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MONGOLIAN NATIONAL SECURITY BETWEEN TWO GREAT POWERS HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Mongolia has protected its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity since 1911 under the immutable geographic condition of sharing borders only with Russia and China. Using historical document analysis, process tracing, and comparative periodization, it assesses primary and scholarly sources concerning the 1912 Russo-Mongolian Agreement, the 1915 Tripartite Treaty of Kyakhta, the 1936 Protocol of Mutual Assistance, the 1945 Yalta arrangement and independence plebiscite, Mongolia's admission to the United Nations in 1961, and the post-1990 concepts of national security, foreign policy, and nuclear-weapon-free status. The study argues that Mongolia's security has not resulted from a simple policy of keeping equal distance from its two neighbors. It has been most resilient when four elements were combined according to the nature of the threat: domestic state capacity, a workable balance in relations with the neighboring powers, international legal recognition, and diversified external partnerships. The abolition of autonomy in 1919 demonstrates that external backing cannot substitute for viable domestic institutions. The alliance-centered security system from the 1930s to the 1980s protected Mongolia against immediate military threats but also narrowed strategic autonomy. Since 1990, a multi-pillar foreign policy and the third-neighbor approach have widened Mongolia's diplomatic room for maneuver, although concentrated trade routes, markets, energy supplies, and infrastructure continue to create structural vulnerability. The article concludes that Mongolia should treat stable and mutually beneficial relations with both neighbors as the foundation of national security while using international law, third-neighbor partnerships, and national resilience to expand its strategic autonomy.

KEYWORDS

Mongolia, National Security, Russia, China, Small State, Third-neighbor Policy, Strategic Autonomy, Nuclear-weapon-free Status

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1. Introduction

Any analysis of Mongolia's security must begin with geography. Mongolia is landlocked and shares its only two borders, among the world's longest land frontiers, with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. It cannot choose its neighbors. It can, however, decide how to manage relations with them, what legal guarantees to establish, how far to diversify its economic and diplomatic options, and what level of domestic state capacity to maintain. Mongolia's experience therefore cannot be explained adequately by the familiar geopolitical image of a buffer state between two great powers. That image captures geographic pressure but obscures Mongolia's political agency, negotiating capacity, use of international law, and efforts to build networks of external partnerships.

Research on the security of small states recognizes that asymmetry in material capabilities matters, but it is not the only determining factor. Small states generally combine several strategies for survival, including alignment, neutrality, reliance on international institutions, and the diversification of economic and diplomatic relations (Keohane, 1969; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Mongolia employed these strategies at different times and sometimes simultaneously. Between 1911 and 1919, the disparity between Russian support and Mongolia's limited internal state capacity became evident. From the 1930s, the security alliance with the Soviet Union provided effective protection against Japanese military expansion. During the Sino-Soviet split, however, the same alliance turned Mongolia into a forward area in a confrontation between great powers. Since 1990, Mongolia has combined balanced relations with its two neighbors with a third-neighbor policy, participation in the United Nations and other multilateral mechanisms, and a nuclear-weapon-free status to broaden the diplomatic foundations of its independence.

The research question is how Mongolia has sought to ensure national security under an unchangeable geographic condition, what benefits and costs its chosen instruments produced, and what lessons this historical record offers for current policy. The central argument is that Mongolian security did not arise from a single alliance, one legal instrument, or a mechanical principle of maintaining equal distance from the two neighbors. It proved more durable when Mongolia adapted and combined four pillars: domestic state capacity, a workable balance in relations with its neighbors, international legal guarantees, and diversified external relations. Historical vulnerability increased whenever one of these pillars was neglected.

The terms Russia and China are used with careful attention to historical period. Russia refers, as appropriate, to the Russian Empire, Soviet Russia, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the present Russian Federation. China refers, as appropriate, to the Qing Empire, the Republic of China, or the People's Republic of China. This distinction avoids projecting the policies of contemporary states directly onto earlier political regimes.

2. Research Method and Analytical Scope

The study uses three complementary methods. First, it examines the content of primary documents, including treaties, protocols, resolutions, policy concepts, and United Nations decisions, to trace changes in Mongolia's status, the rights and obligations of the parties, and the form of security guarantees. Second, process tracing is used to connect the conditions preceding key decisions, the choices of the relevant actors, and the consequences that followed. Third, the periods 1911-1921, 1921-1945, 1945-1961, the 1960s to 1990, and the period since 1990 are compared to identify recurring patterns in Mongolia's use of security instruments.

National security is understood here in a broad sense. It includes not only protection against armed attack, but also the preservation of independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the stability of state institutions, economic viability, and the capacity to make autonomous foreign-policy choices. This approach is consistent with Mongolia's 2010 National Security Concept, which treats security comprehensively at the levels of the state, society, and the individual (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2010).

The analysis applies four dimensions. Domestic capacity includes the legitimacy of the state, institutional continuity, defense and border governance, and social cohesion. Balance in neighborly relations refers to mutually acceptable arrangements with Russia and China. Legal guarantees include treaties, diplomatic recognition, membership in international organizations, and special international status. Diversification refers to a range of partnerships with third countries and multilateral organizations, as well as alternative channels for trade, transport, energy, and information. These dimensions are not separate policies. Together they form a mutually reinforcing security framework.

