

Article

Undercurrents in the Silk Road

An Analysis of Sino-Japanese Strategic Competition in Central Asia

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This article aims to use Japan's relations with Yugoslavia as a case in point to examine the character of With China's promotion of the One Belt One Road initiative, consisting of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road, at the APEC summit in 2014, where the international community once again focused its attention on Central Asia. Despite similar emphasis on the strategic importance of land and sea, much attention has been centered on the continental economic belt that seeks to cross the Eurasia continent by extending westward from China's historical city Xi'an, through Central Asia and into Europe. As a connecting point in the One Belt One Road, Central Asia is critical to China's Go Out strategy. Along with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China clearly demonstrates an aspiration to establish its political and economic influence in Central Asia.

In terms of geopolitics, while China's activities in Central Asia remain distant for Japan, its expansion into the region entails strategic consequences that may severely challenge Japanese foreign policy and security. Although Japan and China have yet to clash directly in Central Asia, incongruent interests between the two powers already hint at the potential for friction in the region. This article is an attempt to understand the impending possibilities for conflict between Japan and China in Central Asia. By identifying and contrasting Tokyo and Beijing's respective interests and foreign policies in Central Asia, this author suggests the formation of a new battlefield for Sino-Japanese competition based around institutional leadership, regional influence and foreign assistance. Three scenarios for conflict are proposed as developments that may destabilize regional order and reinforce tensions between Japan and China in the near future.

Keywords: Central Asia, Strategic Competition, Sino-Japanese Relations, Central Asia plus Japan, One Belt One Road

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, Central Asia has played an increasingly important role in global geopolitics. While part of the region's significance stems from Harold Mackinder's Heartland Theory, Central Asia's strategic location and rich energy and market potential make the region a fitting arena for great power politics. In 2001, international attention was drawn to Central Asia with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As an initial mark of China's expanding influence in the new century, the SCO sounded an alarm for Japan. In response, in 2004, Japan established the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue in an effort to balance China's growing influence in Central Asia.

In light of the Shinzo Abe administration's re-initiation of the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue in 2014, this paper seeks to address growing strategic tensions in Central Asia between Japan and China. The analysis will be carried out in four parts: Part one reviews the significant role of Central Asia in contemporary geopolitics; part two and part three turn to China and Japan's strategic interests and foreign policies in Central Asia respectively; and part four proposes three scenarios for strategic competition between Japan and China in Central Asia in light of recent

developments. This paper concludes with some insights into the development of Sino-Japanese relations in the near future.

1. Strategic Significance of Central Asia

Central Asia, a region generally recognized as consisting of the five countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, has long retained an important status in global geopolitics. In the now renowned Heartland Theory, British geographer Halford Mackinder identified Central Asia as the heartland, or strategic hub, where the Silk Road links the Eurasia continent. In Mackinder's words, "he who controls the Heartland controls Eurasia, he who controls Eurasia controls the world."¹ The statement aptly highlights the geopolitical meaning of Central Asia.

Besides geopolitical status, Central Asia is also significant in two aspects. First, rich deposits of strategic energy resources such as oil and natural gas further highlight the global status of Central Asia. In a world in which economic developments produce ever higher demands for energy, regions harboring energy deposits easily become flashpoints for potential conflict.² Central Asia's energy potential has yet to be fully exploited, particularly in terms of oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea, the largest enclosed inland sea in the world. Central Asia currently holds the third largest oil reserves in the world behind the Middle East and Siberia. Land resources are mainly reserved in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with an estimated potential production of thirty billion barrels of oil; the potential production of petroleum underwater falls in the range of fifteen to forty billion barrels.³

Second, Central Asia is strategically located beside the Middle East, which establishes the region as a hotbed for terrorism and a critical location for counterterrorism alike. Bordering Afghanistan to the south, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan confront the challenge of infiltration by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan face the entry of extremists from neighboring Xinjiang Province. In 2014, the withdrawal of U.S. troops signaling the end of Washington's war in the Middle East has raised security concerns for Central Asia. As Maciej Falkowski and Jozef Lang suggest, alongside U.S. departure from the Middle East is also Washington's diminished presence in Central Asia; as U.S. military presence was important in reinforcing stability in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where established bases were open to American use.⁴ Washington's reduced role in Central Asia after 2014 implies the opening up of a power vacuum in the region.

In recent years, great power competition between the U.S., Russia, China and Japan, among other powers speak to the strategic importance of Central Asia. In terms of geopolitics, while Central Asia traditionally fell within the sphere of influence of Russia in the Cold War period, Washington's war on terror following 9/11 and Beijing's concern for extremist activities along its western border have brought the U.S. and China into Central Asia in the new century. Despite the advancement of bilateral relations and cooperation between Russia and China through the SCO—a development that seemingly isolates the U.S.—in reality, Moscow, Beijing and Washington have disparate strategic goals that may prove unsettling for Central Asia.

For the U.S., noting China's rise in the last decade, Central Asia presents itself as a critical piece to the containment strategy that stretches from Japan and South Korea to Southeast Asia and India.⁵ For Russia, U.S. influence along its borders generates uneasiness while China's expanding relations with Central Asia, in a sense, threatens Moscow's long established leadership status in the region.⁶ For China, U.S. presence is also unsettling

¹ Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History (1904)," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.170, No.4 (2004), pp.298-321; Andrey Fursov, "Central Eurasia: Historical Centrality, Geostrategic Condition and Power Model Legacy," in Irina Morozova ed., *Towards Social Stability and Democratic Governance in Central Eurasia* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2005), p.30.

