

US–Mongolia Defense Relations

A Strategic Partnership in the Heart of Asia

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Abstract

Mongolia occupies a singular position in contemporary geopolitics: a functioning democracy embedded between two authoritarian great powers. This article argues that the US–Mongolia defense partnership is not peripheral but strategically consequential for the United States’ Indo-Pacific and Eurasian posture. Anchored in Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” policy, the relationship has evolved into a durable security partnership encompassing military cooperation, peacekeeping, critical minerals, and deep educational ties. Mongolia’s consistent contributions to international security and its democratic resilience challenge prevailing authoritarian narratives while offering the United States a non-provocative means of sustaining influence in the Eurasian heartland. The article contends that disciplined, calibrated US engagement—focused on institutionalized defense cooperation, economic sovereignty, and multilateral integration—can reinforce regional stability without triggering escalation. Mongolia’s experience demonstrates that geography need not dictate political destiny, and that small democratic states can play strategically outsized roles in an era of renewed great-power competition.

In an era defined by renewed great-power rivalry, the strategic choices of small states in contested regions carry consequences far beyond their borders. Nowhere is this truer than in Mongolia. Wedged between China and Russia, Mongolia is often dismissed as a geopolitical afterthought—a buffer state whose fate is presumed to be constrained by geography. That assumption is analytically lazy and strategically dangerous.

Mongolia is not a passive space between powers; it is an active democratic actor that has deliberately chosen alignment with a rules-based international order. For the United States, the relationship with Mongolia is therefore not an exercise in benevolence or symbolism. It is a calculated investment in regional stability, ideological competition, and strategic access in a part of Asia where American presence is otherwise limited.

This article argues that the US–Mongolia defense partnership constitutes a strategically valuable, low-escalation means of advancing American interests in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian heartland. Properly managed, it strengthens a democratic partner’s sovereignty, diversifies US security relationships, and complicates authoritarian influence—without provoking direct confrontation.

Strategic Context and the “Third Neighbor” Policy

To understand the strategic weight of Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” policy, one must look beyond cartography and confront the deeper forces that shape state behavior: history, geography, power, and political identity. Foreign policy is not improvised; it is the outward expression of national memory. Mongolia’s contemporary strategic posture is inseparable from its past—an arc that runs from imperial dominance to prolonged subjugation, and finally to a hard-won democratic rebirth whose preservation remains an existential concern.

For much of the twentieth century, Mongolia existed as a Soviet satellite in all but name. Its defense posture, foreign relations, and economic orientation were dictated from Moscow, its sovereignty constrained by the imperatives of a collapsing communist system. Earlier still, it endured centuries of rule under the Qing dynasty. The Third Neighbor policy is thus not a diplomatic convenience but a deliberate rupture with a long inheritance of dependency. It reflects a conscious rejection of geographic fatalism—the assumption that Mongolia must inevitably subordinate itself to the preferences of its immediate neighbors.¹

Through this policy, Mongolia asserts a simple but consequential proposition: it will not consent to permanent vassalage. By cultivating deep political and security relationships beyond China and Russia, Mongolia seeks not confrontation, but strategic depth—room to maneuver, hedge, and preserve autonomy. Its choice of the United States as its principal “third neighbor” is therefore not a search for a new patron. It is a calculated alignment with a power whose strategic culture and political principles stand in opposition to imperial domination.² In effect, Mongolia extends an invitation to Washington to uphold the credibility of its professed commitment to sovereignty and self-determination, not in the abstract but in one of the world’s most unforgiving geopolitical environments.

For the United States, Mongolia’s posture carries both moral and strategic resonance. It offers an opportunity to reinforce a rules-based order while complicating the efforts of authoritarian powers to consolidate uncontested influence across the Eurasian heartland. This opportunity does not require sentimental

¹ Oyuntsetseg Densmaa et al., “Mongolia’s ‘Third Neighbor Policy,’” in *Proceedings of the XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference: Social and Economic Aspects of Education in Modern Society* (Warsaw: RS Global, 25 January 2021), <https://doi.org/>; and “Concept of Mongolia’s Foreign Policy” (press release, Institute for Strategic Studies, National Security Council of Mongolia, 2025), <https://en.iss.gov.mn/>.

² “Mongolia” (integrated country strategy, US Department of State, 18 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>; and “Joint Statement on the Strategic Third Neighbor Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia” (press release, The White House, 2 August 2023), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

idealism or reckless ambition. It demands instead a clear-eyed recognition that, at certain junctures, principle and power can align to mutual advantage.

The strategic case for embracing Mongolia's overture rests on three interlocking pillars.

The Moral and Ideological Imperative: The Power of the Democratic Example

Mongolia's democratic endurance constitutes a direct challenge to the legitimizing narratives advanced by Beijing and Moscow.³ The Chinese Communist Party asserts that its model of technocratic authoritarianism is uniquely suited to Asia—more stable, more efficient, and culturally authentic than the disorder it ascribes to liberal democracy.⁴ Russia advances a parallel claim, framing “sovereign democracy” as a civilizational necessity and a bulwark against Western decay.⁵

Mongolia's very existence refutes these claims in practice. Emerging from the wreckage of Soviet communism, it surveyed its options and chose the unglamorous path of democratic governance. Its constitution enshrines fundamental rights; its elections are competitive; its civil society is active and often contentious. Each peaceful transfer of power in Ulaanbaatar, each critical editorial, each vigorous parliamentary debate projects a counternarrative into the authoritarian core lands to its north and south. It demonstrates that democracy is neither culturally alien nor strategically unviable in Asia—and that political liberty need not come at the expense of national identity.

For the United States, supporting Mongolia's democratic resilience is not an act of charity. It is an investment in the ideological dimension of great-power competition. This is soft power in its most effective form: the influence of example rather than coercion, projected without expeditionary forces or forward-deployed assets. In a contest increasingly defined by competing governance models, Mongolia's democratic success amplifies American credibility at minimal strategic cost.

