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Timur Dadabaev

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Correspondence:
Timur Dadabaev: dadabaev.timur.gm@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

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Engagement and contestation: The entangled imagery of the Silk Road

Timur Dadabaev

University of Tsukuba, Tennodai 1-1-1, 3058571 Tsukuba, Japan

Abstract

There is considerable debate over how and in what form Central Asian (CA) states should conduct relations among each other and with other post-Soviet states. The notion of the “Silk Road” has become one of the symbols of extended economic and political cooperation. Notably, however, Japan (Silk Road Diplomacy, 1996–1999), China (One Belt, One Road [OBOR] or the Belt and Road initiative [BRI]) and South Korea (Silk Road Strategy, 2011) have used the rhetoric of reviving the Silk Road to imply closer engagement with the CA region but with different connotations. This paper focuses on the formation of this discourse of engagement with the CA region through the notion of the Silk Road in China, South Korea and Japan and raises the following questions: What are the approaches that facilitate the most effective ways of engaging CA states under this “Silk Road” rhetoric? What are the principles that have detrimental effects on the successes and failures of the engagement of China, Japan and South Korea? The primary objective of this paper is to address these questions and to stimulate debate among both academics and policy makers on the formats of engagement and cooperation in Eurasia.

Introduction

There is considerable debate over how and in what form CA states should conduct relations amongst each other and with other regional and non-regional states. One of the symbols of extended economic and political cooperation has become the reference to the “Silk Road.” Many states have used the rhetoric of reviving the Silk Road to imply closer engagement with the CA region and its eventual integration into the network of economic ties. Such rhetoric is exemplified by Japan’s Eurasian/Silk Road Diplomacy, which emerged as early as 1997 under PM Hashimoto’s administration, South Korea’s 2009–2013 “Silk Road”-related initiatives and the much-discussed Chinese “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) or “Belt and Road” initiative (BRI). Alternatives to the Silk Road scheme have also been proposed by powerful states like Russia in the form of a Eurasian Economic Community and the Eurasian Union.

This paper focuses on the formation of this discourse of engagement with the CA region through the notion of the Silk Road in China, South Korea and Japan and raises the following questions: What are the approaches that facilitate the most effective ways of engaging CA states under the “Silk Road” or alternative rhetoric? What are the principles that have detrimental effects on the successes and failures of the engagement of China, Japan and South Korea? The primary objective

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of this paper is to address these questions and to stimulate debate among both academics and policy makers on the formats of engagement and cooperation in Eurasia.

Thus, by seeking an answer to these questions, this paper attempts to achieve the following two objectives. First, the paper analyses the impact of the so-called Silk Road (One Belt One Road, OBOR or the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) initiative on the prospects for regionalism and regional cooperation in Central Asia in conceptual and theoretical realms. Second, while this paper highlights the nuances of China’s initiatives and their Japanese and South Korean (Republic of Korea, ROK) counterparts, its primary goal is to go beyond the simple empirical consideration of the facts to identify the implications of this initiative for wider theoretical discussions of CA-specific forms of cooperation (not necessarily widely generalizable) rooted in the nexus of relationships found in this region.

This study employs a twofold methodological approach. First, it is an exercise in the theoretical re-consideration of the Chinese, Japanese, South Korean and alternative cooperation schemes of the Silk Road to which CA states are exposed. It then considers the most significant alternatives to the Silk Road by criticizing old clichés of engagement and contestation. More specifically, the paper questions the narrative of domination and conquest of CA by economically larger states. Instead, this paper argues that the discursive practice of using the term “Silk Road” has different connotations and meanings in different (Chinese, Japanese and South Korean) settings. Comparing the usages of “Silk Road” offers an opportunity to identify factors that are important for successful cooperation among these states. In this way, this paper aims to promote and extend current international relations efforts to place CA within appropriate comparative frameworks.

Second, this study tests and partially deconstructs the notions of the “Silk Road” and its “others” to determine whether the “Silk Road” represents a neo-colonial construct or offers decolonizing perspectives that lead to new identity construction in the CA region. It does so through analyses of the initiatives, statements, agreements and speeches of political leadership.

