Mongolia and the US are strengthening their ties within the defense industry

The United States was one of the first western powers who, even as far back as 1946 and again in the early 1950s, intended to establish diplomatic relations with Mongolia, which at the time was referred to as the Mongolian People’s Republic. However, the struggle of the two competing systems and the existence of the iron curtain which was erected around the so-called “socialist camp”, to which the Mongolian People’s Republic belonged, did not allow for the implementation of such plans. It is indeed ironic that, the United States was one of the last major western countries to establish diplomatic relations with Mongolia; that only came to pass in 1987.

In 1990 after a successful democratic revolution in Mongolia, the United States has become one of the main backers for democratic reforms in the country; and the relationship between the two states has been gaining momentum within the political, economic and social spheres ever since. At the present moment both countries attach a great deal of strategic importance to the relationship and the United States in general, has positioned itself as the “third neighbor” of Mongolia.

In this connection, it is interesting to see how cooperation has developed between the United States and Mongolia in such important sectors as the military and in military hardware-technology.

This relationship began in 1991 with the appearance of military attaches being posted at the embassies of both countries and evolved over two stages.

The first stage covers the years from 1991-1996 during which the Mongolian military actively studied English and when the first exchange visits for senior military commanders occurred.

So, in 1995 the first visit to the United States by the Mongolian Minister of Defense occurred, it was followed in 1996 by the deputy minister; in 1993 the Chief of the General Staff visited the United States. In 1992, 1994 and 1996 Ulaanbaatar hosted the naval Commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific.

The second stage lasted from 1996-2003 and began with the signing of an intergovernmental agreement on the exchange visits by military specialists in 1996. Then the U.S. began to accept Mongolian military personnel for study in the United States and soon afterwards began hosting joint command exercises within a limited framework where the U.S. provided for and supplied the Mongolian participants in these exercises.

At this particular stage, the military cooperation between Mongolia and the United States is not that much different than any other type of cooperation Mongolia has with its other neighboring countries.

But in 2003 there was one qualitative difference; beginning in April of that year, Mongolian military brigades were deployed to Iraq, and in early October were in Afghanistan to participate under American command in so-called joint “Peacekeeping” operations. As a result, cooperation has taken on the character of direct interaction in the theater of military operations. Relations between Mongolia and the United States can be characterized as having become de facto allies. The Americans greatly appreciate the role of Mongolian troops in Iraq from 2003 to 2008, during which they constantly provided the Mongolian troops supplies, hardware and equipment.

The Mongolian artillery brigades received high recognition for their efforts in training Afghan soldiers within the
framework of the “Program for the Development of the Afghan National Army”.

Thus, since 2003, the point at which Mongol-American cooperation in the defense sector began, which in addition to joint participation in several UN “peacekeeping” activities, involves an intensive exchange of military delegations at the highest level, military personnel of all ranks trained in the United States and, most importantly, since 2006 there has been a major annual military exercise “Khan Quest” (there are now more than two dozen countries participating besides the United States and Mongolia), in addition Mongolia receives U.S. aid in order to modernize its army, especially in strengthening its capacity to participate in UN operations.

U.S. Department of Defense and the State Department took it upon themselves the financing for the opening in Ulaanbaatar, with assistance from the Mongolian side, a “Regional Centre for Peacekeeping Activities”, as well as measures to increase the capacity of Mongolian peacekeepers.

For the training center the United States delivered and paid for equipment totalling 11 million dollars within the framework of the program “Support for the Coalition”, in addition to that, from 2000 to 2010, the U.S. fully equipped two battalions of Mongolian peacekeepers, provided personal protection for 1100 citizens, delivered 68 vehicles for Special Forces, as well as supplied medicine, food, clothing, products and equipment for the Mongolian army. Along with organizing and conducting bilateral and international forums in the United States, in addition to seminars and exercises from 1992-2010, attended by more than 900 Mongolian soldiers and 100 civilians, this cost the U.S. treasury another 11 million dollars.

A new step in the development of bilateral cooperation came in the form of an official invitation from the Mongolian side to the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, along with a large military delegation, for a one-day visit to Ulaanbaatar on April 10, 2014.