Mongolia as a Strategic Platform for Influence and Observation

Geopolitics is ultimately about access—physical, political, and intellectual. From this perspective, Mongolia's geographic position is not a liability but a

³ МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ГАДААД БОДЛОГЫН ҮЗЭЛ БАРИМТЛАЛ (Foreign Policy Concept), Annex to Resolution No. 10 of the State Great Khural of Mongolia (2011), <https://legalinfo.mn/>.

⁴ “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” *Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies*, 13 July 2022, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

⁵ “Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a news conference on the outcomes of Russian diplomacy in 2024” (press release, Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Malta, 14 January 2025), <https://malta.mid.ru/>; and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “A War of Values with Russia,” *Project Syndicate*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>.

strategic asset. Situated between two revisionist powers, it offers the United States a rare vantage point in a region otherwise resistant to sustained Western presence. This does not imply permanent basing or overt military deployment, which would be both impractical and destabilizing. The opportunity lies instead in subtler forms of engagement.

Mongolia provides a platform from which the United States can cultivate regional expertise, observe the dynamics of Sino-Russian interaction, and assess the flow of trade, energy, and influence across inner Asia. From Ulaanbaatar, American diplomats, analysts, and defense professionals gain proximate insight into the effects of Chinese economic coercion and Russian hybrid activity—insight grounded in lived regional experience rather than distant inference.⁶

Equally important, Mongolia offers a neutral diplomatic space for engagement with Central Asian states increasingly constrained by Chinese and Russian pressure. It functions as a conduit into a region where Western access has narrowed and where conversations can still occur on relatively equal footing. In this sense, Mongolia is not merely a platform, but a bridge—linking the United States to a strategically consequential but increasingly opaque part of the continent.

Securing such access through voluntary partnership, rather than force, yields a geopolitical dividend of exceptional value. In an era when access itself is a form of power, Mongolia stands as a listening post and testbed for American engagement in a region tilting toward authoritarian consolidation. Squandering that opportunity would reflect not restraint, but strategic myopia.

The Nature of the Partnership: An Ally of Principle in an Age of Expediency

In a period marked by transactional diplomacy and shifting alignments, partners who combine strategic position with principled commitment are rare. Mongolia is one such partner. Its adherence to international norms is not rhetorical; it is embedded in its national strategy. This is most evident in its disproportionate contributions to global peacekeeping. Mongolian forces have served alongside Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan and have deployed under United Nations mandates from South Sudan to the Western Sahara. These deployments are neither

⁶ Hunter Stoll, “A Case for Greater US Engagement in Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, 9 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

symbolic nor opportunistic. They reflect a consistent choice to contribute to the maintenance of international order.⁷

This record distinguishes Mongolia as a genuine security producer. Unlike states that benefit passively from stability underwritten by American power, Mongolia actively helps sustain that stability. Its engagement is structural, not situational. Mongolia's interests are best served in a system governed by rules rather than raw power—a logic that aligns its strategic objectives with those of the United States beyond immediate contingencies.

This alignment fosters a level of reliability uncommon in partnerships driven purely by expedience. In Mongolia, the United States finds not merely a state located at a strategic crossroads, but one whose conception of sovereignty, legality, and international conduct mirrors its own professed values. For a country of modest size, Mongolia offers exceptional strategic return. In an age often defined by moral equivocation and short-term calculation, it stands as a reminder that principled partnership—when grounded in shared interests and realistic expectations—remains both possible and strategically advantageous.

Evolution of the Strategic Partnership

Strategic relationships are not sustained by sentiment or symbolism. They endure only when translated into institutions, routines, and shared expectations that outlast political cycles. The evolution of the US–Mongolia relationship—from limited, episodic cooperation to an institutionalized strategic partnership—illustrates how deliberate statecraft can transform alignment into durability.

The decisive inflection point came in 2019, when Washington and Ulaanbaatar formally designated their relationship a “strategic partnership.”⁸ In diplomatic practice, such language is often applied casually. In this case, it was not. The designation reflected a mutual reassessment: Mongolia concluded that episodic engagement was insufficient to safeguard its autonomy, while the United States recognized that Mongolia's stability and democratic resilience carried strategic significance disproportionate to its size.

For Mongolia, the 2019 declaration anchored the Third Neighbor policy in a concrete security relationship. It signaled that engagement with the United States

⁷ “Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking,” United Nations, 31 March 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>; “Service and Sacrifice: Mongolia continues to strengthen its contribution to UN peacekeeping,” UN News, 9 March 2018, <https://news.un.org/>; and Bolor Lkhaajav, “The Mongolian Armed Force’s Contribution to Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸ “Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia” (joint statement, US Department of State, 31 July 2019), <https://mn.usembassy.gov/>.

was no longer peripheral or symbolic, but central to its long-term strategy for preserving sovereignty amid sustained pressure from its two neighbors. For the United States, the declaration amounted to a public acknowledgment that Mongolia’s independence, political system, and security orientation were matters of enduring interest—not merely conveniences shaped by transient geopolitical conditions.

Crucially, the strategic partnership designation did more than clarify intent. It created a formal framework through which cooperation could be expanded predictably and incrementally. This structure was calibrated to Mongolia’s constraints. It enabled deeper defense and security engagement without binding Ulaanbaatar to rigid alliance commitments or forcing it into overt alignment against China or Russia. In this sense, the partnership was engineered not for maximalism, but for sustainability.

That framework was substantially reinforced in July 2024 with the inaugural Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue in Washington.⁹ The significance of the dialogue lay not in its symbolism but in its scope. By explicitly broadening the relationship beyond military cooperation to include governance, economic resilience, and critical minerals, both governments acknowledged a core reality of contemporary competition: security is no longer divisible. Defense capacity, economic sovereignty, institutional integrity, and supply-chain resilience are interdependent elements of national power.¹⁰

The dialogue also marked a shift from coordination to integration. It formalized interagency engagement, created standing mechanisms for follow-through, and reduced reliance on ad hoc consultations driven by personalities rather than process. In doing so, it converted strategic intent into operational pathways—an essential step if the partnership is to endure beyond individual administrations.

Hence, the 2019 strategic partnership and the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue represent a deliberate maturation of US–Mongolia relations. What began in the early post–Cold War period as cautious, limited engagement—focused primarily on training exchanges and peacekeeping—has evolved into a structured partnership supported by institutional mechanisms and shared expectations. This evolution matters because it reduces volatility. The relationship is no longer vulnerable to bureaucratic drift, leadership turnover, or short-term shifts in political attention.

