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Promising Scholar Presentation on

India-Mongolia Relations in Regional Perspective

Last month's visit of Mongolia's newly elected President Ts. Elbegdorj to India and the signing of the Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation pact between the two countries is an indicative of India's emergence as a "Fourth Neighbour" of Mongolia in the near future, if at all Delhi wishes to be. It is more so because at the turn of the twenty first century, Mongolia has been trying to overcome its geographical disadvantage of being a landlocked state and is striving to open itself to the outside world despite being surrounded by two giant neighbours – Russia and China. Moreover, in the post-Cold War security environment of Mongolia, bilateral and multilateral cooperation has become the key factor of regional dynamism in the Asia-Pacific, which has also been guiding Mongolia's relations with other countries. Although in the second half of the twentieth century Mongolia was reduced to a passive buffer between Russia and China, it reasserted itself following the collapse of the former USSR and created a dynamic what it calls "multi-pillared" foreign policy, thus trying to readjust in the framework of new geopolitical realities.

As such Mongolia's freedom of strategic choice has also drawn attention to the commonality of interests between India and Mongolia so much so that both countries can now clearly define their geostrategic interests. India can be visualized as the fourth alternative for providing security and development in Mongolia, the first and second are the two geographical neighbours – Russia and China. However, despite China becoming the largest trade partner of Mongolia it does not mean that there is no threat to Mongolia which exists precariously. Russia, on the other hand, seems to be not in a position to provide the protective shield that it had earlier in Mongolia during Soviet days. Japanese and western interests are limited mainly to economic interests due to Mongolia's rich natural resources. But interestingly and

quite seriously, the United States has been considered as Mongolia's "third neighbour", who could act as a balancing power vis-à-vis Russia and China. What Mongolia expects from India in geostrategic context is yet to be defined but there is no denying of the fact that the two countries are known as "spiritual" neighbours due to their being the southern and northern ends of a Buddhist arch.

Despite the fact that India and Mongolia are geographically far apart, there is no stoppage in continuation of their civilizational links spanning over a period of 2,700 years. These links are fascinating, intense and inseparable; transcending all human activities from language, literature, religion, medicine, and folklore to culture and traditions. India is venerated in Mongolia not only as a homeland of Buddha but also as a country to which the Mongolian people attribute all that have been considered the highest attainments of wisdom and learning. The spiritual linkages between India and Mongolia, therefore, make it imperative for the two sides to cooperate each other not only for mutual benefits but also for regional integration process. India's Look East policy as well as its ongoing role in East Asia may have far reaching consequences to the extent of benefiting Mongolia so far as issue of regional cooperation is concerned. Obviously, Mongolia could seek India's support and certainly in view of the recent developments in India-Mongolia ties it seems possible to a large extent.

Ever since the two countries signed the Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation in 1994, a solid foundation was laid down for further development of bilateral relations and cooperation on regional and international relations. Both sides are involved in several activities in political, economic and cultural fields including expansion of their defence ties. With President Ts. Elbegdorj choosing India (not Russia or China as tradition has been in the past) for his first official trip abroad after assuming office in June 2009, Delhi seems to be on the right track in the strategic imagination of Ulaanbaatar to emerge as Mongolia's "fourth neighbour". Given the fact that Mongolia is critical for a rising India's Asian strategy, the two countries are poised to upgrade their bilateral ties to comprehensive partnership. This is evident from the fact that during the Mongolian President's visit on 13-15 September 2009, both sides signed a comprehensive partnership treaty to cooperate in developing Mongolian uranium mining with a MoU on the "peaceful use of radioactive minerals and nuclear energy". Nuclear experts believe that under the treaty the supply of uranium from Mongolia is more critical for India than access to

enrichment and reprocessing technology, and this would certainly boost and energize India's starving civil nuclear fuel cycle.

Interestingly, mining has now taken over animal husbandry of the 1990s to become the backbone of the Mongolian economy, thus providing enormous business opportunities to the outside world. As India's own demand for imported natural resources multiplies manifold, Mongolia may prove to be a natural and long-term economic partner. In return, Mongolia can benefit considerably from India's advancement in different areas like IT and telecommunications. Not only the current state of India-Mongolia ties but also the new role of India in East Asia will have wide implications for regional cooperation particularly in North East Asia. It is to be noted that India's participation at the three East Asia Summits till date is further evidence of its growing collaborative role in the region. Significantly, the post-Cold War Mongolia identifies itself with North East Asia which is the only region having no organizational structure of its own. But still there is a tremendous scope in this region, which includes China, Japan, the two Koreas-South and North, Mongolia and Russia (Far East region).

Since North East Asia is rich in natural resources, it has a vital economic potential to forge a close regional economic cooperation among the countries belonging to this region and this would be a positive factor in establishing regional peace and security as well. It is more so because Japan and South Korea have an advantage in capital and modern technology, while China has labour in abundance, the Russian Far East and Mongolia have rich natural resources, and North Korea is considered as having a large labour force. Such a strong balance of production factors implies that the expansion of regional economic cooperation will bring mutual benefits to all in this region, and hence broaden the scope of not only regional but a wider Asian security also, and that is where India can also search for its options. For example, ASEAN plus 3 countries (Japan, China and South Korea) can serve as forward posts for India's trade and investment initiatives towards North East Asia. It would certainly benefit Mongolia economically. Geographical apartness of the two countries would, therefore, no longer be viewed as a barrier in the smooth conduct of their bilateral economic and trade relations, besides engagements in various regional cooperative initiatives. In view of India occupying an important place in Mongolia's foreign and security policies to the extent of becoming the "fourth neighbour", one can hope to see the two sides gaining maximum benefits through their cooperative partnership in all areas of mutual interest.

- **Sharad K. Soni**