² The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea are classic examples.

³ Ming Tingquan and Han Xuefeng, "Ershiyi shiji zhongguo shiyou anquan yu zhongguo zhongya zhanlue" (Chinese Oil Security and Central Asia Strategy in the Twenty First Century) *Lanzhou Xuekan*, No.5 (2004), p.47.

⁴ Maciej Falkowski and Jozef Lang, *Hostages to Moscow, Clients of Beijing: Security in Central Asia as the Role of the West Diminishes* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich, 2014).

⁵ Tung-chieh Tsai, "Jinqi xijinping chufang zhongya diqu zhi zhanlue yiyi" (Xi Jinping's Recent Visit to Central Asia and Its Strategic Implications), *Prospect and Exploration*, Vol.11, No.10 (2013), p.15.

⁶ Fan Lijun, "Eluosi ouyalianmeng yu zhongmenge jingjizoulang goujian" (The Establishment of Russia's "Eurasia

while border security and energy are key reasons that continue to drive Beijing's western expansion, even at the risk of potential great power competition. In the case of Japan, the search for energy drove the island nation to Central Asia; the U.S.-Japan alliance suggests that Tokyo may have difficulties keeping its distance from strategic competition in the region.

The year 2015 hinted at a turning point in great power competition in Central Asia. In January, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) consisting of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was officially established, forming a custom union and common market of over 180 million people in the northern Eurasian region. Noting overlapping membership in Central Asia, some Chinese observers have begun to ponder over the EEU's implications for the One Belt One Road, a Chinese initiative aimed at economic integration of the Eurasia continent as well.⁷ In October, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made official visits to Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—the first visit to Central Asia by a Japanese leader in over a decade. Immediately following the footsteps of Abe, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called on Central Asia in November, a development that left some observers wondering whether Tokyo and Washington coordinated their visits as an open balancing gesture against Beijing. In a sense, since the opening up of a “power vacuum” following Washington's diminished role, Central Asia may be moving towards the formation of a “power plenum” or a geopolitical setting that sees the push and pull for influence by the “crowding in” of states. In the context of the latter, this paper turns to China and Japan's potential entanglements in Central Asia.

2. China's Strategic Interests and Foreign Policy in Central Asia

Since former President Hu Jintao's proposal of the Four Outlines (*sige buju*) in 2004, China has continued to emphasize its central tenet of “great power is the key; surrounding is primary; developing countries are the foundation; multilateralism is the stage.”⁸ In the words of former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, the primary goal of China's foreign policy is to maintain the stability of the surrounding environment in order to ensure the normal functioning of the domestic economy.⁹ Located to the west of China, Central Asia conforms to the foreign policy objectives of Beijing. The stability of Central Asia is important for China's economic development; security in the region should be realized in a multilateral manner that includes key powers to the region.

In addition, under the guidance of the Harmonious Worldview (*hexie shijieguan*), a concept introduced to support China's peaceful development, China further adopted a Good Neighbor Policy (*mulin waijiao*) that is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (*heping gongchu wu yuanze*): Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. The principles serve as policy guidance for the shaping of an international environment beneficial for improving China's economy.¹⁰

In terms of strategic interests, Beijing's interests in counter-terrorism, energy resource and trade and investment are worth noting.

(1) Counterterrorism

In 1991, dissolution of the Soviet Union not only created an opportunity for the breakout of formerly suppressed nationalistic and religious sentiments in the Soviet sphere of influence, it also gave way to the development of three challenges: terrorism, separatism and extremism. While the threats that festered in the Middle

Alliance” and the “China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor”), in Zhang Jie ed., *Zhongguo Zhoubian Anquan Xingshi Pinggu 2015* (China's Regional Security Environment Review: 2015) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2015), pp.74-75.

⁷ Yang Chenxi, “Yidaiyilu quyu nengyuan hezuo zhong de daguo yinsu ji yingdui celue” (The Great Power Factor in One Belt One Road Energy Cooperation and China's Strategic Response), http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2015-01/20/content_7620494.htm (January 14, 2016)

⁸ Tung-chieh Tsai, *Dangdai Zhongguo Waijiao Zhengce* (China's New Diplomacy: Interpreting Its Connotation and Tendency) (Taipei: Wunan, 2009), p.79.

⁹ Wayne Bert, *The United States, China and Southeast Asian Security: A Changing of the Guard?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.112.

¹⁰ Ibid.

East (Afghanistan) did not directly threaten China during much of the Cold War period, the fact that Central Asia bordered the Middle East generated concerns for Beijing in the post-Cold War period, especially in the new century.

