Mongolia was the second country after the USSR to recognize the formation of the North Korean state. Naturally, the Mongolian People’s Republic and North Korea, as organic parts “of the socialist community of nations”, developed multilateral cooperation between them and assisted one another. For example, immediately after the Korean War, Mongolia sheltered in more than 200 orphans from North Korea. But even after Mongolia has transitioned to democracy, Ulaanbaatar continued with its charitable actions, repeatedly providing food aid to North Korea when it experienced difficulties there.

Although bilateral relations in the 1990s between North Korea and Mongolia were in decline, a result of a sharp turn in strategy of post-communist Mongolia leaning more towards South Korea, but in 2002 they were restored after an official visit to Mongolia by North Korea’s Foreign Minister, Pak Nam Sun, the first such high level state visit in 19 years.

At the current time, Mongolia has positioned itself as a intermediary between North Korea on the one hand and the Republic of Korea on the other; the U.S. and Japan are possible models in terms of the potential for democratic reforms and, finally, as an important foreign economic partner for the North Koreans. Moreover, it is the only state that seems to hold the trust of both Koreas. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia, Luvsanvandan Bold, noting the role of broker for Mongolia, recently told reporters that “... Ulaanbaatar can be a useful platform for understanding”. And he added, “Mongolia can provide leverage to improve the situation in the region and the initiate dialogue between the parties”.

The intermediary function of Mongolia is already being felt. On May 25, 2014, the city of Ulaanbaatar was the site of an informal meeting between Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for North Korea, Ri Yong Ho and his adviser with 5 Americans - university professors, former State Department headed by Stephen Gotsworth. The unofficial meeting centered around the resumption of the Six-Party (North Korean, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, USA) talks on the North Korean nuclear program, which had been at a standstill since 2008. The parties exchanged their positions on this issue. Ri Yong Ho left with a package of U.S. proposals and to which the North Koreans must respond.

And earlier this year, Ulaanbaatar used the opportunity to soften the relations between Japan and North Korea, to act as mediator in the conflict regarding the kidnapping by North Korea agents in March 2009 of a 13-year-old Japanese girl. Eventually she was reunited with her parents on the territory of Mongolia.

In their approach to relations with North Korea, Mongolia, judging by its actions, bases its belief on economic assistance, cooperation along with dialogue as the only meaningful way to affect positive change in the country.

In this regard, the official visit to North Korea by the Mongolian President, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, on October 28-29, 2013 was significant. It was the first official state visit of a foreign head of state to Pyongyang after Kim Jong-un came to power; that in particular gave his visit a special significance. And it became even more so because, firstly, it greatly expanded the scope of economic cooperation and aid from Mongolia to the impoverished North Korean economy. The negotiations resulted in the signing of important agreements on cooperation in the fields of industry, agriculture, transport and construction of new railway lines, culture and sports as well as in the tourism sector.
Secondly, President Elbegdorj gave a speech at the University of Kim Il sung about freedom, support for the rule of law and respect for human rights.

“Tyranny will not last forever ... Forever is the desire of people to live free”. Such words highlighted the President's speech. He urged the North Koreans to go the way of Mongolia, to use its transition model, thereby indirectly urging Pyongyang to give freedom to its people. The audience was shocked by the content of the speech, professors and students of the university did not ask a single question, but the end of the speech was accompanied by prolonged applause.

We do note that, for Kim Jong-un it is dangerous to continue to ignore the higher appeals, and for North Korea, it may result in the losing many of the benefits economic cooperation with Mongolia brings.

In the meantime, the visit of the Mongolian president has led to an apparent rapprochement between the two states. The agreements allow for Mongolia to recruit for employment 5,000 citizens from North Korea. Mongolian construction and processing firms have already hired 1700 Korean workers, and although the government of North Korea takes most of their earnings, working abroad is highly beneficial financially. In addition, it gives them a new world and gives them the opportunity to get information and a divergent propaganda from Pyongyang. And this, according to a majority of Western experts on Korea, can lead to a gradual revision of its attitude by the Korean workers to the Korean government.

On September 15, 2013, the Mongolian oil production and trading company, HBOIL bought a 20% stake in Korean oil refinery Sungri and announced that it will supply crude oil to this state-owned enterprise and reimport the finished products, gasoline.

Mongolia supports the North Korean economy by investing in industry, agriculture and tourism. It does possess the wherewithal for this; in 2013 Mongolia was one of the most successful producers in the world, having achieved, due to the rise in the mining sector, GDP growth of 11.7%.

All of this suggests a deep penetration of the Mongolian economy into North Korea, and of course, its quest to become a strategic partner for the North Koreans.

While Mongolia is naturally pursuing its own interests, as a landlocked country, it is earnestly seeking a way to the sea, as it access to a seaport is a means to export its mineral wealth and products to Asia. For this reason Mongolia urges Moscow to complete the construction of the railway to the North Korean port of Rason, which would then connect it to North Korea via Russia.

The implementation of this project, possibly with the participation of Mongolia, will make it the main foreign shareholder in the North Korean market. As for North Korea, it continues to stubbornly pursue a parallel strategy of strengthening the defense, nuclear capabilities and economic development, modernization and opening wide embraces cooperation and assistance from friendly countries, Mongolia and Indonesia.

In developing cooperation, Mongolia and North Korea seek to somehow weaken their economic dependence on China and Russia. In addition, both states have similar geopolitical interests and share a common concern over security issues in the region, linked to the dominance of China and Russia in Central and East Asia. They are both interested in maintaining room for future maneuvers. And here in Mongolia, with its rich experience of skillful maneuvering between political, economic and military interests of neighboring states and the ability to keep them balanced, constructive relationships can serve as a shining example for the North Koreans. The pragmatic and multi-vector foreign policy of Mongolia, which is denoted in the West as the “Third Neighbor Doctrine” allows Mongolia to develop beneficial and close ties with the far distant United States and European powers.

This example and experience are very useful for Korea, and not only Korea. According to Western experts, strong political, diplomatic and economic activities by Mongolia in North Korea creates an opportunity for Mongolia to try to influence change in how Pyongyang relates to the outside world, to stabilize the economy and perhaps even inspire ways in carrying out certain political reforms.

Of course, Beijing, Washington and Moscow incomparably have greater leverage over the regime of Kim Jong-un. However, the policy of Mongolia towards North Korea shows to the West a way more reasonable strategy in North Korean affairs. After all, 50 years of diplomatic pressure, repressive sanctions or the international isolation did not bring North Korea to its knees, it did not bring about regime change, but rather it was strengthened.

Currently, the Obama administration policy adheres to “strategic patience”, which, according to observers, means
“do not do anything”. This policy also does not bring any results, while the policy of Mongolia as an investor and broker bring about much more hopeful prospects.

Mark Goleman, is a Ph.D. of History and a senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".