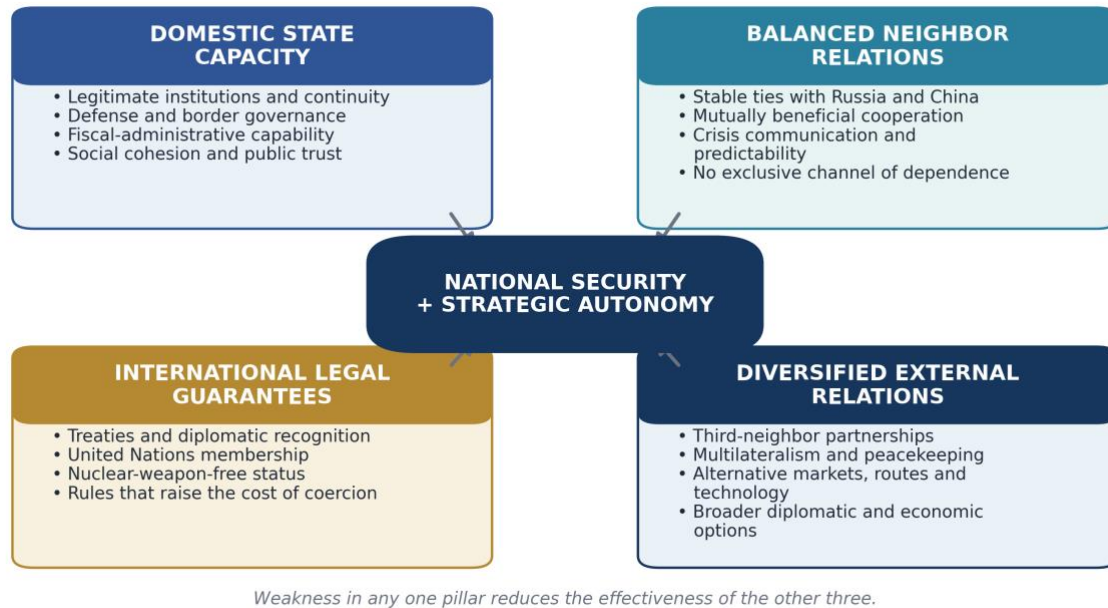


Fig. 1. Four-pillar framework of Mongolia's national security
 Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the analysis in this article.

The limitations of the sources also require attention. Some records, including the official results of the 1945 plebiscite, were produced within the political conditions of their time. The article therefore focuses on the plebiscite's diplomatic function in 1945-1946 rather than judging its democratic quality by contemporary standards. Similarly, published casualty figures for the Battle of Khalkhin Gol vary. The analysis avoids disputed totals and concentrates on the battle's strategic consequences.

Table 1. Historical periods in Mongolia's national security

Period	Principal security context	Main instruments	Outcome and lesson
1911-1919	Collapse of Qing rule, Russo-Chinese arrangements, and weak Mongolian institutions	Declaration of independence, Russian support, and autonomy agreements	Separate state institutions emerged, but sovereignty remained constrained. The events of 1919 exposed the limits of external support and domestic capacity.
1921-1945	Chinese and White Russian forces and the Japanese military threat	Soviet assistance, the 1936 protocol, and joint defense	National government was restored and the eastern frontier was defended in 1939, while dependence on the Soviet Union deepened.
1945-1961	Postwar great-power settlement and limited international recognition	Yalta settlement, plebiscite, bilateral recognition, and United Nations membership	Independence acquired bilateral and multilateral legal guarantees.
1960s-1990	Sino-Soviet confrontation	Soviet military protection and close political alignment	Military deterrence increased, but strategic autonomy narrowed.
1990-present	End of the alliance system, economic opening, and renewed great-power competition	Multi-pillar policy, third-neighbor partnerships, the United Nations, and nuclear-weapon-free status	Diplomatic options expanded, but concentrated dependence in trade, transport, and energy persists.

PERIOD	SECURITY MODEL	KEY MILESTONES	CORE LESSON
1911-1919	Constrained statehood	1911 declaration; 1912 agreement 1915 Kyakhta; 1919 autonomy lost	Domestic capacity is indispensable.
1921-1945	Alliance-based survival	1921 revolution; Soviet support 1936 protocol; 1939 Khalkhin Gol	Alliances require aligned interests and capability.
1945-1961	Legal consolidation	1945 plebiscite; 1946/1949 recognition 1961 United Nations admission	Sovereignty needs layered recognition.
1960s-1990	Frontline deterrence	Sino-Soviet confrontation; Soviet forces Withdrawal during 1987-1992	Protection can reduce autonomy and remains conditional.
1990-present	Multi-pillar security	Balanced neighbors; third neighbors UN engagement; nuclear-free status	Diversification widens strategic choices.



 Increasing legal institutionalization, diversification and strategic autonomy

Fig. 2. Evolution of Mongolia's security strategy, 1911-present
Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the analysis in this article.

3. The First Test Between Independence and Autonomy

3.1. The National Revolution of 1911 and Limited Russian Support

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Qing government's New Policies threatened to alter Mongolia's traditional administration, land use, and demographic balance. These measures intensified political resistance among Mongolian nobles and Buddhist leaders (Ewing, 1980). When the Qing central government entered a severe crisis in 1911, Mongolian nobles enthroned the Eighth Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutuktu and declared independence on 29 December. This was more than a response to an external opportunity. It was an act of domestic state building through which Mongolia's political elite sought to establish a separate sovereign, government, ministries, armed forces, and taxation system (Ewing, 1997; Liu, 2006).