Considering that China's continued rise and economic development is hinged on a secure neighboring environment, in 2001, Beijing established the SCO. At the first meeting of the SCO in 2001, besides the pronouncement of the *Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO*, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (the Shanghai Six) also signed the *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism* and agreed on the convening of an annual summit meeting to deepen cooperation. In 2004, SCO members further increased their efforts towards counterterrorism by establishing the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS).¹¹ Based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the main tasks of the RATS include the maintenance of cooperation with other counter-terrorist institutions in the world and the coordination and organization of counter-terrorist exercises.¹²

On the occasion of the 14th SCO Summit held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2014, President Xi Jinping re-emphasized China's priority in combating terrorism in Central Asia. In his speech delivered at the summit, Xi noted the maintenance of regional security and stability as the foremost point in a four-point proposal addressed to the member states. In Xi's words, members to the SCO should "strengthen the construction of the capacity to maintain stability...grant the RCTS of the SCO the function of drug control as soon as possible, and establish the security challenge and threat response center...to combat the 'three evil forces.'"¹³ Xi's statement not only suggests counterterrorism as a strategic priority in China's policy towards Central Asia, the statement also exposes Beijing's chronic consideration for border security, an issue that has been repeatedly raised and re-emphasized since China's economic takeoff in the early 2000s.¹⁴

(2) Energy Resource

With the transformation of China into a net importer of energy in 1993 and the world's second largest consumer of energy in 1997,¹⁵ the international community began speculating how much energy China would continue to devour in its economic rise and its implications in the future. For China, the critical question is not its potential energy consumption but where could new energy sources come from and be sustained over time. By 2020, China's energy consumption is expected to make up 16.1% of total global consumption. In 2014, China led the world in oil consumption at 3,034 million tonnes of oil (Mtoe) and in April 2015, surpassed the U.S. to become the world's largest importer of oil at 7.4 million barrels per day (the U.S. stood at 7.2 million barrels per day).¹⁶ Noting China's immense appetite for energy, Thrassy Marketos has long observed that China's exponential growth in energy import would inevitably lead the country to depend excessively on the international market and encourage Beijing to secure new sources favorable for diversification and sustainable economic development.¹⁷

Strategically, besides Central Asia's energy potential, two other considerations have encouraged China to invest in the region. First, as Central Asia straddles the Middle East and Siberia, by strengthening energy cooperation

¹¹ Also referred to as the Regional Counter-terrorist Structure (RCTS).

¹² Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "The Executive Committee of the Regional Counter-Terrorist Structure," <http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/AntiTerrorism.asp> (accessed August 30, 2015)

¹³ See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Attends SCO Summit in Dushanbe and Delivers Important Speech Stressing Gathering People's Will and Power and Coordinating Sincerely to Push to a New Level,"

http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/zjpcxshzzygyslshdsschybdtjktmedfsllykjxgfw/t1191482.shtml (accessed September 1, 2015). The "three evil forces" refer to terrorism, separatism and extremism.

¹⁴ Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Kai-ming Chang, "In the Name of Integrity and Security: China's Counterterrorist Policies," in Scott Romaniuk, Francis Grice, Daniela Irrera and Stewart Webb eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Studies* (forthcoming 2016).

¹⁵ Evan Medeiros, *China's International Behavior* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), p.134.

¹⁶ See: Enerdata Global Energy Statistical Yearbook 2015, <https://yearbook.enerdata.net/energy-consumption-data.html> (accessed September 4, 2015); David Sheppard and Gregory Meyer, "China Oil Imports Surpass Those of US," <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/342b3a2e-f5a7-11e4-bc6d-00144feab7de.html#axzz3jSjy2sBp> (accessed August 30, 2015)

¹⁷ Thrassy Marketos, *China's Energy Geopolitics: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.15.

with the region, China could gain easier access to two of the world's largest oil production sites. Second, cooperation with Central Asia could benefit China by helping to lower the risk of shipping energy by sea and avert potential conflict with the U.S. and Japan at sea.¹⁸ Energy interests have led Beijing to invest in the construction of energy-related infrastructure and pipelines and cooperate with countries in the region through joint excavations and laying of oil and natural gas pipelines.¹⁹

(3) Trade and Investment

Aside from security concerns, for China, Central Asia also boasts a sizeable market worth exploring. The five countries of Central Asia combined have a population of 61 million people, a figure that is slightly higher than the population of South Korea and roughly half that of Japan. Chinese trade and investment in Central Asia has greatly expanded in the new century. According to China's Ministry of Commerce, the country's current value of trade with Central Asia is about one-hundred-fold of the value when relations were first normalized between Beijing and the five states of Central Asia.²⁰ With bilateral trade leaping from a mere \$547 million in 1994 to \$450 billion in 2014, China is currently the biggest trade partner of Central Asia. Respectively, China is the largest trade partner of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the second biggest trade partner of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the third biggest trade partner of Tajikistan. Table 1 captures the growth in trade between China and Central Asia since 2000.

¹⁸ Bai-ku Wei, "Zhongguo yu zhongya de nengyuan guanxi: hezuo yu tiaozhan" (China-Central Asia Energy Relations: Cooperation and Challenges), *Journal of International Relations*, No.25 (2008), p.67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.58.