Equally important, the partnership has been shaped to avoid the pitfalls that often accompany great-power engagement with small states. It provides a recog-

⁹ “Joint Statement on the United States–Mongolia Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue” (joint statement, US Department of State, 26 July 2024), <https://mn.usembassy.gov/>.

¹⁰ Bolor Lkhaajav, “Mongolia, US Launch Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue,” *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/> and Jargalsaikhan Enkhsaikhan, “The Mongolian Miracle,” in *Getting to Nuclear Zero in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gregory Kulacki et al. (London: Routledge, 2025), 83–102.

nized structure for expanding defense cooperation while preserving Mongolia's strategic autonomy and avoiding the optics of bloc politics. For the United States, this approach reflects a mature understanding of alliance management: strengthening a partner's sovereignty rather than subsuming it, and advancing shared interests without converting cooperation into dependency.

The distinction is fundamental. In Mongolia, Washington is not purchasing alignment or extracting loyalty. It is cultivating a sovereign partner whose security contributions, democratic institutions, and strategic positioning align naturally with American interests. The durability of the partnership rests precisely on that restraint. It is not a transient convergence born of momentary necessity, but a compact grounded in shared principles and a clear-eyed appraisal of what each side can—and cannot—reasonably expect from the other.

The Sinews of Cooperation: Military, Economic, and Educational Fronts

Strategic partnerships endure only when they are anchored in practice rather than proclamation. Diplomatic declarations may signal intent, but they do not confer capability. What ultimately sustains cooperation is measurable performance: forces that deploy, institutions that adapt, and networks that persist under pressure.

In the case of US–Mongolia relations, these foundations are no longer abstract. They have been constructed incrementally across three mutually reinforcing domains—military cooperation, economic engagement, and educational exchange. Together, they convert strategic alignment into operational reality and ensure that the partnership rests on durable interests rather than episodic convergence.

Peacekeeping Collaboration

Mongolia's role as a contributor to international peacekeeping is the most visible—and strategically consequential—expression of its defense partnership with the United States. This is not token participation designed to purchase goodwill. It is a deliberate national strategy that yields concrete military, diplomatic, and political returns.

Mongolian forces have deployed alongside US and coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they provided base security, logistical support, and training assistance under demanding conditions. In Afghanistan, Mongolian contingents served under both ISAF and the Resolute Support Mission, integrating effectively into NATO command structures and earning a reputation for discipline

and reliability.¹¹ These deployments demonstrated not only operational competence but an ability to function within complex multinational environments—an increasingly rare and valuable attribute.¹²

Beyond US-led missions, Mongolia has established itself as a credible contributor to United Nations peacekeeping, most notably in South Sudan. There, Mongolian units have protected civilians, secured humanitarian corridors, and operated in volatile conditions with professionalism that has drawn consistent international praise. Unlike some troop-contributing states that deploy underprepared forces, Mongolia has emphasized training, interoperability, and adherence to international norms—reinforcing its standing as a serious security actor.

From a strategic perspective, these contributions matter for three reasons.

First, they mark Mongolia as a security producer, not a passive beneficiary of stability underwritten by others. Its participation reflects a structural commitment to the maintenance of international order rather than a situational alignment driven by short-term incentives.

Second, peacekeeping deployments function as force multipliers for Mongolia's own military development. Exposure to coalition standards, logistics, and operational planning sharpens institutional competence, strengthens interoperability, and professionalizes the officer corps. These benefits translate directly into enhanced national defense capacity.

Third, for the United States, Mongolia's consistent performance provides reliable burden sharing. In an era when coalition cohesion often determines mission success, Mongolia's ability to integrate seamlessly into multinational operations adds value disproportionate to its size. It reinforces a broader truth frequently obscured in great-power discourse: that capable small states can meaningfully shape security outcomes when partnerships are grounded in competence and trust.

US support for Mongolia's military has been intentionally calibrated. Assistance has focused on mobility, force protection, training, and institutional development rather than offensive capability or permanent presence. This approach reflects both strategic restraint and geopolitical realism.

¹¹ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations During Pentagon Visit," *DOD News*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and David E. Sanger, "In Mongolia, Bush Grateful for Iraqi Help," *New York Times*, 21 November 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/>. For a firsthand account of Mongolian forces serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, see Gonchigdorzhiin Nīāmdorzh, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Back to Baghdad* (Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing Co., 2011).

¹² Grace Nechanicky, "18-year mission with Mongolian counterparts comes to an end," *Alaska National Guard Public Affairs*, 23 July 2021, <https://ak.ng.mil/>; and Bolor Lkhaajav, "The Mongolian Armed Force's Contribution to Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

Joint training, professional military education, and targeted equipment transfers—such as tactical vehicles optimized for peacekeeping—have strengthened Mongolia’s operational readiness without altering the regional balance of power.¹³ The objective is not to transform Mongolia into a frontline military actor, but to ensure it possesses a credible, professional force capable of defending sovereignty and contributing to international missions.

This restraint is not weakness; it is strategic discipline. By reinforcing Mongolia’s capacity without forcing it into overt alignment against its neighbors, the United States strengthens a partner’s autonomy while minimizing escalatory risk. The result is a form of security cooperation that stabilizes rather than provokes.

Military cooperation alone cannot sustain a strategic partnership. Economic resilience and human capital are equally decisive, particularly for a landlocked state navigating asymmetric relationships with far larger neighbors.

Mongolia’s economic engagement with the United States—especially in areas such as infrastructure, governance reform, and critical minerals—directly supports its strategic autonomy. Diversifying economic ties reduces vulnerability to coercive leverage and reinforces the material foundations of sovereignty. For the United States, these investments also advance supply-chain resilience in sectors essential to both national security and technological competitiveness.

Educational exchange constitutes the partnership’s most durable long-term asset. A significant share of Mongolia’s political, military, and civil-society leadership has been educated in the United States.¹⁴ This has produced more than cultural familiarity. It has generated shared professional norms, institutional trust, and a common vocabulary of governance and security.