To accomplish the methodological steps above, this study uses a case-study-focused analysis (Silk Road Diplomacy; OBOR/BRI; and Silk Road Strategy of Japan, China and South Korea) and analyses the official foreign policy discourse formation regarding these initiatives by analysing the available texts and expert interviews.3

The selection of case studies (China’s OBOR/BRI; Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy and the initiatives under the PM Koizumi and PM Abe administrations; and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun’s Comprehensive Central Asian Initiative of 2006, Lee Myung-bak’s New Asia Initiative of 2009 and Park Geun-hye’s Eurasia initiative of 2013) herein corresponds to geographic criteria and is also designed to reflect a variety of different strategies of cooperation schemes.

The general theoretical framework used to explain the engagement strategies analysed in this paper is a constructivist one; it claims that these strategies are socially constructed and are constantly undergoing reformulation and reshaping. At the same time, each case study considered in this paper has its own unique specificities. Thus, the analysis is conducted by considering cooperation within OBOR/BRI initiatives as emphasizing pragmatism and functionalist goals in contrast to the integration processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This paper then considers similar attempts by Japan and South Korea to engage post-Soviet CA through constructivist lenses.

Engagement and contestation

In the 25 years since the independence of the CA states, the issues of how to form and shape cooperation between and among these states have been some of the most discussed issues in regional international relations. These include but are not limited to discussions on the formation of the CIS, Central Asian cooperation, Shanghai Five, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Eurasian Union. Interestingly, many of these schemes have been considered from two main positions.

The first position is the notion of engagement. Integration of their economies into the structure of the international economy has been of crucial importance to CA states. Therefore, most schemes offered to these states represented methods of engaging them and forming closer relations among their economies and with countries outside the region. To a great extent, these attempts represented de-colonization efforts by CA states and their counterparts through the diversification of their infrastructure and trade partners and an effort to attract foreign investors to the region. The degree of success in these areas depended on the degree of participating states’ commitment and motivation. The outcomes of these efforts in the areas mentioned above depended on the efforts of CA states and on the changing international environment. Although most of these schemes resonated with the intentions of the CA states, they did not produce many tangible outcomes. On the contrary, the concept of cooperation has been corrupted by the great number of these cooperation schemes and the lack of outcomes produced. Such a lack of efficiency led to claims that most of these schemes were initiated as a result of attempts to dominate and control the CA region and to access regional resources. As a consequence, interpretation and narration about these schemes frequently developed along the lines of conspiracy theories reproduc ing the discourse of CA being contested and eventually turning into a battleground for neo-colonization and a new “frontier” to be “conquered” by “big players”. To some extent, CA states themselves are also responsible for the regeneration and reproduction of these discourses, as they often misinterpret the importance of engagement with the international community as a form of contestation. For many of these CA governments, engaging with larger states inevitably results in contestation, which they attempt to use as a bargaining tool to receive larger amounts of developmental aid. However, the discourse of contestation in the sense of rivalry for dominance in the CA region does not reflect the intentions of other states. Rather, the contestation witnessed in the region is about the types of engagements and models of interactions that are employed by various countries.