The newly established Bogd Khanate nevertheless lacked broad international recognition, stable finances, adequate arms, and a professional administration. Imperial Russia avoided unequivocally recognizing Mongolia as a fully independent state separate from China. Instead, it favored extensive autonomy compatible with its own commercial and strategic interests. The 1912 Russo-Mongolian Agreement recognized Mongolia's right to self-government and secured Russian commercial privileges. It also demonstrated that the Mongolian government possessed practical treaty-making capacity, but it stopped short of unambiguous recognition of full independence (Ewing, 1997; Zhu, 2020).

The first major lesson follows from this experience. The support of a great power does not necessarily coincide fully with the aims of a small state. Russian assistance was important to the survival of the Mongolian state, but it protected an autonomous arrangement acceptable to Russia rather than the full independence sought by Mongolia. A patron's guarantee is therefore not a permanent entitlement. Its scope reflects the patron's wider interests.

3.2. The 1913 Arrangement and the 1915 Treaty of Kyakhta

Through the Russo-Chinese declaration of 1913 and the accompanying exchange of notes, Russia recognized Chinese suzerainty over Outer Mongolia, while China recognized Mongolian autonomy. Mongolia itself was not the principal subject of this bilateral arrangement. After protracted negotiations at Kyakhta, representatives of Russia, Mongolia, and China signed a tripartite treaty in 1915. The treaty granted Outer Mongolia autonomous authority over its internal administration within the framework of Chinese suzerainty and restricted its independent treaty-making powers in foreign political and territorial affairs (Zhu, 2020).

The Treaty of Kyakhta should not be interpreted in absolute terms. On the one hand, it marked a legal retreat from the full independence declared in 1911. On the other, the tripartite recognition of Mongolia's separate government, territory, and internal administration did not amount to a complete return to direct Qing-era rule. It is therefore more accurate to view the treaty as an interim arrangement that limited Mongolia's sovereignty while preserving certain institutions of separate statehood.

The principal lesson is that when two great powers reached an understanding concerning Mongolia, Mongolian political will alone could not determine the outcome. For a small state, a seat at the negotiating table is insufficient. Without effective institutions, economic resources, military capacity, and broader international support, the result of negotiations is likely to remain bounded by the consensus of the great powers.

3.3. The Abolition of Autonomy in 1919 and the Lesson of State Capacity

The Russian Revolution of 1917 removed Mongolia's principal external supporter and sharply altered the regional balance of power. At the same time, internal disputes over political authority, finance, and military organization weakened the autonomous government's capacity for self-defense. Under these conditions, forces commanded by the Chinese warlord Xu Shuzheng compelled Mongolia to renounce its autonomy in 1919 and restored direct Chinese control (Ewing, 1997; Rossabi, 2005).

The events of 1919 provide one of the clearest warnings in Mongolia's security history. External guarantees cannot replace domestic state capacity. A small state's security model may collapse when it relies excessively on a patron that becomes consumed by internal crisis. Divided elites, weak public finances, and the absence of organized armed forces also allow external pressure to develop into a domestic political crisis. Mongolia's later emphasis on centralized state institutions and the development of security organizations was, in part, an indirect response to this painful experience.

4. Soviet Support and the Preservation of the State

4.1. The Revolution of 1921 and a New Security Dependence

In 1921, Mongolian revolutionaries, supported by the Red Army of Soviet Russia, expelled Chinese forces and the troops of Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg and restored the existence of a national government. Mongolia's domestic revolutionary movement and Soviet strategic interests converged, but the asymmetry of power remained substantial (Isono, 1976). Following the death of the Bogd Khan, the Mongolian People's Republic was proclaimed in 1924. The new regime consolidated its institutions while becoming deeply embedded in Soviet political, security, and economic influence.

The outcome of 1921 cannot be reduced to the proposition that independence was completely saved or, conversely, that Mongolia merely became dependent on another power. The continued existence of a distinct territory, government, armed forces, and basic foreign-policy apparatus was a substantive achievement. Yet limited international recognition and heavy dependence on the Soviet Union for economic and defense support narrowed the exercise of sovereignty. This duality defined Mongolian security through much of the twentieth century.

4.2. The 1936 Protocol of Mutual Assistance and Khalkhin Gol

Japan's occupation of Manchuria and establishment of Manchukuo in the 1930s created a direct military threat along Mongolia's eastern frontier. In response, the Mongolian-Soviet Protocol of Mutual Assistance of 1936 established the basis for comprehensive assistance in the event of aggression by a third party. The protocol provided a legal basis for the Soviet military presence in Mongolia and was implemented during the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in 1939.

Between May and September 1939, Mongolian and Soviet forces fought Japanese and Manchukuoan units in the Khalkhin Gol region. A ceasefire was concluded on 15 September and entered into force the following day. The victory secured Mongolia's eastern frontier, checked Japanese military pressure, and affected strategic calculations in Northeast Asia. Its most immediate consequence for Mongolia was the defense of the state's survival and territorial integrity through effective military force (Sella, 1983; Rossabi, 2005).

This experience shows that alliance protection can be indispensable when a threat is imminent, military in nature, and beyond national capabilities. Its effectiveness, however, depended on the clarity of the common threat, the convergence of interests, and legal and operational mechanisms established in advance. The value of the 1936 protocol lay not merely in its declaratory terms but in the military, command, and logistical capabilities that made implementation possible in 1939.

