jayaswal, 2021). Additionally, India works alongside China in several multilateral organisations such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, the BRICS summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. For Mongolia, the issues are even starker. Approximately 70 percent of Mongolian trade is with China and Chinese ports such as Tianjin are the main import/export route for its trade with the rest of the world (Soni, 2020, p. 70). Furthermore, the sheer geographic distance ensures that any moves to form an alliance or even engage in *de facto* balancing actions would be unfeasible. Any attempt to do so would likely only attract China's wrath whilst the separation between the two would make it difficult for either party to fulfil any their commitments or deter reprisals. Thus, India and Mongolia have opted for a milder version of balancing known as 'hedging'.

In essence, hedging is a form of strategic alignment behaviour in which a state seeks to keep its position towards the centres of power ambiguous and open, neither seeking to 'bandwagon' with or balance against one power or the other (Kuik, 2016; Lim & Cooper, 2015). This is typically achieved through a 'engage and resist strategy', in which a state mixes both cooperation and counteraction policies as a contingency plan with the aim of minimising risk whilst and maximising benefits (Korolev, 2019, p. 422). It is important to note that hedging is a contested term in the theoretical scholarly literature.⁶ Nonetheless, Indo-Mongolian relations clearly have a strong undertone of mutual assistance to resist domination by China whilst deliberately remaining well below the threshold that could generate legitimate concern or potential reprisals from the penultimate global power.

⁶ Specifically, the debate largely revolves around whether hedging should be considered a distinct activity or a form of balancing behaviour. There are also debates about whether hedging is a common option or a 'luxury' for some states, under what circumstances will states choose to hedge over balancing/band wagoning/attempting isolation etc.

Specifically, India has been recognised by several scholars as attempting to maintain its strategic autonomy via a strategy of ‘multi-alignment’ (Hall, 2016). This has seen India cooperating with China at an international level in breaking down the unipolar world whilst resisting China at a regional and/or local level through the development of strategic partnerships and independent capabilities (Boon, 2016, pp. 795–799; Takenori, 2017, pp. 475–479). Similarly, Mongolia’s foreign policy after 2010 has followed what scholar Jeffery Reeves (2012) has identified as blend of ‘omni-enmeshment’ and ‘complex balancing of influence’. In essence, this has effectively seen Mongolia seek to embrace as many prominent international partners and multilateral organisations as possible in order to curb Chinese (and to a lesser extent Russian) influence without provoking any retribution or getting unintentionally drawn into an alliance or becoming dependent on another overmighty patron (Soni, 2020). Thus, both India and Mongolia appear to have found in each other the perfect partner to help enhance their capabilities and limit Chinese influence without committing to an alliance or overtly directing their cooperation against China.

Conclusion

Although diplomatic and other engagements between India and Mongolia prior to 2010 were negligible, the decade between 2010 and 2020 has seen a palpable expansion of bilateral relations. The scope and frequency of diplomatic, defence, development and political dialogues has increased and both states seem to be keen on exploring how the relationship can be furthered (MEA, 2019). Naturally, this relationship has been built upon the inroads created in the 1990s and 2000s, but it was a convergence of three key factors that have brought India and Mongolia into close communication. First has been the emergence of India as a bonafide regional power, able to appear as an attractive market and partner to minor powers within Asia. Second was the growth of Mongolia’s resource sector, with resource extraction quickly dominating its economic output and attracting many foreign investors. Finally, and potentially most importantly, both India and Mongolia had a shared desire to hedge against China’s rise, seeking to strengthen their capabilities and partnerships to resist any attempts at coercion whilst still maintaining as friendly relations with their largest trading partner.

Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that there are still major obstacles in the two states developing a genuinely productive partnership. China and Russia still dominate Mongolia’s economic and strategic engagement. Furthermore, its engagement with other third neighbour partners such as the USA, Japan and South Korea typically eclipse Mongolia’s interactions with India (Campi, 2018). India for its part remains focused on its immediate

neighbourhood and great power politics, frequently distracted by confrontations along its borders with Pakistan and China as well as developing its relationships with other Indo-Pacific powers. Mongolia's landlocked position also renders more active engagement and trade between the two states difficult. Hence, even an optimistic Indian brief on the status of Indo-Mongolian relations conceded that, despite the numerous talks and investment initiatives, bilateral trade remains "modest in value and volume" (MEA, 2021).

Ultimately, the current Indo-Mongolian relationship can be best characterised as having plenty of bonhomie and potential, especially in terms of trade, but one that should not be overhyped. The sheer distance between the two and more pressing matters may yet stymie further developments or even ensure that Indo-Mongolian relations wither. Yet, notwithstanding those caveats, the geopolitical factors that have brought the two states together are unlikely to shift any time soon. Thus, it can be expected that the confluence of interests between India and Mongolia that initially drew their mutual gaze towards each other will keep their relationship alive into the medium term. Indeed, it is clear that there are many further avenues that their bilateral engagement can explore before it reaches its natural limits.

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