These ties lower transaction costs across the partnership. They facilitate cooperation during crises, smooth bureaucratic coordination, and ensure continuity across political transitions. In strategic terms, they anchor alignment at the level that matters most: elite formation and institutional culture.

Taken together, these military, economic, and educational ties form the connective tissue of the US–Mongolia partnership. They transform shared values into shared capabilities and ensure that cooperation is resilient rather than performative.

For Mongolia, peacekeeping and partnership are not gestures of prestige. They are instruments of statecraft—means of strengthening defense institutions, elevating international standing, and embedding sovereignty within a web of meaning-

¹³ William Leasure, “US Army Advisors Strengthen Partnership in Mongolia,” U.S. Army Pacific, 10 April 2023, <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/>.

¹⁴ Ichinkhorloo Khosbayar, “What Mongolia Can Learn from U.S. Exchange Programs,” *CPD Blog*, 19 September 2024, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/>.

ful relationships. For the United States, Mongolia represents a rare combination: a democratic partner in a difficult region that contributes to security rather than merely consuming it.

This is not alliance politics in the traditional sense. It is strategic cooperation shaped by realism and restraint—an example of how principled engagement, when matched to local constraints and mutual interest, can yield stability without confrontation.

Military Modernization Support

US support for Mongolia’s military modernization reflects a pragmatic assessment of regional stability rather than a sentimental commitment to partnership. Mongolia’s security posture matters because its vulnerability—or resilience—has implications that extend beyond its borders. In a Eurasian environment increasingly shaped by coercive diplomacy and power asymmetries, a capable Mongolian military contributes to stability precisely by reducing opportunities for pressure and miscalculation.¹⁵

American assistance has therefore been intentionally limited in scope and precise in purpose. The objective is not to alter the regional balance of power or to convert Mongolia into a forward military outpost. It is to ensure that Mongolia retains a credible capacity for self-defense, peacekeeping, and independent decision making.

The provision of Joint Light Tactical Vehicles illustrates this approach. These platforms are not prestige items; they are functional assets optimized for mobility, force protection, and sustainment in expeditionary and peacekeeping environments.¹⁶ Their value lies less in their numbers than in what they enable: safer deployments, greater operational endurance, and improved integration with coalition forces. In practical terms, such capabilities reinforce Mongolia’s credibility as a security contributor and reduce perceptions of vulnerability that external actors might otherwise seek to exploit.

Hardware, however, is the least important component of modernization. Far more consequential is the sustained emphasis on training, professional military education,

¹⁵ “Department of War and Mongolian Ministry of Defense Conduct Bilateral Defense Framework” (press release, Department of War, 19 September 2025), <https://www.war.gov/>; and Larry A. Wyatt, Michele Devlin, and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, *Weaponizing Environmental Insecurity in Mongolia: A Strategic Framework for US Civil Affairs Engagements to Counterbalance China and Russia* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2025), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁶ “Joint Statement on the Strategic Third Neighbor Partnership between Mongolia and the United States Of America” (press release, Embassy of Mongolia to the United States, 2 August 2023), <https://mongolianembassy.us/>; and “Joint Statement on the United States–Mongolia Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue” (press release, US Department of State, 26 July 2024), <https://2021–2025.state.gov/>.

doctrine development, and institutional reform. US engagement has focused on strengthening command structures, logistics planning, and force management—areas that determine whether equipment translates into usable capability.¹⁷ This approach prioritizes resilience over expansion and competence over mass.

The logic underpinning this support is straightforward. A professional, institutionally sound Mongolian military is less susceptible to external coercion and internal erosion. It is better positioned to resist pressure that might compromise political independence or distort foreign policy choices. It is also more capable of contributing meaningfully to multinational operations, reinforcing Mongolia's role as a security producer rather than a dependent client.

Equally important is what US policy has deliberately avoided. Washington has not sought to bind Mongolia into formal alliance structures, encourage provocative deployments, or impose capabilities misaligned with Mongolia's strategic environment. This restraint reflects a mature understanding of partnership: strengthening autonomy rather than substituting for it. The goal is not to direct Mongolia's security choices, but to ensure that those choices are made from a position of competence and confidence.¹⁸

In this sense, military modernization support is less about augmenting force structure than about reinforcing sovereignty. By investing in institutions and operational proficiency, the United States reduces regional risk without escalating tensions. Mongolia's military becomes neither a proxy nor a pawn, but a stabilizing presence—capable enough to deter opportunistic pressure, yet restrained enough to avoid entanglement.

This approach exemplifies a form of security cooperation suited to contemporary competition: selective, disciplined, and aligned with local realities. It advances American interests not by projecting power through Mongolia, but by ensuring that Mongolia remains secure, autonomous, and capable of contributing to a stable regional order.

Khaan Quest Exercise

The annual Khaan Quest exercise represents the most visible institutional expression of the US–Mongolia defense partnership. Unlike Mongolia's overseas peacekeeping deployments, which test individual units in operational environments,

¹⁷ US Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy: Mongolia (Washington: US Department of State, 23 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

¹⁸ "U.S.-Mongolia Relations" (fact sheet, US Department of State, 1 August 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>; and Michael Klecheski, "US-Mongolia Relations: Standing Strong as Third Neighbors," *Asia Pacific Bulletin* 649 (14 June 2023): <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/>.

Khaan Quest functions as a standing mechanism for multinational integration and regional engagement. Its value lies not in scale, but in structure.