²⁰ Xi Wang, "Zhongguo yu zhongya wuguo maoyie yue wei jianjiao zhichu 100 bei" (Trade Value of China and the Five States of Central Asia is About 100 Times More Than the Value at the Beginning of Normalization), http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-10/15/c_117721451.htm (accessed August 26, 2015)

Table 1: Trade between China and Central Asia (2000-2014)

(Unit: hundred millions USD)

Year	China-Kazakhstan		China-Kyrgyzstan		China-Tajikistan		China-Turkmenistan		China-Uzbekistan	
	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export
2000	6.737	1.510	0.670	1.100	0.103	0.067	0.040	0.121	0.120	0.394
2001	6.596	1.720	0.420	0.770	0.053	0.054	0.010	0.314	0.076	0.507
2002	10.230	3.130	0.560	1.460	0.058	0.065	0.010	0.870	0.274	1.042
2003	16.531	5.237	0.700	2.500	0.200	0.208	0.040	1.460	2.002	1.462
2004	19.673	7.582	1.100	4.930	0.200	0.535	0.140	1.720	4.027	1.724
2005	24.239	12.518	1.050	8.700	0.142	1.437	0.190	2.300	4.510	2.302
2006	35.925	19.249	1.130	21.130	0.200	3.100	0.160	3.470	5.658	4.061
2007	56.396	35.073	1.120	36.700	0.102	5.130	0.490	4.750	3.633	7.659
2008	76.766	45.650	1.200	92.100	0.200	14.800	0.280	6.860	3.304	12.774
2009	58.890	35.700	0.500	52.300	1.900	12.200	0.380	5.960	34.938	15.568
2010	101.200	39.600	0.700	41.000	0.600	13.800	10.450	6.600	12.992	11.780
2011	153.800	95.700	1.000	48.800	0.710	20.000	46.930	10.060	8.067	13.590
2012	164.800	75.000	0.900	50.700	1.100	17.500	80.220	13.360	10.912	17.839
2013	143.340	81.930	0.600	50.800	0.900	18.700	88.930	13.560	19.180	26.140
2014	127.120	97.260	0.550	52.430	0.480	24.690	95.160	9.540	15.960	26.750

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/; China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, “Haishang sichouzhilu yanxian guojia touzi maoyi zhinan” (Investment and Trade Guide for Countries along the Maritime Silk Road), http://www.ccpit.org/Contents/Channel_3603/2015/0410/455476/content_455476.htm (Accessed September 4, 2015).

Besides Africa and Southeast Asia, Central Asia is another important arena for China to realize its Go Out (*zouchuqu*) Policy. In addition to trade, Chinese investment in Central Asia has increased steadily. In 2014, China was the largest provider of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kyrgyzstan (2.03 billion USD) and Uzbekistan (44 million USD), and the second-largest investor in Tajikistan (72 million USD).²¹ By 2013, China had invested approximately 90 billion USD in Central Asia,²² making Beijing one of the top providers of investment in the region. The economic linkage between China and Central Asia gave the latter a critical role in the One Belt One Road (*yidaiyilu*) initiative introduced in 2014.

3. Japan’s Strategic Interests and Foreign Policy in Central Asia

Hampered by location, Japan is not a traditional power in Central Asia, a category dominated by the likes of China and Russia. However, with the rising challenge of energy security in the new century, similar to other powers, Japan began turning its eyes towards resource abundant or potentially energy rich areas such as Central Asia. One may be surprised that as far back as the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, Japan took notice of the power vacuum and resource potential in Central Asia and began engaging the region. In December 1991, Japan recognized the independence of Kazakhstan and, in the following months, established formal diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan (January 1992), Uzbekistan (January 1992), Kyrgyzstan (January 1992), Tajikistan

²¹ Xia Yue and Xiaoping Qian, “Zhongya wuguo touzi huanjing bijiao yanjiu: zhongguo de shijiao” (A Comparative Study of the Investment Environment of the Five States of Central Asia), *Yatai Jingji* (Asia-Pacific Economy), No.2 (2015), available online at: <http://www.chinathinktanks.org.cn/content/detail?id=2895509> (accessed August 30, 2015) Figures reflect 2013 values.

²² Ibid.

(February 1992) and Turkmenistan (April 1992).²³

In 1997, under considerations for geopolitics and energy security, former prime minister Hashimoto Ryutaro proposed the strategy of Eurasian Diplomacy, also known as “Silk Road” Diplomacy. Japan’s strategic adjustment is significant in two ways. First, in terms of geopolitics, by expanding its role in Central Asia, Japan seeks to increase its global status and regional influence. Correspondingly, Tokyo’s established foreign policy guidelines seek to engage in dialogue with Central Asia and strengthen bilateral exchange with countries in the region, and to support economic and resource development in Central Asia through Japan’s economic capability.²⁴ Second, Japan seeks to gain influence in the development of energy resources in Central Asia through increased political and economic exchange in the region.²⁵ In terms of strategic interests, international status and energy access dominate Tokyo’s considerations towards Central Asia.

(1) International Status

While Japan’s economic status in the world does not frequently undergo contestations, the inability to deploy troops and conduct military activities abroad undermines Japan’s political standing in the international community. In other words, Japan falls short of achieving great power status or becoming a “normal” state because carrying out military actions is constrained by the Japanese Constitution (Article 9). In such case, in order to become a full political power (or “normal” state), Japan could only adopt other courses, one of which is the acquisition of permanent representation on the United Nations (UN) Security Council. Located outside East Asia –a region that Japan continues to have troubles with in finding political support despite its proximity–Central Asia has proved to be a potential source of support.