In this sense, the discourse of contestation for the CA region has multiple aspects. Interestingly, the discourse of the creation of a common new Eurasia has been approached differently by different states. Some conceptualized the issue of Eurasian cooperation from a conventional integration perspective, suggesting that such elements as historical ties and common linguistic and civilizational features constitute the basis of and an asset for cooperation. In Russian constructs, these are mostly related to “common belonging” to the former Soviet space. References were also made to the notions of Eurasianism and shared geography. According to these notions, geography and common history produce a common identity, which then leads to the commonality of approaches to conceptualizing cooperation. Under this view, the notion of common Eurasian norms was frequently emphasized as a part of a shared value system that helped CA states integrate with Russia and other post-Soviet constituencies. Among these norms and values, the emphasis on collective/group rights over individual human rights and the paternalistic role of the government in the social contract in these societies have frequently served as examples of ideas that unify the approaches of many states in post-Soviet Eurasia. However, the approach that relied primarily on civilizational, ethnic and historical commonalities did not sustain the motivation of participating states. The best examples to illustrate such schemes are CIS and Central Asian Cooperation. With time, these schemes were more associated with attempts by Russia to dominate this region or, in the case of CA cooperation, with contestation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for dominance and leadership in the region.
After the inefficiency of CIS became apparent, the states participating in such schemes began to pay more attention to sustaining the motivation of member states of cooperation schemes. The Chinese schemes were largely a response to the problems existing in the relations among member states (Shanghai five). This problem-solving approach towards engagement has several connotations. It serves the functional purpose of resolving particular problems and, at the same time, is only possible because parties develop common approaches, norms and mutual trust within this problem-solving process, thereby leading to common norm creation. In this sense, the Chinese attempted to create schemes that are not necessarily (initially at least) based on the notion of “common belonging” but have more of a problem-solving, reactive nature, such as SCO, and later developed into the OBOR/BRI and related Silk Road transportation network that exemplified this pattern. They can also be considered as a response to the deficiencies of previous schemes, such as the deficient functioning of the CIS. Therefore, instead of focusing on the issues of civilizational and conventional cooperation, Chinese initiatives focused on common-approach and norm-creation for practical problem solving because these targeted areas were either of a less politically sensitive nature or were related to the real needs of each CA state. Another difference in the SCO and post-SCO structures from other previous formats is that bilateral engagements are frequently designed or sometimes simply interpreted as those produced by a multilateral structure. There is also the possibility that many of these outcomes claimed to be achieved multilaterally would probably have happened through pre-existing or current bilateral processes and that the SCO simply places a supposed multilateral stamp on what is essentially agreed upon bilaterally. However, attributing these achievements with a multilateral nature legitimizes China-led SCO and post-SCO structures and strengthens the sense of “common belonging” and common “identity.” Nevertheless, when transportation networks and the ever-growing Chinese economic power began to show signs of larger Chinese corporate penetration of CA markets and appeared to benefit China more than CA counterparts, these Chinese projects became a concern to the participating states. Chinese moves were subsequently balanced by the expansion of SCO and the entry into Eurasian integration schemes of smaller CA states. In turn, Russia also appears to have learned from its past mistakes. It now attempts to construct a vision of a cooperation scheme that will prioritize common identity creation through schemes that are oriented at achieving practical and feasible outcomes. These assumptions aim at increasing the efficiency of cooperation in Eurasia. Although Eurasian construction is a notion that is more frequently interpreted from the rationalist perspective, this paper claims that the notion of Eurasian political space construction needs to be understood in constructivist terms. The reason for such a claim emanates from the understanding that Eurasian political space is a continuing process of construction that involves construction of discourse, practices and perceptions. It also involves the process of counter-posing what Eurasia is and is not. In such a process of construction, the notions of “practicality” and “functionality” also become pieces that contribute to the process of trust- and norm-building, which inter-subjectively develop into a common identity. Thus, there is no tension between functionalist engagement and constructivist discourse in narrating Russian Eurasian engagement discourse.

Japan and South Korea show a tendency to differently conceptualize their vision of CA engagements, thus contesting Chinese and Russian regional constructs. As described below, the Japanese engagement in this region argues strongly for “open regionalism,” which corresponds to Japan’s distant location from the region and attempts to allow participation of non-regional states. In this sense, Japan contests the notion that the CA region is only available to the big powers bordering CA. However, the Japanese engagements in this region are mostly done through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) scheme conducted by the Japanese government, with limited participation of corporate interests. Although the Japanese government claims that such limited Japanese corporate participation is a competitive advantage of Japan because of the absence of Japanese self-interest in CA engagements, such a claim of “altruism” in CA engagement is part of

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4 Kyrgyzstan expressed concern about the route of the Kashgar-Osh-Andizhan railroad, which, from Kyrgyzstan’s perspective, benefitted China more than Kyrgyzstan, while Kyrgyzstan remained in the transportation route but saw no effects with respect to diversifying its economy and industrial structure.
the discursive construction of competitive advantage in respect to other big players, such as China and Russia.

Another alternative to the Chinese, Japanese and Russian modes of engagement is South Korean diplomacy, which is rooted in President Roh Moo-hyn’s Comprehensive Central Asian Initiative of 2006 and Lee Myung-bak’s New Asia Initiative of 2009. Prior to the announcement of this initiative, Prime Minister Han Seung-soo conducted a mission to the Caucasus and CA, during which he visited Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. After the announcement of the “Silk Road Diplomacy” initiative, President Lee upgraded the status of relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to the level of strategic partnerships and provided the framework for governmental support of Korean corporate penetration into this region.