4.3. The 1945 Settlement Plebiscite and Diplomatic Consolidation

The end of the Second World War opened a new opportunity to consolidate Mongolia's independence internationally. The secret agreement concluded at Yalta on 11 February 1945 stipulated, as one condition for the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Japan, that the status quo in Outer Mongolia be preserved (United States Department of State, 1945). The provision was problematic because Mongolia's status was discussed by three great powers without Mongolian participation. In practical diplomatic terms, however, it was an important step in incorporating the separate existence of the Mongolian People's Republic into the postwar great-power settlement.

In the exchange of notes associated with the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 14 August 1945, the Chinese side stated that it would recognize the independence of Outer Mongolia within its existing boundaries if the people of Outer Mongolia confirmed their desire for independence through a plebiscite. The vote took place on 20 October. According to the official result, 487,409 people voted for independence and no vote was cast against it. This unanimous result cannot be assessed apart from the one-party political environment and the conditions under which the vote was organized. Its diplomatic function was nevertheless clear. A representative of the Chinese government observed the plebiscite, and its result provided the legal criterion for the Republic of China's recognition of Mongolian independence on 5 January 1946 (United States Department of State, 1945-1946; Liu, 2006).

The process of 1945-1946 demonstrates three points. Soviet military and diplomatic influence raised Mongolia's objective to the level of great-power negotiations. The plebiscite expressed the Mongolian people's will for independence in a form required by the international settlement. Recognition by the other neighboring power was then decisive for the external legal consolidation of independence. Domestic political will, support from one great power, and legal recognition by the other thus converged to produce the diplomatic result.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 added a further layer of recognition. Diplomatic relations between Mongolia and the new Chinese government were established in October of that year, confirming state-to-state relations between the People's Republic of China and the Mongolian People's Republic. This step was distinct from recognition by the Republic of China in 1946 and provided renewed diplomatic confirmation following a change of regime in China. Distinguishing these dates is important because Mongolia's independence was consolidated through a sequence of acts rather than a single event.

5. International Legal Guarantees and the United Nations

5.1. The Prolonged Negotiations over Membership

The Mongolian People's Republic first applied for membership in the United Nations in 1946. Its admission was delayed for years by Cold War competition, great-power disputes over package admissions, and the position of the Republic of China, which represented China in the United Nations at the time (Batbayar, 2021). The delay shows that the practical exercise of independence and full recognition within an international institution do not necessarily occur at the same time.

On 25 October 1961, the Security Council adopted Resolution 166 recommending Mongolia's admission. On 27 October, the General Assembly admitted the Mongolian People's Republic through Resolution 1629 (United Nations Security Council, 1961; United Nations General Assembly, 1961). United Nations records show a vote of 74 in favor, none against, and 17 abstentions. Membership marked a turning point by establishing Mongolia's sovereignty within a global multilateral institution.

5.2. The Security Value of Legal Institutionalization

United Nations membership did not immediately transform Mongolia's military-strategic environment. Mongolia remained within the Soviet security system, and relations with China soon deteriorated. Membership nevertheless produced three long-term effects. It largely ended broad international contestation of Mongolia's standing as a separate sovereign state. It gave Mongolia a forum in which to state its positions directly and channels through which to participate in international organizations and treaty regimes. It also provided a foundation for expanding diplomatic relations with third countries beyond fluctuations in relations between its two neighbors.

This experience shows that the security of a small state does not rest exclusively on military deterrence. International legal personality, organizational membership, treaty networks, and diplomatic recognition do not automatically prevent aggression, but they increase the political and legal costs of violating independence and widen a small state's opportunities to speak, seek support, and build partnerships. Mongolia's success in 1961 added a multilateral guarantee to the bilateral recognitions achieved in 1945-1946.

6. Frontline Security During the Sino Soviet Confrontation

6.1. Mongolia's Choice as Relations Between Its Neighbors Deteriorated

As the ideological and security dispute between the Soviet Union and China deepened from the late 1950s, Mongolia aligned firmly with the Soviet Union. By the mid-1960s, China's Cultural Revolution, increasing border tensions, and the military confrontation between the two powers heightened Mongolia's perception of danger along its southern frontier. A bilateral agreement in 1966 provided the basis for the large-scale redeployment of Soviet forces to Mongolia, making Mongolian territory an important southern component of Soviet defenses against China.

It would be misleading to judge Mongolia's decision solely from the perspective of the more peaceful conditions that followed. Armed clashes occurred on the Sino-Soviet border in 1969, and the possibility of a broader regional war was real. Given Mongolia's population, economy, and limited national military capacity, independent deterrence was not a viable option. The Soviet military presence supplied a credible capability to deter attack and defend Mongolian territory.

The arrangement nevertheless carried a strategic cost. Mongolia's foreign and defense policies became closely aligned with the Soviet regional strategy, leaving little independent space for relations with China. Territorial security increased while freedom of foreign-policy choice diminished. This condition is best understood as a trade-off between effective protection and the cost to strategic autonomy, rather than through the one-sided claim that Mongolia was either secure and independent or dependent and therefore insecure.