In August 2004, during her visits to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko proposed the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue initiative.²⁶ In 2005, the first Central Asia plus Japan Foreign Ministers’ Meeting was held in Astana, Kazakhstan. The meeting produced a Joint Statement that sets out the goals of promoting and deepening cooperation in the fields of economic and social development, energy and environmental issues, cultural exchange and human resource development.²⁷ In terms of international status, the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue played a key role in generating an Action Plan that promotes Japan’s desire of achieving a stronger influence in the international community. As Article 1.2 of the Action Plan states:

*Japan and the Central Asian countries emphasized that the reform of the United Nations is urgently needed...Japan and the Central Asian countries need to work together to reform the UN Security Council which plays a major role in maintaining peace and security. The crux of the Security Council reform is to increase the number of both permanent and non-permanent members. The Central Asian countries expressed their expectation that Japan would play a more political role in the international community and confirmed that they would unanimously support Japan’s becoming a permanent member.*²⁸

It is clear that Japan aspires to become a greater political power through the support of Central Asian

²³ Jiangyong Liu ed., *Dangdai Riben Duiwai Guanxi* (Foreign Relations of Contemporary Japan) (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2009), p.440.

²⁴ Akio Kawato, “What is Japan up to in Central Asia?” in Christopher Len et al. eds., *Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead* (Singapore: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2008), pp.17-18.

²⁵ Christopher Len, “Understanding Japan’s Central Asian Engagement,” in Christopher Len et al. eds., *Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead* (Singapore: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2008), pp.36-37.

²⁶ Christopher Len, “Japan’s Central Asia Diplomacy: Motivations, Implications and Prospects for the Region,” *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol.3, No.3 (2005), p.142.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Joint Statement ‘Central Asia + Japan’ Dialogue/Foreign Ministers’ Meeting – Relations between Japan and Central Asia as They Enter a New Era,”

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/dialogue/joint0408.pdf> (accessed August 24, 2015)

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “‘Central Asia plus Japan’ Dialogue–Action Plan–,” <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/dialogue/action0606.html> (accessed August 24, 2015)

countries. Another Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in 2010 before the Great East Japan Earthquake disrupted further dialogue. The Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue was reinitiated in 2014 under the Shinzo Abe administration.

(2) Energy Resources and Investment

Coincidentally, compared with China's high energy demand caused by economic development, the case of Japan may not be any more optimistic. The fact that Japan is an island nation means that much of its energy demands need to be fulfilled externally. As Candace Dunn and Mark Eshbaugh point out, by 2012, Japan was the second largest net importer of fossil fuels in the world, trailing only China.²⁹ A resource-poor country, Japan imported as much as 90% of its oil from the Middle East, which establishes a vulnerability that bears on the country. With the suspension of operation of all nuclear power plants following the Fukushima incident in 2011, Japan's dependence on fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas heightened. Currently, Japan is the third largest global consumer and importer of oil behind the U.S. and China.³⁰

Hence, similar to China, Japan sees Central Asia as a potential source for energy diversion. Among general efforts that support the development of oil and natural gas resources throughout the region, Tokyo's efforts are particularly focused in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan, INPEX Corporation, Japan's largest oil and gas exploration company, acquired an interest in the Offshore North Caspian Sea Contract Area in Kazakhstan's territorial waters in 1998 and began development work in the Kashagan Oil Field after sources were confirmed in 2000.³¹ The Kashagan Oil Field began production in 2013. On the other hand, along with Kazakhstan firm Kazatomprom, Japanese companies Sumitomo Shoji and KEPCO (Kansai Electric Power Co., Inc.) are jointly developing the Zapadny Munkuduk uranium deposit.³² Kazakhstan is currently the world's largest producer of uranium. In Uzbekistan, in January 2015, Japan and Uzbekistan signed a large package of investment and loan agreements and technical assistance projects worth 3.8 billion USD.³³ Japanese investment in Uzbekistan includes infrastructure, telecommunication and oil and gas projects.

4. Scenarios for Sino-Japanese Competition in Central Asia

Despite the limitation of traditional thinking on Sino-Japanese competition in the locales of Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia, it is nonetheless worth considering the possibilities for rivalry in Central Asia, a region that continues to elevate in global status due to its strategic location and energy potential. While a brief survey of Japan and China's respective interests in Central Asia may suggest the competition over energy as the main potential point of conflict between the two powers, the paradox between Beijing and Tokyo may lay deeper, touching on power competitions on both the international and regional levels. In 2014, China's initiation of the One Belt One Road initiative once again captivated global attention on Central Asia while the strategic competition between China and Japan raged on in different parts of the world. The following considers three potential aspects of competition between Japan and China in Central Asia.