From SCO to OBOR: Spill-over or a shift?

The primary appeal of the SCO for its members is the decolonization opportunities that this organization generates for its participating states.\(^5\) As an international organization, the SCO functions by embracing the principles of non-interference into the internal affairs of its states and respect for the sovereignty and developmental choices of each member state.\(^6\) Explicit references to this respect and consideration for mutual concerns within the SCO Charter as well as the implementation of cooperation based on the notion of the Shanghai spirit further aid the organization’s anti-colonial rhetoric.\(^7\) Therefore, the Shanghai spirit as a value system that is applied to cooperation serves the role of an anti-colonial safeguard, although there are several reservations about neo-colonial tendencies within SCO, which the next section explores. This anti-colonial stance is especially important for CA states whose transport and energy-related infrastructure have been constructed in a way to connect them to external markets, primarily through Russia. The Soviet Union attempted to construct a system to facilitate economic modernization in this region under the model of Soviet modernity. It also aimed to increase the degree of inter-dependence between Soviet constituencies, thereby reinforcing the notion of Sovietness within the identity of CA republics. However, post-Soviet governments regard such Soviet policies with a degree of scepticism, considering them a way to colonize CA republics. According to the prevailing CA political discourse regarding Soviet-era policies, Soviet leadership attempted to control the vast energy resources of these republics, providing only a tiny portion of the revenues received from their exports to CA republics.

The SCO and China’s pro-active policy to facilitate various transportation and energy infrastructure projects are generally welcomed by CA governments, as these projects offer them more means to deliver their products to international markets while limiting the dominating influence of Russia. This organization is also sometimes considered to be a proper substitute to certain functions of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, within which Russia plays a major role.\(^8\) Some CA governments consider China to be a proper safeguard against not only Russia but also the US (perceived or real) in its efforts to widen its sphere of influence in CA. These states support the US’s efforts to stabilize Afghanistan because these efforts also contribute to the stability of the CA region in general. However, these states strongly fear that a US presence in this region would also entail heavy criticism of regional governments’ human rights record and “political mentor-
ship,” as seen during government take-over in Kyrgyzstan and the US criticism of the Karimov administration during Andijan events in Uzbekistan in 2005.

Therefore, the SCO’s strong stance against the foreign military presence in the CA region are welcomed by regional states. Russia still maintains bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and important military facilities in Kazakhstan and thus does not necessarily share this anti-imperial SCO stance. However, it accepts this stance because Russia possesses alternative means of influencing the CA region, as exemplified by the significant number of CA labour migrants in Russia whom Russia can potentially instrumentalize to influence these countries, without a need for military action.

In addition to the anti-imperial stance mentioned above, the Chinese model of generating economic growth is an appealing point for many CA states in their participation in SCO structures. The developmental state model of economic development, which aligns with significant government control over various aspects of public life under the conditions of the unstable political and economic systems in CA states, is a model of modernization that is radically different from Western models of free liberal democracy.

There is certainly a danger that Indian and Pakistani membership (with a population many times that of the combined population of CA) in practice can shift the agenda away from CA and from the smaller states’ priorities. However, if safeguards against such drastic shifts are put in place, successes, principles and lessons from the SCO construction process can be utilized for the benefit of building a new engagement in this region; this is the strategy adopted by the OBOR/BRI initiative announced by China in 2013.

The new Chinese OBOR/BRI distinguishes itself from the SCO in its wider geographic coverage as well as in the issues that it covers. There were certain attempts to reform the SCO to expand into economic areas but, by 2012, it was obvious that such “maturing” of the SCO was paralyzed by the different preferences of Russia and China. Each country had its own distinct vision of free trade zones, financial institutions and priority issues. China emphasized the creation of a free trade zone within the SCO and the creation of an SCO bank and related economic activities. Russia, however, preferred the SCO to focus on security-related issues and prioritized constructing its own Eurasian Economic Community with post-Soviet constituencies, which is eventually supposed to mature into the Eurasian Union. To some extent, such inexplicit rivalry between the visions espoused by Russia and China facilitated an international environment for the Chinese shift from the SCO to OBOR/BRI. In this sense, the influential role of Russia in shaping and largely constraining the Chinese from pursuing their vision for the development of the SCO needs to be emphasized. In other words, the development of OBOR/BRI occurred, in a certain sense, at the expense of the SCO, which steadily loses functionality in terms of project development and implementation as OBOR/BRI expands and dominates the Chinese political agenda.