6.2. Rapprochement Between the Neighbors and Military Withdrawal

Mongolia's strategic environment changed when the Soviet Union adopted a new foreign policy and sought to normalize relations with China in the mid-1980s. In his 1986 Vladivostok speech, Mikhail Gorbachev proposed measures to reduce tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. Soviet forces in Mongolia were subsequently reduced in stages. Withdrawals began in 1987, accelerated in 1989, and the final units had left Mongolian territory by the end of 1992 (Radchenko, 2012).

The withdrawal offers an important lesson. Alliance protection depends on a great power's threat assessment and wider relations and therefore cannot be assumed to be permanent. As Soviet-Chinese relations normalized, the strategic requirement for Moscow to station forces in Mongolia declined. For Mongolia, this reduced an immediate source of military protection, but it also created an opportunity to normalize relations with China and recover room for an independent foreign policy. Together with Mongolia's democratic transition in 1990, the change required a shift from a security system based on a single alliance to a multi-pillar approach.

7. Democratic Transition and Multi Pillar Foreign Policy

7.1. Constitutional Government and a New Understanding of Security

The democratic revolution of 1990 and the Constitution of 1992 transformed the domestic foundation of Mongolian security. The legitimacy of the state came to rest on popular sovereignty, elections, human rights, and the separation of powers rather than on a single-party ideology. This constitutional order became an internal source of foreign-policy autonomy. Domestic governance matters to the security of a small state because external actors can exploit institutional weakness, corruption, social division, and policy instability as channels of influence. Democratic legitimacy, a professional civil service, an informed public, and social cohesion are therefore strategic assets alongside military capability.

In 1994, Mongolia adopted its first national security and foreign policy concepts, moving from an ideologically based alliance policy toward national interests, open relations, and multi-pillar diplomacy. The 2010 National Security Concept updated a comprehensive policy for protecting vital national interests, avoiding excessive dependence on any single country, and strengthening domestic resilience (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2010). The 2011 Foreign Policy Concept defines Mongolia's foreign policy as independent, open, peaceful, and multi-pillar and gives priority to friendly and balanced relations with Russia and China (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2011).

Balanced relations should not be interpreted as numerically equal engagement with both neighbors in every sector. The geography of Mongolia's trade, cross-border infrastructure, and fuel and energy supplies necessarily produces different forms of interaction with Russia and China. Policy balance means that relations with one country should not be directed against the other; neither country should acquire excessive leverage over national decision-making; and disputes should remain manageable through political and diplomatic means.

7.2. The Substance of the Third Neighbor Policy

The term third neighbor entered Mongolian political usage during the visit of United States Secretary of State James Baker in 1990. It later became a policy framework for expanding relations with Japan, the United States, the European Union, India, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and other democratic and developed partners (Campi, 2019). The 2011 Foreign Policy Concept formally institutionalized this direction.

The third-neighbor policy would be misunderstood if treated as a military alliance intended to balance either Russia or China. Because Mongolia is landlocked and depends physically on transit through its two neighbors, third countries cannot replace its geography. They can, however, expand Mongolia's range of choices by diversifying technology, investment, education, defense capacity, peacekeeping cooperation, democratic institutions, and international support. A third neighbor is therefore not a substitute neighbor. It is an additional pillar that reduces excessive strategic concentration.

Mongolia's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations since 2002 is one practical security expression of this policy. Mongolia has deployed military and police personnel to multiple operations. Peacekeeping improves the professional capacity and interoperability of the armed forces and identifies Mongolia as a contributor to international security. For a small state, serving not only as a consumer of security but also as a provider of public security builds reputation and partnership capital.

7.3. Combining Bilateral and Trilateral Mechanisms

Since 1990, Mongolia has sought to develop stable relations with Russia and China on renewed legal foundations. The 1962 boundary treaty with China and the demarcation and related protocols of 1963-1964 remain the historical legal basis for a clearly defined southern border. Agreements and demarcation work with Russia have likewise stabilized the northern border. The absence of an active territorial dispute and the treaty-based definition of both frontiers constitute a fundamental security achievement.

In the twenty-first century, Mongolia has established a comprehensive strategic partnership with China and strengthened a long-term framework of friendly relations and comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia. The 2019 Treaty on Friendly Relations and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Mongolia and Russia was concluded without a fixed term and renewed the legal framework for long-term relations. Mongolia, Russia, and China also held their first trilateral summit in 2014 and signed the program for the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor in 2016. Trilateral mechanisms can enable Mongolia to participate as a negotiating subject in shared infrastructure, transport, and economic matters rather than remain merely an object of its neighbors' separate policies (Campi, 2014).

Trilateral cooperation does not automatically ensure equal participation. Without a coherent national position and professional negotiating capacity on project finance, technical standards, routes, environmental effects, and domestic benefits, Mongolia risks becoming little more than a transit space between two larger economies. The security value of trilateral arrangements must therefore be measured by their alignment with Mongolia's strategic objectives and national development plans, not by the number of projects announced.

8. Nuclear Weapon Free Status and Legal Initiative by a Small State

Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status is its most distinctive contribution to multi-pillar security. In September 1992, President Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat announced from the rostrum of the United Nations General Assembly that Mongolia would declare its territory a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Situated between two nuclear-weapon states, Mongolia thereby signaled that it would not allow its territory to become an instrument of nuclear competition.