(1) Institutional Competition

Despite early ventures into Central Asia in the aftermath of the Cold War, perhaps owing to geographical

²⁹ Candace Dunn and Mark Eshbaugh, "Japan is the second largest net importer of fossil fuels in the world," <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=13711> (accessed September 4, 2015)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ INPEX Corporation Annual Report 2015, http://www.inpex.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/annual_report/inpex_annualreport2015_en-4.pdf (accessed September 4, 2015). The Kashagan Oil Field has a production potential of 450,000 barrels per day and 1.5 barrels over the next decade. See: Bin Xiao and Xiaohui Zhang, "riben de nengyuan xiongxin: cong zhongya dao yasaibairan" (Japan's Energy Ambition: From Central Asia to Azerbaijan), <http://oilobserver.com/case/article/76> (accessed August 31, 2015)

³² Roman Muzalevsky, "Japan Looks to Central Asia for Strategic Resources," http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40151&no_cache=1 (accessed September 4, 2015)

³³ John C.K. Daly, "Japan's Central Asia Strategy Emerges with Upcoming Visit," <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2015/08/11/japans-central-asia-strategy-emerges-with-upcoming-visit/> (accessed September 4, 2015)

distance (and instability in domestic politics since 2006), Japan's influence in the region remains limited. The power vacuum in Central Asia was not filled again until China's rise in the new century. The most prominent evidence of China's gaining influence in Central Asia was the establishment of the SCO in 2001. While a key feature of the SCO is its objective to combat terrorism and ensure regional security and stability, over the years, the organization has gradually evolved into a multilateral interface for discussions on economic and energy cooperation among China, Russia and Central Asian states. With the U.S. occupied with its War on Terror in the Middle East, Chinese influence in Central Asia expanded greatly.

In a sense, Japan's initiation of the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue in 2004 could be seen as a response by Tokyo that seeks to counterbalance China's growing regional influence. For Japan, a stronger China in Central Asia not only has the potential to challenge Tokyo's efforts to diversify its sources for energy, it could also reduce the support Japan needs in its quest to become a political power. Noting China's adoption of a Go Out Policy, Japan also needed a "go out policy" in order to garner support for its international status. Since 2004, five rounds of the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue have been held. Hosted in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the Fifth Round of the Dialogue was held in 2014 and was attended by foreign ministers from all member states for the first time in history.³⁴

While participation in the SCO or Central Asia plus Japan is not mutually exclusive and the former seems to have developed more vibrantly compared with its Japanese counterpart, the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue nonetheless serves as a potential institution for challenging Chinese influence in the region. For example, in the Joint Declaration signed at the 2014 Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue, all member states agreed on the importance of peaceful resolution of conflicts based on international law and principles including non-intervention of territorial boundaries and the resignation of the use of force and threats in international relations.³⁵ The statement was considered by some observers to be directed against Chinese belligerence in the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.³⁶ On the other hand, the capture and killing of Japanese nationals Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa by ISIS in 2015 encouraged Tokyo to step up counterterrorist cooperation with Central Asian states, an area recognized to be a main function of the SCO. Through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Japan plans to provide aid to Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan towards improved inspection facilities and equipment.³⁷ It remains to be observed whether security cooperation between Japan and Central Asia will continue to expand and intensify the undercurrents in Sino-Japanese relations in Central Asia.

(2) Power Competition

In September 2013, while visiting Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the concept of joint establishment of a Silk Road Economic Belt by China and Central Asia. In the following month, while visiting Southeast Asia, Xi Jinping further suggested the establishment of a Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road by China and ASEAN. Together, the two proposals form the concept of the One Belt One Road, a strategic initiative that seeks to connect the Eurasian continent and promote economic cooperation and integration between China and countries along the imagined route (see Figure 1). The One Belt One Road initiative captured international attention at the 2014 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit Meeting in Beijing, when Xi Jinping announced the plan along with the establishment of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Fifth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of 'Central Asia Plus Japan' Dialogue," http://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ca_c/kg/page22e_000455.html#section1 (accessed August 24, 2015)

³⁵ "Fifth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of 'Central Asia Plus Japan' Dialogue Joint Declaration," <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000045365.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2015)

³⁶ See: Tong Qian, "Riben yu zhongya wuguo lianhe shengming qianzhi zhongguo" (Central Asian Countries and Japan Jointly Declare to Tie Down China), http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world/2014/07/140717_central_asia_plus_japan_dialogue (accessed August 31, 2015)

³⁷ "Japan to help Central Asia beef up border controls," *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 6, 2015, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Japan-to-help-Central-Asia-beef-up-border-controls> (accessed August 31, 2015)

Figure 1: One Belt One Road Initiative

Source: Sander Denecker, "China's One Belt One Road Strategy,"

<http://insight.amcham-shanghai.org/chinas-one-belt-one-road-strategy/> (accessed September 17, 2015)

While the success of the One Belt One Road initiative remains to be watched, its geopolitical implications do not go unnoticed. Xi Jinping's proclamation of the ambitious plan revived the debate of whether China seeks a land power strategy that stands in contrast with maritime power strategies historically embraced by countries such as Britain, the U.S. and Japan. Despite arguments by Chinese scholars that contend the One Belt One Road to be a strategy that goes beyond the traditional concepts of land power and sea power,³⁸ various developments suggest that Beijing seems to lean towards a land power strategy. In addition to the construction of gas and oil pipelines leading from Central Asia to China, Beijing has made the establishment of an infrastructure network between all sub-regions in Asia and between Asia, Europe and Africa a priority in its initiative.³⁹ Such an objective has led to Beijing's planning and construction of the "Eurasian Land Bridge" that aims to stretch from China's coastal region to the European continent, while the export of high-speed rail technology or "high-speed rail diplomacy" (*gaotie waijiao*), is adopted as a way to establish the influence of China beyond its borders.⁴⁰ Compared with locations such as the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, where China's efforts to gain influence are constantly under challenge, pursuits on the continent seem to confront less friction, a condition that argues in favor of land power aspirations.