The “problem-solving” principle, which was largely inherited by OBOR/BRI from the SCO, could serve as one of the norms within the innovative approach to cooperation. To succeed, in stark contrast to the SCO, OBOR/BRI would also require bottom-up “soft regionalism” involvement and not simply the top-down presidentially determined projects currently seen within the SCO. Partly in response to these challenges, there are already signs of engagements in this region that have developed not only between governments but also cover region-to-region cooperation. For example, the Chinese government has encouraged provincial leadership to seek opportunities for Chinese provinces in CA. Similarly, CA states, like Uzbekistan under the new Mirziyoyev administration, attempt to develop region-to-region ties to encourage investments, which has already produced several noticeable outcomes.
OBOR/BRI and its Japanese/South Korean variations

Although China has extensively engaged in CA over the past decade, it aims to further expand its presence in this region by offering a transportation infrastructure project that would help China further penetrate the CA market and allow further penetration of other regions. As a part of these plans, in 2013, the Chinese government proposed the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (consisting of six economic corridors, of which the Eurasian Land-bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia, and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” are relevant to CA) OBOR/BRI concept; this represents an even broader and more ambitious initiative than that represented by the SCO.\(^{10}\) The AIIB that was established as an alternative to regional and global financial institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank (in partnership with BRICS New Development Bank and Silk Road Fund, SCO interbank association), will serve as the financing arm of the OBOR/BRI.\(^{11}\) In addition to the economic benefits of this project, the Chinese government aims to address the lack of trust from some of its smaller neighbours by offering infrastructure development, which sends a message to CA states that China is genuinely interested in contributing to their development.\(^{12}\) This is supposed to further strengthen the “soft power” potential of China in Central Asia by offering a non-coercive, non-military (non-security-focused) approach.

The OBOR/BRI initiative represents an increasing effort to shape positive Chinese involvement in CA by constructing a sense of common belonging based on pragmatism and functionality. On many occasions, Chinese officials have emphasized that OBOR/BRI is not an “expansion of China” but rather a benefit for all parties.\(^{13}\) However, both CA politicians and the public have often expressed the view that Chinese initiatives under the umbrella of SCO and OBOR largely benefit China while making little if any contribution to the long-term development of this region.\(^{14}\) These views have sustained the image of the continuous expansion of China, have led to anti-Chinese protests in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and have potentially demotivated further engagement of CA states with China.\(^{15}\)

Currently, OBOR/BRI initiatives involve such economic components as developing energy-resource transportation and railroad and highway infrastructure. However, the effects of these projects on strengthening on growth-generating potential of CA states is frequently questioned because previous initiatives have had little effect in facilitating economic development in the region.\(^{16}\) In this sense, the success of OBOR/BRI largely depends on how China and other regional states will learn from the successes and failures of the SCO and other engagement schemes in this region.

\(^{10}\) For details, see Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China’s Contribution (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), especially pp.11–17.


\(^{12}\) As an example of such new engagement, see “Joint Declaration on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between the People’s Republic of China and Republic of Kazakhstan,” 31 August 2015, available from MOFA of PRC at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/11293114.shtml (last seen on 25 January 2018).