Conducted annually in Mongolia with sustained support from the US Department of War, Khaan Quest brings together military contingents from across the Indo-Pacific and select global partners. Its focus on peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response reflects deliberate design rather than constraint. These mission sets emphasize interoperability, command-and-control coordination, and procedural compatibility—the foundations of coalition effectiveness—without introducing escalatory dynamics associated with high-end warfighting scenarios.¹⁹

For Mongolia, Khaan Quest serves a dual purpose. Operationally, it reinforces professional standards, exposes Mongolian forces to diverse partners, and institutionalizes best practices in multinational coordination. Strategically, it establishes Ulaanbaatar as a credible convening state rather than a peripheral participant in regional security affairs. Hosting the exercise enhances Mongolia’s diplomatic agency by positioning it as a platform through which cooperative security can be advanced on neutral ground.²⁰

For the United States, Khaan Quest offers a cost-effective means of sustaining presence and influence in the Eurasian interior without permanent basing or overt force posture adjustments. It provides a recurring venue for strengthening interoperability not only with Mongolian forces, but among a wider network of partners whose interactions might otherwise remain episodic.²¹ The trust and familiarity generated through repeated field-level engagement—shared planning, standardized procedures, and routine collaboration—constitute a form of strategic capital that cannot be replicated through episodic diplomatic contact.

As Lt Gen Joel B. Vowell, deputy commander, US Army Pacific, said, “Khaan Quest prepares us to meet these challenges, equipping us with the skills and trust needed to operate in volatile environments. This work is about upholding the values of freedom, justice and human dignity, protecting vulnerable populations and creating conditions for lasting peace.”²²

¹⁹ Tristan Moore, “Khaan Quest 2025 successfully ends with a closing ceremony,” 8th Theater Sustainment Command, 2 July 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/>; and “Mongolia: Promoting Humanitarian Principles at Khaan Quest 2025,” International Committee of the Red Cross, 1 July 2025, <https://www.icrc.org/>.

²⁰ Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren, “Mongolian Peacekeeping as a Foreign Policy Tool,” *Royal Society for Asian Affairs Blog*, 14 May 2024, <https://rsaa.org.uk/>.

²¹ “Khaan Quest demonstrates ‘strength and resolve’ of partners to seek peace,” *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 7 July 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/>.

²² Quoted in: Tristan Moore, “Opening ceremony kicks off Khaan Quest 2025,” U.S. Army, 14 June 2025, <https://www.army.mil/>.

Beyond its immediate operational effects, Khaan Quest carries signaling value. It demonstrates that meaningful security cooperation need not be confined to formal alliances or driven exclusively by great-power rivalry. The exercise underscores the role of smaller and mid-sized states in sustaining regional stability through participation, professionalism, and institutional continuity. Mongolia's ability to host a multinational exercise while maintaining balanced relations with its neighbors illustrates how agency can be exercised even under significant geographic constraints.

At the same time, Khaan Quest avoids the pitfalls of overt militarization. Its focus on peacekeeping and humanitarian operations reinforces norms of collective security rather than confrontation. This restraint has been central to its durability. The exercise has persisted not because it dramatizes competition, but because it operationalizes cooperation in a manner compatible with regional sensitivities.

The sustained commitment of both Washington and Ulaanbaatar to Khaan Quest reflects a shared understanding that security partnerships are built through repetition and reliability rather than spectacle. As an institutionalized forum for cooperation, the exercise functions as both a practical tool and a strategic signal: practical in its contribution to interoperability and readiness, and strategic in its affirmation that the Indo-Pacific security environment is shaped not only by great-power maneuvering, but by the cumulative actions of capable, committed partners.

In this respect, Khaan Quest encapsulates the broader logic of the US–Mongolia defense relationship. It demonstrates how disciplined, non-provocative cooperation—grounded in capability and mutual respect—can strengthen regional stability without escalating competition.

High-Level Military Diplomacy

High-level military diplomacy has played a critical role in consolidating the US–Mongolia defense relationship, transforming sustained cooperation into recognized strategic commitment. The August 2023 visit by Mongolian Prime Minister Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene to the Pentagon—the first such visit by a Mongolian head of government—marked a significant milestone in this process.²³ The visit was not ceremonial. It reflected a deliberate decision by both governments to elevate defense engagement to the highest political level and to signal that the relationship had moved beyond routine military-to-military contact.

²³ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations During Pentagon Visit," *DOD News*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.war.gov/>.

During the visit, Michael S. Chase, deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, Taiwan and Mongolia, publicly acknowledged Mongolia’s “outsized impact” on international peace and security. While such language carries diplomatic weight, its importance lay less in rhetoric than in validation.²⁴ The statement reflected an established assessment within the US defense community: that Mongolia has consistently delivered reliable, professional contributions to demanding security missions and has earned credibility as a serious partner. Public recognition at this level reinforced Mongolia’s standing not only with Washington, but within the broader community of US partners.

This form of diplomacy serves multiple strategic functions. Externally, it signals to Beijing and Moscow that US engagement with Mongolia is intentional, sustained, and grounded in performance rather than opportunism. It raises the diplomatic cost of coercive pressure by underscoring that Mongolia’s security relationships are visible and supported at senior levels. Internally, it reassures Mongolian decision-makers that engagement with the United States rests on durable institutional commitment rather than transient political interest.

Equally important, senior-level engagement accelerates institutionalization. Direct interaction among political and defense leaders strengthens channels of communication, aligns strategic expectations, and reduces the risk of miscalculation. In practical terms, such engagement reinforces the bureaucratic frameworks that support defense cooperation—facilitating training initiatives, equipment transfers, and multinational participation in exercises such as Khaan Quest. These outcomes are cumulative rather than dramatic, but they are essential to sustaining partnership under stress.

The Pentagon visit also reflected a shared understanding of the partnership’s long-term horizon. For Mongolia, high-level defense diplomacy anchors the Third Neighbor policy in tangible commitments while preserving strategic balance with its neighbors. For the United States, it reinforces an Indo-Pacific and Eurasian approach that complements treaty alliances with partnerships based on capability, reliability, and voluntary alignment.

In this respect, the significance of the visit lay not in spectacle but in normalization. It demonstrated that Mongolia is no longer treated as an episodic partner, but as a standing participant in US security engagement. High-level military diplomacy thus functions as connective tissue—binding operational cooperation to political assurance and ensuring that the partnership remains resilient amid shifting regional dynamics.

²⁴ Quoted in: Garamone, “U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations.”

When executed with restraint and consistency, such diplomacy strengthens alliances without provoking escalation. In the US–Mongolia context, it has served precisely that function, reinforcing credibility, reducing uncertainty, and embedding cooperation within a stable strategic framework.