On 4 December 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 53/77 D without a vote, supporting Mongolia's international security and nuclear-weapon-free status (United Nations General Assembly, 1998). On 3 February 2000, Mongolia adopted the Law on Its Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status, prohibiting the development, manufacture, acquisition, possession, stationing, and transit of nuclear weapons under national law (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2000). On 17 September 2012, the five nuclear-weapon states issued a joint declaration that included commitments to respect Mongolia's status and not to contribute to any act that would violate it. The declaration added a further political assurance to Mongolia's initiative.

Mongolia's status is not identical to a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone established through a multilateral treaty. Its single-state status was strengthened incrementally through domestic legislation, repeated United Nations resolutions, and a joint declaration by the five nuclear-weapon states. The lesson lies less in

achieving a perfect legal form than in Mongolia's ability to connect its geographic vulnerability to a broader international interest, mobilize support, and institutionalize the resulting status (Enkhsaikhan, 2012).

The initiative succeeded in part because it was not directed against either neighbor. Russia and China are both nuclear-weapon states, but Mongolia's commitment not to host nuclear weapons did not directly threaten their legitimate security interests and instead accorded with a shared interest in regional stability. The case shows that a small state's initiative is more likely to gain international support when it reduces its own vulnerability without dismissing the legitimate security interests of neighboring states.

9. Structural Vulnerabilities in the Contemporary Security Environment

9.1. Concentration in the Economy Transport and Energy

Policies adopted since 1990 have significantly expanded Mongolia's diplomatic options but have not eliminated the economic consequences of geography. Mongolia's export market is highly concentrated in its southern neighbor, and the principal routes to seaports pass through Chinese territory. Petroleum products and several critical energy supplies remain heavily dependent on the northern neighbor. This concentration is not necessarily the product of hostility. It reflects the size of neighboring markets, transport costs, Soviet-era infrastructure, and comparative advantage. It nevertheless allows shocks involving borders, transport, prices, sanctions, or supply interruptions to spread rapidly through Mongolia's economy, public finances, and social stability.

Treating economic dependence as a security issue does not mean deliberately reducing trade with neighboring states. Mongolia's development requires access to their markets, transit systems, and investment opportunities. The security objective is to prevent the interruption of a single channel from disabling essential national functions. Measures include strategic reserves, a more diverse energy system, interconnected border ports and railways, agreements that provide access to third markets, domestic processing capacity, and reliable digital infrastructure.

9.2. Great Power Competition and the Spillover of Sanctions

The confrontation between Russia and the West, strategic competition between the United States and China, and the gradual separation of technological and financial systems make policy choices more difficult for small states. Mongolia needs to avoid becoming an arena for conflict while consistently defending the principles of the United Nations Charter, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Ignoring violations of international law in the name of balance would weaken the legal foundation on which Mongolia relies to protect its own independence. Expressing principled positions in the language of hostile alignment, however, could impose unnecessary costs on relations with neighboring states. Mongolia therefore requires diplomacy that is grounded in law, predictable, and capable of explaining its positions clearly.

Sanctions imposed by third countries, restrictions on payments, and export controls can have secondary effects on Mongolian banks, transport, and imports. The policy objective should not be sanctions evasion. It should be to protect legitimate Mongolian trade and finance through effective compliance systems, alternative routes, and timely information exchange. A small state's reputation and contractual reliability are strategic assets comparable to material resources. Accepting legal risk for short-term benefit can therefore weaken long-term security.

9.3. Information Cyberspace and Domestic Cohesion

In the twenty-first century, security between two great powers is no longer measured only at the border. Digital infrastructure, data, the public information environment, confidence in elections, and ownership in strategic sectors have become arenas of influence. Disinformation, content designed to aggravate social divisions, cyberattacks, and efforts to link economic interests to political decisions may reduce policy autonomy without an armed attack.

The appropriate response is neither information isolation nor the treatment of all cultural influence from neighboring countries as a threat. Mongolia needs a diverse information environment, professional media ethics, critical literacy among citizens, transparent government, cybersecurity for critical infrastructure, and lawful disclosure of financing connected to foreign influence. External information operations become more effective when domestic trust is weak and decision-making is closed. National cohesion should therefore be strengthened through evidence-based public debate and confidence in legitimate institutions rather than enforced uniformity of opinion.