In terms of Japanese involvement, similar calls for a more mutually beneficial structure of relations were heard from CA countries during the recent visit of Japan’s PM to Central Asia 22–28 October 2015. The visit of PM Abe to Central Asia can be termed historic because it was the first-ever visit of the Japanese PM to all five Central Asian states. PM Koizumi visited Central Asia in 2006, but his visit was limited to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. PM Abe’s visit builds upon previous Japanese engagement strategies exemplified by PM Hashimoto’s Eurasian Diplomacy of 1996–1997, the Obuchi Mission of 1998, FM Kawaguchi’s visit of 2004 when the “Central Asia plus Japan” forum was established and PM Koizumi’s visit in 2006 as mentioned above. Japanese experts generally attempt to differentiate the Japanese engagement in CA from the Chinese one by arguing that the Chinese “assistance” to CA is largely a gesture of goodwill like a “firework shoot” before the launch of major infrastructure-related projects. For them, Japanese involvement in this region goes beyond infrastructure construction and attempts to transfer technology and knowledge.

The goals of PM Abe’s visit to CA in 2015 partly confirm the description above and can be considered four-fold. First, the Japanese PM attempted to deepen and strengthen the presence of the Japanese business community in Central Asia, as exemplified by the contracts signed during the visit for the joint exploration of gas fields in Turkmenistan (Galarynikish), Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Such intensification of direct investments by Japanese companies with the support of the Japanese government has been encouraged by the majority of CA governments, as exemplified by the speech of the Tajik President, who explicitly emphasized the importance of a switch from humanitarian aid projects to foreign direct investment by Japanese companies. Second, it was an attempt by the Japanese PM to secure orders from CA countries for Japanese corporations, as exemplified by the Japanese and Kazakh commitment to work on the construction of a nuclear plant in Kazakhstan and the Japanese and Turkmen agreement (between Turkmengas and JOGMEC) on the construction of mineral resource processing factories in Turkmenistan. Currently, Kazakhstan is also negotiating with Russia on the possible construction of such a plant. Third, PM Abe aimed to further boost its “Cool Japan” soft-power construction initiative by supporting the construction of a Japanese university in Turkmenistan, cooperation on IT education in Tajikistan by launching the Youth Technological Innovation Centre in Uzbekistan and similar educational initiatives in Kazakhstan. Fourth, Abe’s visit offered further humanitarian aid to the smaller republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for various development-related projects.

Some experts have argued that Japanese technologies and loans for the projects mentioned above are a sign of competition between China and Japan because they offer alternatives (to Chinese projects) and thus competing sources of funding. Some have even suggested that “incongruent interests between the two powers already hint for the potential for a friction in the region.” However, there is little evidence to suggest that these loans for Japanese projects in Turkmenistan aim to affect Chinese projects. Although the field of mineral extraction coincides with Chinese interests, Japanese loans and projects in Turkmenistan do not aim to exclude China’s investment there. In addition, the Japanese initiatives extend beyond energy resources to encompass human resource development, joint university and research facilities construction and human security infrastructure. Additionally, former and current Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials

19 Joint Statement of Tajik President and Japanese PM, 2015, MOFA Japan.
20 Joint Statements of Japanese PM and CA Presidents, 2015, MOFA, Japan.
frequently attempt to define the features of “Japanese-ness” in assisting and engaging the CA region that are different from the features offered by the Chinese counterparts.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, it is difficult to argue that Japan directly links Japanese initiatives with the intensification of Chinese or Korean initiatives in this region. Japanese attempts to secure access for Japanese corporate and state institutions to CA may offer some alternative resources for funding and development initiatives to those offered by Chinese and Russian schemes. However, at least in the official discourse and project implementation, Japanese involvement in CA does not appear to be linked to countering Chinese or Korean initiatives because the goals and the degree of commitment to the region differ between Japan and other global players. Interestingly, there are suggestions within the expert community in Japan that OBOR initiatives in CA do not contradict with the Japanese engagements. Rather, experts suggest that Japan should use China-built and financed infrastructure for the benefit of Japanese corporate penetration.\textsuperscript{25} As has been voiced by PM Abe, OBOR has potential; it is important that both Japan and China contribute for the peace, prosperity and resolution of international problems, and Japan is prepared to cooperate (with China) where it can.\textsuperscript{26} At the same time, PM Abe emphasized that OBOR infrastructure schemes need to be transparent, and loans provided under this scheme should be repayable by borrowing countries without indebting these developing nations.\textsuperscript{27} The Chinese MOFA welcomed such a Japanese stance by saying that OBOR will become a “development platform, creating benefits for countries around the world including Japan” and responded to the Japanese PM’s remarks by saying that “China is committed to establishing a set of fair, reasonable and transparent rules for international trade and investment”.\textsuperscript{28} Therefore, both countries’ foreign policies are in the indirect process of mutual shaping and dialogue, which again confirms constructivist logic.