Economic Dimensions of Defense Cooperation

The US–Mongolia partnership cannot be understood solely through a military lens. Its durability increasingly rests on economic foundations that directly shape national resilience and strategic autonomy. In the contemporary security environment, economic capacity is not adjacent to defense; it is constitutive of it. Both Washington and Ulaanbaatar have come to recognize that supply chains, infrastructure, and connectivity are now integral components of security competition.

Mongolia’s endowment of critical minerals—particularly copper and rare earth elements—illustrates this convergence of economic and strategic interests. These materials underpin modern defense systems, advanced manufacturing, and clean energy technologies. Global supply chains for rare earths remain heavily concentrated, with China exercising disproportionate influence over extraction, processing, and downstream production.²⁵ Mongolia’s reserves therefore represent not an alternative panacea, but a meaningful opportunity for diversification.

For the United States, engagement with Mongolia’s mining sector is best understood as risk mitigation rather than substitution. Transparent investment, governance reform, and responsible development offer a pathway to modestly reduce dependence on concentrated supply chains while strengthening a partner’s economic sovereignty.²⁶ This is not an exercise in commercial opportunism; it is a strategic effort to reinforce the resilience of the defense industrial base and associated technologies over the long term.

Economic connectivity also has direct operational implications. Efforts to establish direct air links between the United States and Mongolia, while commercially modest, carry strategic significance. Improved aviation connectivity would facilitate the movement of personnel for training, exercises, and consultations, reducing friction in defense cooperation. It would also enhance responsiveness

²⁵ Solongo Li Yushin, “Mongolian ‘Third Neighbor Policy’ and Strategic Partnership with USA,” *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2025): <https://doi.org/>; and Bolor Lkhaajav, “Advancing the Mongolia–US strategic economic partnership,” East Asia Forum, 4 October 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/>.

²⁶ “The United States and Mongolia Sign MOU to Collaborate on Critical Minerals” (press release, US Department of State, 26 June 2023), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>; and Erin L. Murphy, “Mongolia: A Case for Flexibility in U.S. Economic Engagement,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 15 March 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and contingency operations. In a landlocked country with limited logistical options, such flexibility constitutes a quiet but consequential advantage.²⁷

Collectively, these economic elements reinforce the partnership in ways that purely military arrangements cannot. Secure supply chains, infrastructure connectivity, and regulatory transparency reduce vulnerability to coercion and expand policy space for both governments. They also complicate efforts by external actors to exert leverage through economic pressure rather than overt force—a tactic increasingly favored in competitive environments.

For Mongolia, deeper economic engagement with the United States offers a practical means of diversification. China will remain Mongolia’s dominant trading partner by geography alone, but diversification at the margins matters. Even incremental reductions in dependence can enhance bargaining power and reduce exposure to political or economic coercion. Participation in global supply chains for critical materials also elevates Mongolia’s international standing as a reliable, rules-based economic actor.

For the United States, supporting Mongolia’s economic resilience is neither altruistic nor speculative. It strengthens a partner’s autonomy while advancing American interests in supply-chain security, technological competitiveness, and regional stability. The value of this engagement lies not in scale, but in alignment: economic cooperation that reinforces sovereignty rather than substituting for it.

In this respect, the economic dimension of US–Mongolia defense cooperation reflects a modern approach to partnership. It integrates military collaboration with the material conditions that sustain it, ensuring that security cooperation rests on foundations capable of withstanding political pressure, market shocks, and strategic competition alike.

Educational and Soft-Power Foundations

Beneath the visible structure of US–Mongolia defense cooperation lies a quieter but no less consequential foundation: sustained educational exchange, institutional engagement, and targeted development assistance. These instruments do not generate immediate operational effects, but they shape the human and institutional

²⁷ “United States, Mongolia Sign Open-Skies Agreement and Transportation Memorandum” (press release, US Department of Transportation, 4 August 2023), <https://www.transportation.gov/>; “Cabinet Approved Agreement to Start Direct Flight to the United States” (press release, National Security Council of Mongolia, 15 September 2023), <https://en.iss.gov.mn/>; and “United Airlines Launches Historic Flights Connecting Mongolia, Japan, and the United States,” *Jamogrand*, 22 September 2025, <https://www.jamogrand.com/>.

environment in which security cooperation either succeeds or fails. Over time, they reduce friction, align expectations, and reinforce continuity across political cycles.

Educational exchange has been particularly influential. More than 1,700 Mongolian citizens were pursuing higher education in the United States in 2024, a notable figure given Mongolia's population size.²⁸ The strategic relevance of this exchange lies not in the number alone, but in its concentration among Mongolia's political, military, and professional elite. A significant share of Mongolia's parliamentary leadership has studied in the United States, acquiring firsthand exposure to Western approaches to governance, civil-military relations, and institutional accountability. While education does not produce automatic policy alignment, it does cultivate shared reference points that facilitate cooperation under stress.

The effects extend beyond formal politics. US-educated Mongolians are disproportionately represented in business, civil society, and the defense establishment, contributing to a broader institutional culture that values transparency, rule-based decision-making, and professional norms. This background lowers transaction costs in bilateral engagement. Negotiations are more predictable, misunderstandings fewer, and coordination easier precisely because interlocutors share a common intellectual and professional vocabulary.

Equally important are the informal networks that emerge from these exchanges. Personal relationships forged in academic and professional settings often outlast official postings and provide trusted channels of communication. In security partnerships, such networks can prove decisive—enabling quiet clarification, early warning, or de-escalation when formal mechanisms are slow or politically constrained. Their value lies not in visibility, but in reliability.

These educational ties are reinforced by targeted US development assistance, most notably through the Millennium Challenge Corporation. MCC-funded infrastructure and water security projects address tangible challenges facing Mongolia, particularly in Ulaanbaatar. Their strategic relevance lies less in scale than in signal. By focusing on institutional reform and public goods rather than patronage, these investments strengthen governance capacity and public confidence while demonstrating long-term American commitment. This, in turn, reinforces trust in broader cooperation, including in sensitive defense domains.