It should be noted that, although after the beginning of the second stage in the development of the relationship and cooperation in 2006, there occurred multiple exchanges and visits by high-ranking military commanders, including the Ministers of Defense of Mongolia and the Chairman of the Joint Staff for U.S. armed forces and others, Chuck Hagel was only the second U.S. Secretary of Defense to visit Mongolia, a fact which gave his visit special significance. The first visit of U.S. Secretary of Defense was held in 2005 when Secretary Hagel was received at the highest levels, was greeted with an honor guard. The Minister of Defense for Mongolia, D. Bat-Erdene, thanked his counterpart for agreeing to come to Mongolia. In the Government House Mr. Hagel and the U.S. delegation was received by the Mongolian Prime Minister, Norovyn Altankhuyag

In turn, Mr. Hagel said that Mongolia is a valuable partner to the U.S., so he gladly accepted the invitation to pay an official visit at the conclusion of his 10-day trip to the 13 Asia-Pacific countries.

The purpose of the visit was, as the Mongolian press wrote, “promote allied relations”.

The Ministry of Defense for Mongolia held talks between the Mongolian and American defense ministers, during which they discussed the state of and the prospects for further development in cooperation; they confirmed their main areas for cooperation in disaster management, the joint participation in UN international peacekeeping operations, the modernization of the Mongolian Armed Forces, the training of Mongolian military professionals from all levels in the U.S., and the conduct of joint exercises.

Coming out of those negotiations a joint “Mongolian-American communique on security” was signed, which, according to Mr. Hagel, “enriched the cooperation in the defense sector with new content” and demonstrated the parties’ desire to expand on its scope. In general, during the negotiations, at a meeting with 25 Mongolian soldiers who participated in operations in Afghanistan, and during a reception at Government House with the Mongolian Prime Minister, Mr. Hagel spoke glowingly about Mongolia, “Mongolia is a strategic partner, an important ally for peace and stability in Northeast Asia; the United States and the UN appreciate the participation of the Mongolian Armed Forces in peacekeeping activities”, said the Minister.

And in referring to bilateral defense cooperation, Charles Hagel said that “they have been developing rapidly over the course of the past 10 years. We provide an example to each other and we have a lot to learn from one another. As the implementation of reforms in the Mongolian Armed Forces increases, the level of cooperation and joint exercises between us will also increase. From the U.S. perspective and for Mongolia, there are new opportunities opening up to participate in international events, exercises and activities”. In turn, the Minister of Defense of Mongolia, Bat-Erdene, noted that bilateral military cooperation is developing rapidly and stressed that “this visit opens a new page in the partnership”.
The Prime Minister, Mr. Altankhuyag, expressed his satisfaction with the development of partnership with the United States in many sectors, not only within the framework of defense, however, he did stress that cooperation on defense issues is, "the basis for full bilateral partnership".

Thus, the visit by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mr. Hagel, clearly stated the commitment of both parties to develop and expand further its cooperation within the military sphere. As vice-U.S. ambassador to Ulaanbaatar, Mr. Kirk McBride, “the U.S. seeks to become Mongolia's third neighbor, number 1” and presented this visit as evidence to a step in that direction.

It’s impossible to say that this visit gave much reason for apprehension in the neighboring countries of Mongolia, specifically, Russia and China, although the Taipei press tried to somehow tie it to Russia's growing influence in the region after the annexation of the Crimea. In the Mongolian newspaper, Udriin Sonin, (News Today) printed the information that during the negotiations the Americans allegedly put forward a proposal to open a U.S. military base in the country, but this proposal was refused. The Minister of Defense for Mongolia, Bat-Erdene, on April 16 said that the issue of the bases did not come up in negotiations, their creation on the territory of Mongolia is prohibited by law; a fact that is well known by the Americans. But upon hearing such rumors, a Washington Post correspondent at a press conference asked the question as to whether or not a military base is planned for Mongolia, to which the correspondent received a negative and thorough response.

In general, it should be noted that Mongolia has been particularly scrupulous with regard to compliance about publicity as it pertains to ongoing joint exercises and other activities in a timely and direct manner, informing neighboring countries, as well as countries who are members in ASEAN and SCO.

Thus, the relationship is essentially a military and technical cooperation between Mongolia and the United States, which has been, up until now, sufficiently open and not directed in anyway, with assurances from both sides, against Russia or China, but requires attention from them.

Meanwhile, the expansion of military cooperation between Mongolia and the United States does not, in our opinion, suggest that they are truly allies. That would imply a much greater intimacy, more unity in policies and objectives, and imposes on the parties mutually certain obligations which are not currently observed. So, it would be better to consider the Mongolian-American relationship, including its military component, a partnership, but nothing more than that.

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