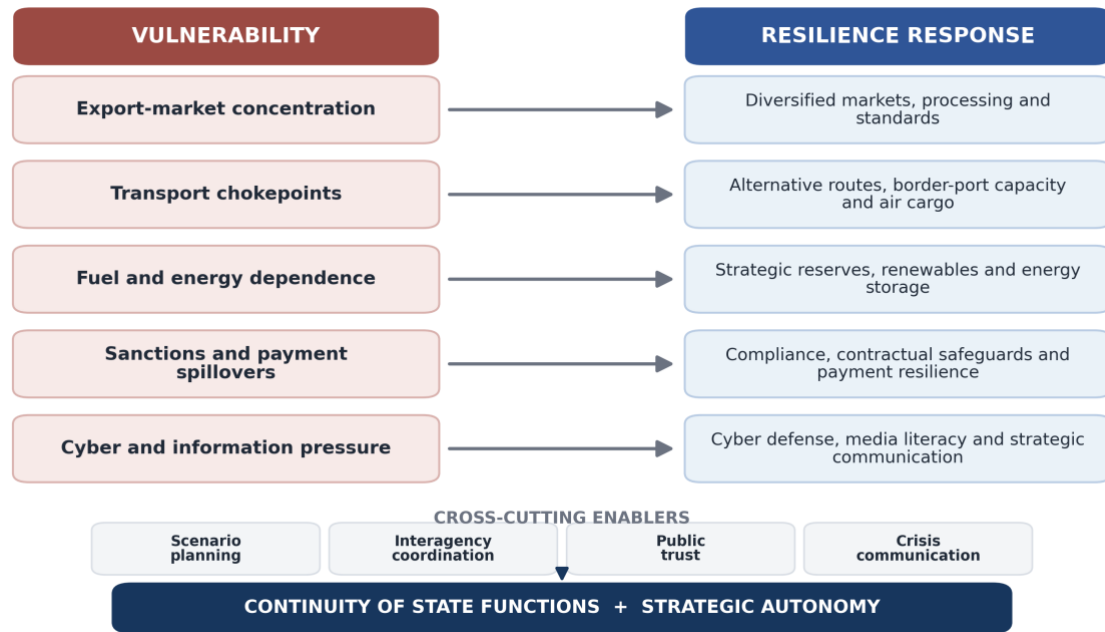


Fig. 3. Structural vulnerabilities and resilience responses in contemporary Mongolia
Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the analysis in this article.

10. Comparative Lessons from Historical Experience

Table 2. Historical cases and current policy lessons

<i>Historical case</i>	<i>Core lesson</i>	<i>Current policy implication</i>	<i>Risk if neglected</i>
Abolition of autonomy in 1919	External support cannot replace domestic state capacity	Strengthen professional government, social cohesion, and preparedness	An external shock becomes a domestic governance crisis
The 1936 protocol and Khalkhin Gol in 1939	An implementable partnership can be effective against a shared and immediate threat	Link defense partnerships to clear objectives and operational capability	A declaratory guarantee fails during a crisis
The Sino-Soviet confrontation	Unilateral protection may impose costs on strategic autonomy	Assess dependence and exit conditions in every major security arrangement	Mongolia becomes a forward area in great-power confrontation
Consolidation from 1945 to 1961	Sovereignty requires layered guarantees	Combine bilateral treaties, the United Nations, and international regimes	A change in one guarantee weakens the entire security framework
Third-neighbor policy since 1990	Diversification expands options rather than replacing neighboring states	Deepen partnerships in technology, markets, transport, education, and security	Broad diplomacy does not translate into practical capacity
Nuclear-weapon-free status	A small state can advance legal initiatives that serve a common interest	Renew assurances, verification, and professional capacity	A political declaration loses practical substance

10.1. Geography Is a Permanent Condition Rather Than Destiny

Mongolia's location between two neighbors will not change, but its political consequences are not fixed. In 1919, state collapse in Russia and domestic weakness in Mongolia created the conditions for the abolition of autonomy. In 1939, a shared threat made Mongolian-Soviet military cooperation effective. In the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet confrontation turned Mongolia into a forward area, while rapprochement in the 1980s opened the way for troop withdrawal and normalized relations. Geography determines the field of risk, but domestic capacity, the regional balance of power, and diplomatic policy shape the outcome.

10.2. Unilateral Protection Can Be Effective but Remains Conditional

The experience of 1936-1939 shows that an alliance guarantee can deter a direct military threat. The events of 1919 and 1986-1992 show that guarantees can weaken or change when a patron's interests or capabilities change. Alliances should therefore be assessed neither as permanently good nor as permanently harmful. The relevant criteria are the nature of the threat, the credibility and implement ability of the guarantee, the cost to autonomy, and the existence of an exit strategy.

10.3. Domestic Capacity Is the Foundation of Foreign Policy

The independence proclaimed in 1911 could not be defended in 1919 because institutions remained weak. As state structures, the armed forces, the diplomatic service, and public finance became stronger, Mongolia gained greater capacity to exploit opportunities in its external environment. Domestic capacity today is not measured simply by the size of the armed forces. It includes the rule of law, a professional civil service, fiscal discipline, strategic infrastructure, education, science, food and energy security, and public trust.

10.4. Legal Guarantees Must Be Layered

Mongolia's independence began with the declaration of 1911 but was consolidated through successive agreements, recognition, and membership in 1912, 1915, 1945, 1946, 1949, and 1961. Its nuclear-weapon-free status was likewise strengthened in stages through the declaration of 1992, a United Nations resolution in 1998, national legislation in 2000, and the statement by the five nuclear-weapon states in 2012. This pattern demonstrates that the legal security of a small state rests on mutually reinforcing layers rather than on a single instrument.

10.5. Balance Means Independent Judgment Rather Than Equal Distance

The scale and content of Mongolia's relations with its two neighbors cannot be identical. The practical measure of balance is whether Mongolia can refrain from adopting a policy against one neighbor at the demand of the other, avoid placing national decisions at the mercy of a single channel of dependence, develop issue-based relations with each neighbor, and explain and manage disagreements. Such a policy is not neutrality without principles. It is active diplomacy guided by national interests defined in advance.

10.6. Diversification Stabilizes Rather Than Replaces Neighborly Relations

Third neighbors, multilateral organizations, new markets, and alternative transport routes do not reduce the need for sound relations with Russia and China. They can reduce excessive dependence and enable Mongolia to engage each neighbor through more stable and capable negotiations. Presenting diversification as a geopolitical project against the neighboring states would deepen mistrust. Grounding it in economic resilience, contributions to international public goods, and transparent rules makes it more acceptable to all parties.