Viewed in aggregate, educational exchange and development assistance anchor the partnership at the societal and institutional level. They ensure that defense cooperation is not isolated from the political and economic context in which it operates. In a region where external powers often leverage economic inducements

²⁸ "More Mongolians than ever studying in the U.S." (press release, US Embassy in Mongolia, 22 November 2024), <https://web.archive.org/>.

to extract political compliance, Mongolia's experience offers an alternative model: engagement that reinforces autonomy rather than dependency.

These soft-power foundations do not substitute for military capability, nor do they guarantee alignment in every circumstance. What they provide is resilience. They help ensure that the US–Mongolia partnership rests not solely on converging threat perceptions, but on a durable base of institutional familiarity, professional trust, and shared expectations. In strategic terms, that depth is often what determines whether partnerships endure once circumstances become less favorable.

Strategic Implications and Future Prospects

The US–Mongolia defense relationship carries implications that extend beyond bilateral cooperation. It illustrates how contemporary statecraft can operate effectively in a multipolar environment marked by asymmetry, ideological contestation, and geographic constraint. The partnership does not offer a universal template, but it does provide a credible example of how small democratic states can preserve autonomy—and how great powers can support that autonomy without destabilizing the surrounding region.

Mongolia's experience demonstrates that proximity to dominant neighbors does not preclude strategic choice. By engaging China and Russia where necessary while deepening ties with democratic partners beyond its immediate geography, Mongolia has expanded its strategic maneuver space rather than surrendered it. This approach challenges the assumption that geography alone determines alignment. It also offers a cautionary lesson: balance is not passive neutrality, but an active and continuous process requiring institutional capacity and external support.

For the United States, Mongolia offers practical advantages without the liabilities associated with formal alliance structures. Engagement with Mongolia provides access—diplomatic, military, and analytical—into a region where American presence is otherwise limited, while avoiding the escalatory dynamics that accompany forward basing or treaty commitments on China's periphery. This form of engagement reinforces US situational awareness and regional connectivity without compelling Mongolia to choose sides in a way that would invite retaliation.

The partnership also carries normative significance, though its effects should not be overstated. Mongolia's democratic system and consistent participation in international peacekeeping reinforce the credibility of a rules-based order by demonstrating that democratic governance and security contribution can coexist even in challenging environments. Mongolia's value lies less in symbolic alignment than in performance: its willingness to deploy forces, adhere to international norms, and sustain cooperation over time. These actions resonate more persuasively than declaratory statements.

At the same time, Mongolia's strategic position imposes unavoidable constraints. Its location between China and Russia confers leverage but also exposure. US policy must therefore remain calibrated. Cooperation that enhances Mongolia's resilience—professional military development, economic diversification, institutional capacity—strengthens regional stability. Measures that appear to instrumentalize Mongolia or draw it into overt confrontation would do the opposite. The effectiveness of the partnership to date has rested on this restraint.

This approach reflects a mature understanding of contemporary competition. Supporting Mongolia's autonomy reduces incentives for coercion and miscalculation, contributing indirectly to regional stability. A Mongolia that is secure, capable, and diplomatically balanced is less likely to become a flashpoint or a venue for proxy competition.²⁹ In this sense, the partnership serves not only bilateral interests but broader systemic ones.

Looking forward, sustaining these benefits will require consistency rather than expansion. The United States should prioritize continuity of engagement, focus on areas where cooperation delivers tangible resilience, and resist the temptation to overformalize the relationship. Strategic patience—not maximalist ambition—has been the partnership's defining strength.

Viewed in this light, the US–Mongolia defense relationship is neither symbolic nor exceptionalist. It is an example of how disciplined, principled engagement can preserve space for democratic autonomy in constrained environments. For American statecraft, the lesson is not that this model can be replicated wholesale, but that it can inform how power is applied—selectively, sustainably, and with an appreciation for local realities—in an increasingly contested international system.

Challenges and Limitations

The progress of US–Mongolia defense cooperation does not negate the structural constraints that define the partnership. A realistic assessment requires acknowledging the limits imposed by geography, logistics, and force capacity. These constraints do not undermine the relationship; they shape the conditions under which it can succeed.

Geography is the most consequential of these limits. Mongolia's position between Russia and China ensures that its foreign and security policy will remain an exercise in calibrated balance. Economic connectivity, energy supply, and basic transit routes bind Mongolia to its two neighbors in ways that no external partnership

²⁹ Batmunkh Gerelmaa, "Balancing Giants, Building Influence: Mongolia's Soft Power in Asia," *Journal of Politics and Law* 19, no. 1 (2026): 27–36, <https://doi.org/>.

can fully offset. Ulaanbaatar cannot afford overt alignment that would jeopardize stable relations with either Moscow or Beijing. As a result, there are natural ceilings on the pace and visibility of defense cooperation with the United States. Any approach that ignores this reality risks imposing costs on Mongolia that outweigh the benefits of engagement.

Logistical constraints reinforce these limits. Mongolia's landlocked status and underdeveloped transportation infrastructure complicate the movement of personnel and materiel. Defense cooperation must contend with restricted access routes, reliance on overflight and transit permissions, and high costs associated with airlift.³⁰ These factors constrain the scale and frequency of exercises, limit the feasibility of heavy equipment transfers, and reduce flexibility in crisis response. They demand advance planning and reinforce the value of modest, repeatable engagement over large, episodic initiatives.

Mongolia's military capacity also places clear boundaries on what the partnership can reasonably achieve. While Mongolian forces have demonstrated professionalism and reliability in peacekeeping and expeditionary roles, overall force size and support infrastructure remain limited. Mongolia is not positioned to serve as a regional military counterweight, nor should policy aim in that direction. The strategic value of the partnership lies in niche capabilities—interoperability, specialized training, institutional competence—not in mass or power projection.

These constraints point toward a clear policy logic. US engagement is most effective when it reinforces Mongolia's ability to make independent choices rather than attempting to expand its role beyond structural limits. Emphasizing professional military education, peacekeeping support, selective modernization, and economic resilience aligns with Mongolia's capabilities and strategic environment. Efforts that seek to accelerate cooperation beyond these parameters risk diminishing returns or unintended escalation.