South Korea has also attempted to use opportunities created by the Chinese OBOR initiative for Korean gains. However, it should be noted that South Korean Silk Road diplomacy was launched earlier than the articulated OBOR initiative. Thus, it represents a branding umbrella scheme for expanding South Korea’s corporate interests in this region. By the time South Korea’s Silk Road diplomacy was announced, South Korea’s economic presence in CA, in particular in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was significant in terms of ODA assistance, direct investments and human resource development. In terms of aid disbursements, Uzbekistan ranks the highest in the region, accounting for a third of the assistance volume, while Kazakhstan is second highest, accounting for approximately 6%. South Korean assistance and investment programmes, in addition to considering importing resources from CA to South Korea (similar to the 2008 contract to import 2,600 tons of uranium from Uzbekistan), also aim to link CA resources to international markets. In this way, they aim to establish economically sustainable production, extraction and re-production cycles that are marketable in CA and beyond the region, bringing the benefit to the South Korean conglomerates. In particular, during President Lee’s visit to CA in 2009, he secured an agreement to build a petrochemical plant in Atyrau with a budget of USD 4 billion, a USD 4 billion contract to construct power generation plants in Balkhash and a USD 4 billion deal to participate in development of a gas field in Uzbekistan. In 2011, during another visit by President Lee, the construction of the Ustyurt gas chemical complex was launched. In addition, South Korea’s Hanjin (parent company of Korean Air) received exclusive rights from Uzbekistan to develop its Navoi International Airport into an intercontinental logistic hub.

\textsuperscript{24} See, for instance, roundtable discussion named “Chûō Ajia hatten no kokusaiteki jyoken to Nihon (Development of Central Asia: International conditions and Japan),” Guiko (Journal edited by MOFA of Japan), 34: 29–33.

\textsuperscript{25} See “Chûō Ajia hatten no kokusaiteki jyoken to Nihon (Development of Central Asia: International conditions and Japan),” Guiko (Journal edited by MOFA of Japan), 34: 31.

\textsuperscript{26} Yomiuri Shimbun “Shyusho ‘Ittai ichirou ni kyoryoku’ Hatsuno hyoumei (PM first announcement of preparedness for cooperation along ‘OBOR’),” 5 June 2017.

\textsuperscript{27} Sankei Shimbun “Chugoku no ‘Ittai Ichiro’ Kyoryoku ni Seimeisei, Kouseisenadoga ‘youken’ (Transparency and legitimacy are the conditions for support of Chinese OBOR),” 5 June 2017, available at: www.sankei.com (last seen on 8 June 2017).

Framing of the “Silk Road”

As stated above, the notion of the Silk Road is contested; there is no consensus on what it is. The Silk Road as a term has come to imply the various CA engagement strategies of a number of powerful states — strategies that are constantly questioned, analysed and contested. Notably, however, the concept of the Silk Road takes on different meanings depending on which state uses this rhetoric. For Japan, Hashimoto’s Eurasian Diplomacy of 1997 implied the engagement of energy resources of gas and oil in Russia and other Soviet constituencies as well as human resource development. In US foreign policy, the emphasis has been on limiting Russia’s presence in Former Soviet Union (FSU) and spreading democracy and the market economy. For China, it means the construction of transportation hubs and infrastructure for its goods to penetrate related markets. In addition, the Silk Road has become the subject of contested discursive debates because it also has its so-called “others,” i.e., alternatives. For instance, for Russia, the Silk Road is the rival “other” to its Eurasian Union construct, which it needs to differentiate and outperform to ensure that the “Silk Road” construction does not constrain the shaping of the Eurasian Union. As observed above, the Silk Road is a policy of engaging CA states and other FSU countries, and it has become the subject of contestation in terms of both constituent elements and the region that it covers.