China's continental advancements towards the west stand in contrast with Japan's traditional emphasis on maritime strategy, a position that has been somewhat revived by the recent Shinzo Abe administration. Despite its Silk Road Diplomacy, since 2012, Japan has made a series of strategic moves in the Asia Pacific that hint at the country's sea power focus. For example, in response to China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe vowed Japan's support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure the security and free navigation of the seas and skies.⁴¹ Correspondingly, Japan provided three patrol vessels to Indonesia and ten patrol vessels to the Philippines through grant aid cooperation.⁴² Although Japan does not have any territorial grievances

³⁸ See: Wu Zhifeng, "Yidaiyilu: chaoyue luquan haiquan de xinsiwei" (One Belt One Road: New Thinking that Goes Beyond Land Power and Sea Power), <http://scholarsupdate.hi2net.com/news.asp?NewsID=18037>; Liu Jianguo, "Diyanzhengzhi sixiang dui zhongmeiri guanxi de yinxiang" (The Influences of Geopolitical Thinking on China-US-Japan Relations), http://www.globalview.cn/html/strategy/info_4889.html (accessed August 31, 2015) Liu Jianguo suggests the emergence of a new concept that combines both the theory of land power and theory of sea power which he terms "land-sea cooperation theory" (*hailu hehelun*).

³⁹ "Infrastructure Connectivity a Priority in Belt and Road Initiative," http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/28/c_134105411.htm (accessed August 30, 2015)

⁴⁰ Regarding China's use of railway technology as a diplomatic tactic, see: Tsai, *op. cit.*, pp.161-170.

⁴¹ Shinzo Abe, "Military Transparency and Asian Security,"

<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/shinzo-abe-calls-on-the-region-s-governments-to-make-their-defense-budgets-public> (accessed September 1, 2015)

⁴² *Ibid.*

in the South China Sea, concern over so-called “sea lines of communication” (SLOCs)—critical shipping lanes the country depends on for trade and energy imports—has led Tokyo to pronounce its interests in the region under the Abe administration.

Beyond the South China Sea, Japan’s maritime focus can be observed in the Indian Ocean as well. In 2012, then newly elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced the concept of “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” a strategic vision based on a democratic alliance among Japan, the U.S., Australia and India. Abe clearly exposed Japan’s emphasis on the sea in a passage:

*The ongoing disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea mean that Japan’s top foreign policy priority must be to expand the country’s strategic horizons. Japan is a mature maritime democracy, and its choice of close partners should reflect that fact. I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.*⁴³

Under the new Abe administration, Japan stepped up maritime cooperation with India. In 2013, Japan and India commenced the first Maritime Affairs Dialogue in New Delhi and agreed on potential cooperation in areas such as non-traditional security, transportation, ocean science and technology and maritime biosphere.⁴⁴ Following the first Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) carried out off the coast of Tokyo in 2011, a second exercise was carried out in the Bay of Bengal adjacent to the Indian Ocean in 2013.

On the system level, geopolitical competition between sea power and land power, Japan and China, respectively, is increasingly vivid when recent developments are also considered. As Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Ming-Te Hung observe, since 2012, Japan has pivoted towards China and seeks to contain its rising power by engaging countries in the Asia Pacific such as Burma, India and Australia.⁴⁵ On the other hand, perhaps in response to Japan’s pivot and Washington’s current rebalance to Asia, at the 2015 SCO summit held in Ufa, Russia not only strengthened cooperation among China, Russia and Central Asia, but also hinted at the emergence of a continental bloc that may serve as a counterweight to the Asia Pacific group under U.S. and Japanese leadership. The accession of India and Pakistan to SCO membership at the Ufa meeting further expands the influence of the SCO.⁴⁶ In light of the above developments, Central Asia may be a sub-region where larger power competitions in the world play out.

(3) Credit Competition

Due to Japan’s military constraints, economic means such as the provision of official development assistance (ODA) have long served as a foreign policy tool to accomplish national interests. Through the provision of aid to developing countries, Japan seeks to improve its international image and shape an international environment beneficial for its development. In Central Asia, Japanese assistance consists of the three categories of loans, grants and technical cooperation.⁴⁷ The tasks of personnel training and institutional establishment, construction of social and economic infrastructure, and mitigation of existent social problems guide Japan’s delivery of ODA to Central Asia. According to Japan’s 2013 ODA White Paper, in 2012, Japan provided 28.4 million USD to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan combined.⁴⁸ Table 2 shows Japan’s disbursement of ODA in

⁴³ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,”

<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe> (accessed September 1, 2015)

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “daiyikkai ni-indo kaiyou nikansuru taiwa no kaisai” (The First Meeting of the Japan-India Maritime Affairs Dialogue), http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/25/1/0128_02.html

⁴⁵ Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Ming-te Hung, “Jianzhi zhongguo: riben dui yazhou de anquan zhanlue” (Pivot towards China: Japan’s Renewed Security Strategy in Asia), *Review of Global Politics*, No.46 (2014), pp.139-152.