Seen in this light, the limitations of the partnership are not liabilities to be managed away but conditions to be incorporated into strategy. They impose discipline on both sides and help ensure that cooperation remains sustainable. The US–Mongolia defense relationship succeeds precisely because it operates within these constraints, leveraging Mongolia's strengths while respecting the boundaries imposed by geography and scale.

This is the art of the possible in contemporary statecraft: advancing stability not by ignoring constraints, but by working within them with patience, precision, and restraint.

³⁰ David Brunnstrom and Simon Lewis, "US discussed 'creative ways' to help landlocked Mongolia export rare earths, officials say," *Reuters*, 4 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

Recommendations

A realistic appraisal of the strategic environment—tempered by recognition of Mongolia’s enduring constraints—calls not for grand gestures, but for disciplined, intentional policy. The objective of US strategy should not be to transform Mongolia into a formal ally or a regional counterweight, but to consolidate and selectively deepen a partnership that strengthens Mongolian sovereignty, contributes to regional stability, and advances American interests without provoking escalation.

The following recommendations prioritize feasibility, durability, and strategic restraint.

Consolidate the Bilateral Strategic Core

The United States and Mongolia should focus on strengthening existing mechanisms rather than proliferating new institutional structures. The Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue has proven its value as a coordinating framework and should remain the primary forum for setting priorities and ensuring follow-through. Its effectiveness would be enhanced by clearer tasking between annual meetings, designated lead agencies on both sides, and continuity in working-level engagement.

Rather than establishing multiple permanent task forces, cooperation in critical areas—such as minerals governance, cybersecurity resilience, and logistics—should be embedded within existing channels. Progress in these domains depends less on new bureaucratic entities than on sustained technical assistance, regulatory alignment, and targeted investment consistent with Mongolian capacity and political realities.

In the economic sphere, US engagement should emphasize diversification and transparency rather than displacement of existing trade relationships. Instruments already in use—the Development Finance Corporation, MCC compacts, and targeted commercial diplomacy—offer credible avenues to support infrastructure development, regulatory reform, and responsible resource extraction. These efforts should be framed as risk reduction rather than zero-sum competition with China, reinforcing Mongolia’s bargaining power without forcing binary choices.

Defense cooperation should continue along its current trajectory: focused on professionalism, peacekeeping readiness, and institutional development. Selective enhancement of domain awareness, planning support, and intelligence cooperation can proceed cautiously where mutually agreed, but without introducing capabilities or postures that would alter regional perceptions or impose new political costs on Ulaanbaatar. Expanded professional military education—particularly in strategy, logistics, and civil-military relations—offers long-term returns at modest cost and should remain a priority.

Integrate Mongolia Selectively into Multilateral Frameworks

Mongolia's strategic value increases when it is embedded—carefully and selectively—within broader regional networks. Full membership in treaty-bound alliances is neither appropriate nor necessary. Instead, the United States should support Mongolia's participation in flexible, issue-specific frameworks that enhance capacity without triggering bloc dynamics.

Mongolia's engagement in “Quad-Plus” dialogues should be encouraged where it adds substantive value, particularly in areas such as democratic resilience, supply-chain security, and governance standards. Such participation should remain functional rather than declaratory, reinforcing Mongolia's role as a contributor without implying alliance commitments.

Operational exposure is equally important. The United States should facilitate Mongolia's observer participation in select multinational exercises beyond Khaan Quest, focusing on those that emphasize interoperability, logistics, and coalition coordination rather than high-end warfighting. These opportunities would strengthen Mongolia's officer corps and deepen familiarity with coalition dynamics while remaining politically sustainable.

Washington should also support Mongolia's role as a convening state on governance and resilience issues, but with restraint. Existing forums in Ulaanbaatar already provide platforms for dialogue on democracy and rule of law; US support should reinforce these efforts rather than create new, highly branded initiatives that risk overpoliticization or regional backlash.

Measure Success by Continuity, Not Escalation

The success of US–Mongolia cooperation should be measured by endurance rather than visibility. A partnership that quietly strengthens Mongolia's autonomy, sustains its democratic institutions, and enables constructive regional engagement is more valuable than one defined by formal status or symbolic elevation.

US policy should therefore prioritize consistency over expansion, credibility over ambition, and restraint over theatrics. Mongolia's strategic importance lies precisely in its ability to operate without becoming a flashpoint. Preserving that balance is not a limitation—it is the partnership's defining strength.

Conclusion

The US–Mongolia defense relationship demonstrates how sustained, disciplined engagement can produce strategic value without escalation. It is not a relationship built on sentiment or symbolism, but on a shared assessment of interests, compatible political values, and a realistic understanding of regional constraints. Through incremen-

tal cooperation across military, economic, and educational domains, the two countries have developed a partnership that is durable precisely because it has avoided excess.

Mongolia's Third Neighbor policy has provided the essential framework for this engagement. It affirms Mongolia's agency while acknowledging the limits imposed by geography and dependence on neighboring powers. For the United States, working within this framework has required restraint as much as commitment—supporting Mongolia's sovereignty and defense capacity while avoiding actions that would force Ulaanbaatar into untenable choices or provoke unnecessary confrontation.

As the relationship has matured, cooperation has become increasingly institutionalized. Joint exercises such as Khaan Quest, senior-level defense engagement, targeted modernization support, and economic and educational ties have moved the partnership beyond episodic interaction. These efforts have yielded practical benefits: improved interoperability, enhanced professional capacity, and greater resilience against coercive pressure. They have also reinforced Mongolia's role as a contributor to international security rather than a passive beneficiary.

The partnership's future will depend less on expansion than on consistency. Its success hinges on maintaining calibrated support, respecting Mongolia's strategic environment, and continuing to prioritize capability over symbolism. Strategic patience—often undervalued in contemporary policy debates—has been the defining strength of this relationship and should remain so.

The broader lesson is not that Mongolia represents a model to be replicated wholesale, but that effective statecraft does not require maximalism. Even in regions shaped by great-power rivalry, carefully structured partnerships can preserve autonomy, reinforce stability, and advance shared interests. In this sense, the US–Mongolia defense relationship offers a quiet but instructive example of how power can be applied with precision, restraint, and enduring effect. 🦅

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