11. Policy Recommendations

First, Mongolia should ground its policy toward both neighbors in a national consensus that extends beyond electoral cycles. The minimum principles, red lines, and risk assessments governing high-level visits, major infrastructure projects, and security cooperation should be explained publicly except where legitimate confidentiality is required. Greater clarity would improve policy continuity. Neither exaggerated fear nor excessive confidence in either neighbor should substitute for evidence-based analysis.

Second, the National Security Council, the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the defense and economic authorities should maintain a jointly updated map of strategic dependencies. Scenario analysis

should assess the effects of a single-point failure in export markets, critical imports, fuel, electricity, banking payments, international internet connections, railways, road border crossings, medicines and medical supplies, and food inputs. This would not be a plan to sever relations with neighboring states. It would be a plan to preserve the functioning of the state, economy, and society when disruption occurs.

Third, strategic reserves and infrastructure diversification should be treated as security insurance rather than ordinary expenditure. Fuel reserves, renewable generation, energy storage, border-port capacity, multiple transport routes, air cargo, domestic food-processing capacity, and data backup facilities should be assessed for their value during disruption as well as for their normal economic return. In sectors where a fully independent alternative source is infeasible, Mongolia should develop time-bound reserves, contractual guarantees, and mutual assistance protocols.

Fourth, the third-neighbor policy should shift from a list of projects toward systematic capacity transfer. In defense, cooperation should prioritize peacekeeping, professional military education, cybersecurity, disaster response, medical readiness, and logistics. Economic partnerships should prioritize technology, standards, value addition, export certification, and human capital. High-level declarations and short-term assistance alone cannot alter structural dependence.

Fifth, Mongolia should continuously maintain security confidence with Russia and China. It should strengthen rapid communication on border issues, transparency concerning military activities, disasters, wildfires, infectious diseases, transnational crime, water, and environmental concerns. Clear explanations of the objectives and scope of Mongolia's defense cooperation with third neighbors, together with its established policy of not allowing foreign troops to be stationed on its territory, can reduce the risk of miscalculation.

Sixth, Mongolia should continue to use its nuclear-weapon-free status as an active diplomatic asset. It should keep implementation of relevant United Nations resolutions under regular review, preserve continuity in the assurances of the five nuclear-weapon states despite political changes, and strengthen national expertise in nuclear-material security, radiation monitoring, and regional risk analysis. These measures would give the status continuing practical substance.

Seventh, Mongolia should establish an integrated strategic communications system. During a crisis, it must be able to explain its position promptly, consistently, and on the basis of evidence to both neighbors, third-country partners, and the domestic public. Policy ambiguity during great-power competition can generate deliberate or inadvertent misunderstanding. Specialists with relevant foreign-language skills, country expertise, strategic analysis, and coordinated official communication form part of the state's nonmaterial security infrastructure.

Eighth, scenario planning and institutional learning should become routine components of decision-making. Interagency exercises should consider scenarios in which relations between the two neighbors deteriorate sharply or, conversely, become more closely coordinated; a major border port closes for an extended period; fuel supplies are interrupted; third-country sanctions affect Mongolian payments; or a cyberattack disrupts critical infrastructure. Such exercises can identify legal and resource gaps before a crisis. The contemporary meaning of the 1919 lesson is that state functionality must be prepared before a crisis rather than relying on external assistance after it begins.

12. Conclusions

More than a century of Mongolian efforts to ensure security between two great powers does not yield a single prescription valid for every period. The national revolution of 1911 demonstrates the importance of political will and state-building action. The Treaty of Kyakhta of 1915 shows that agreements among great powers can restrict the sovereignty of a small state. The abolition of autonomy in 1919 confirms that external support cannot substitute for domestic capacity. The 1936 protocol and the victory at Khalkhin Gol in 1939 show that alliance protection can be indispensable against a direct military threat, while the Sino-Soviet confrontation demonstrates that a security guarantee may impose costs on strategic autonomy.

The Yalta arrangement of 1945, the plebiscite, recognition in 1946 and 1949, and United Nations membership in 1961 show that Mongolian independence did not emerge through a single event. It was consolidated through a sequence of domestic political will, great-power settlement, bilateral recognition, and multilateral institutionalization. This lesson remains directly relevant. The more layers on which sovereignty is secured, the better Mongolia can withstand changes in any one channel.

Since 1990, Mongolia's independent, open, peaceful, and multi-pillar foreign policy has expanded its diplomatic options. On a foundation of friendly and balanced relations with its two neighbors, Mongolia has developed the third-neighbor policy, United Nations engagement, peacekeeping participation, and nuclear-

weapon-free status. These are substantive achievements of active small-state diplomacy. Concentrated dependence in trade, transport, energy, finance, and information nevertheless continues to create strategic vulnerability.

Mongolia's appropriate contemporary security formula is therefore neither mechanical equal distance from the two neighbors nor reliance on a unilateral guarantee. It is to establish stable, predictable, and mutually beneficial relations with Russia and China as the foundation, while building additional layers of domestic state capacity, international legal guarantees, third-neighbor diversification, and whole-of-society resilience. The central historical lesson is that Mongolia cannot change its geography, but it can manage geographic pressure through effective institutions, law, diplomacy, and national cohesion. That capacity remains the practical guarantee of independence.

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