⁴⁶ Lidia Kelly, Denis Pinchuk and Darya Korsunskaya, “India, Pakistan to join China, Russia in security group,” <http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/07/11/china-russia-india-pak-sco-idINKCN0PK20520150711> (accessed August 31, 2015)

⁴⁷ For a complete discussion of Japan’s ODA strategy in Central Asia, see: Timur Dadabaev, *Japan in Central Asia: Strategies, Initiatives and Neighboring Powers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Chapter 2.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *ODA White Paper 2013* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013), p.121.

Central Asia in the period 2010-2013.

Table 2: Japan's ODA Disbursements in Central Asia (2010-2013)

(Unit: in millions USD)

Year	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
2010	-1.82	23.16	43.42	-0.94	7.04
2011	-20.73	30.62	35.59	-1.47	-1.79
2012	-15.93	19.57	32.98	-2.21	-6.01
2013	-6.32	17.48	26.66	-1.68	30.11
Total	811.60	553.65	248.86	37.82	857.70

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "ODA by Region: Central Asia and the Caucasus,"

http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page_000010.html (Accessed February 24, 2016)

Note: Negative figures indicate that outstanding loans remain after repayment by respective recipients.

For China, comparable figures for ODA in Central Asia remain difficult to gauge. In both the 2011 and the 2014 ODA White Paper released by China's State Council, besides general descriptions on the performance of aid, the documents do not show the precise figures for the distribution of ODA in each region.⁴⁹ However, according to a study carried out by the RAND Corporation, of six regions (Latin America, Africa, Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia) surveyed, Central Asia received the least assistance in the past decade (2001-2011).⁵⁰ Although the SCO helped to initiate several agreements between China and Central Asian countries, most deals were small, usually amounting to less than 100 million USD.⁵¹

Nonetheless, with the announcement of the establishment of a Silk Road infrastructure fund consisting of 40 billion USD by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC Summit in 2014, the potential amount of Chinese credit in Central Asia may be greatly increased in the near future. In turn, such a development may directly challenge Japan's influence in the region. In terms of the disbursement of ODA, in 2012, Japan was the biggest provider of development assistance in Kazakhstan, the second biggest provider in Uzbekistan (behind Germany) and the third biggest provider in Tajikistan (behind Germany and the U.S.).⁵² While China's commitment to aid and investment in Central Asia has the potential to challenge Japan's ODA diplomacy in the region, with most of Beijing's assistance in the past devoted to oil and natural gas, the threat of energy security may come to bear against Japan.⁵³ It remains to be observed whether Japan would increase its provision of ODA to Central Asia in response to China's Silk Road infrastructure fund.

5. Conclusion

This article briefly surveyed the emerging possibilities for strategic competition between Japan and China outside the Asia Pacific region. While many of the past competitions between the two powers were concentrated in Asia, developments in Central Asia suggest that it may be worthy for observers of Sino-Japanese relations to look beyond the regional scope for factors that are likely to introduce new challenges and perhaps reinforce tensions already existent in bilateral relations. As this article seeks to elaborate, from institutional establishments to different

⁴⁹ See: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China,

"China's Foreign Aid White Paper 2011," <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/wjbps/Document/1435354/1435354.htm> ;

"China's Foreign Aid White Paper 2014," <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/wjbps/Document/1435360/1435360.htm> (accessed August 30, 2015)

⁵⁰ Charles Wolf Jr., Xiao Wang and Eric Warner, *China's Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities: Scale, Content, Destinations and Implications* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), pp.39-40.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "ODA by Region: Central Asia and the Caucasus," http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page_000010.html (accessed August 31, 2015)

⁵³ On this point, see: Timur Dadabaev, "Chinese and Japanese Foreign Policies towards Central Asia from a Comparative Perspective," *The Pacific Review*, Vol.27, No.1 (2014), pp.123-145.

strategic conceptions of Japan and China, to the amount of foreign aid or potential investment Japan and China could bring to countries in the region, Central Asia contains the seeds for strategic competition in the near future. In this respect, two aspects are particularly worth noting.

First, considering the difference in strategic outlook between continental and maritime powers, in terms of Japan and China, an important question to address is whether both powers have the potential to mutually recognize and acknowledge their respective spheres of influence. In theory at least, if both continental and maritime powers keep to their power base, coastlines should serve as lines of demarcation or boundaries that keep the states away from direct confrontations. However, as evidence in the South China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands suggest, the claims by Japan and China overlap and induce tensions. Once other power coalitions such as the Japan-U.S. alliance and cooperation between China and Russia are taken into account as well, the international system increasingly suggests an emerging division of competing power blocs defined by continental and maritime powers. Therefore, in Central Asia, whether Japan and China can find compatible grounds for acknowledging each other's regional influences remains an important issue to be observed.

Second, besides power competitions, the stances and responses of Central Asian states are also critical factors that may affect Sino-Japanese relations. Regardless of tensions between Japan and China, the fact that Central Asian countries participate in both the SCO and the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue hints at the possibility of a balancing strategy at work. Yet with the expansion of the SCO and China's push for the One Belt One Road initiative, how long Central Asian countries can sustain their balance between Japan and China seems uncertain. For Japan, reduced influence in Central Asia may not only challenge attempts to diversify the sources of its energy supply, Japan's global influence may also be rolled back and perhaps be limited within the confines of Asia. The consequence of such scenario may be an even smaller Japan than before that risks both political and economic irrelevancy in the international community. How Japan's leadership responds could define the country's international status for years to come.

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