China and Japan faced similar uncertainty in approaching post-Soviet countries after the demise of the USSR. A lack of a clear understanding of their foreign policies complicated the task of formulating Chinese and Japanese interests. China and Japan also confronted different situations in their own economies, international environment in the early 1990s. Therefore, the interests and foreign policies that they directed towards this region were largely socially constructed through interactions with these new states, as seen by the dynamics of the constantly changing agenda setting within Chinese (Shanghai Five towards the SCO and from the SCO towards OBOR/BRI) and Japanese (Eurasian Diplomacy towards CA+Japan) initiatives. They accepted that CA states had a high degree of inter-dependence with Russia in social, economic and political spheres at both the political leadership and population levels. Therefore, the foreign policy orientations of CA states were considered to be developing in a similar direction as Russian foreign policy. Thus, China and Japan defined their early policies towards this region taking into account the extended Russian influence in this region.

Naturally, China attempted to construct friendly relations with these countries, some of which still had unresolved territorial disputes with China. In addition, China’s primary objective was to ensure that “separatist” groups would not receive aid from CA states, many of which share ethnic commonalities with various ethnic groups residing within China.

Integrating CA into its foreign policy was an equally difficult task for Japan. It initially conceptualized the CA region through its Russian foreign policy, as overseen by the European Bureau of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It shifted its policy in later years to conceptualize CA within the realm of its Asian policy.

In terms of agenda setting for interactions with these states, both countries attempted to build upon the historical heritage of interactions through the Silk Road. As FM Kishida emphasized during the visit to Turkmenistan in May 2017, “For many Japanese people, Central Asia is associated with the Silk Road as it brought Buddhism, which is the basis of the Japanese culture, enriched Japanese culture by introducing civilizational and cultural influences of the West all were communicated through the Silk Road.” For China, this approach aimed at constructing a “win-win” structure of interaction with CA countries along its borders. This principle is not new to Chinese foreign policy, but in the CA context, it has received a warm welcome by CA counterparts.

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who also feared that their relatively small-sized countries would eventually become victims of
great-power politics.\textsuperscript{31}

Japan, however, faced greater challenges in the process of framing a partnership with regional
countries. First, despite historical references to Silk Road connections, Japanese foreign policy
poorly operationalized these connections in a practical sense. It is also well established that
Japan’s policy in Asia often excessively focused on Association of Southeast Asian Nations
(ASEAN) countries.\textsuperscript{32} Thus, the “CA plus Japan” dialogue scheme has been constructed using the
“ASEAN Plus 3” example and the adaptation of that scheme to the conditions to the CA.\textsuperscript{33} Some at
the MOFA and expert community now suggest that this scheme can be used to create a CA ASEAN-
like organization.\textsuperscript{34}

Another challenge in “defining” CA for Japan has been its relatively far proximity from the CA
region, which makes it more difficult for Japanese policy makers to “frame” this region’s import-
tance for Japan. Some scholars suggest that such distance can serve as a competitive advantage as
Japan could emphasize being impartial and committed to in developing the region rather than by
motivated by Japan’s benefits.\textsuperscript{35} As recognized by several diplomats who set up Japanese
embassies in the region, most of the initiatives were achieved spontaneously based on the
enthusiasm and commitments of ambassadors and officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Ministry of Finance and other related agencies. Japanese Ambassador Magosaki recalled how, on
the visit to Uzbekistan, officials of the Ministry of Finance were so touched by the Uzbek Ministry
of Finance officials’ long work hours that it reminded them of the work at the post-war Japanese
ministries and the patriotism of Japanese civil servants in the immediate post-WWII years. Thus,
Ambassador Magosaki recollected that, based on such sympathy, many decisions have been made
to support Uzbek counterparts and Uzbek statehood construction.\textsuperscript{36} Similarly, there were a few
spontaneous attempts to adopt Japanese modes of development in the CA region, for instance, by
exporting the “One village, One product” (OVOP) model of local development that was successfully
implemented in Japan in the 1970s. In particular, this scheme has been introduced in Kyrgyzstan
and in Armenia with varying degrees of success.\textsuperscript{37}

While defining this region remained a problem for Japan, through these seemingly functional
engagements, Japan aimed not only to export its model of development but, more importantly, to
contribute to human resource development in this region. The examples above (e.g., OVOP) also
illustrate how Japanese engagement creates a pattern of interactions which, from a constructivist
perspective, indicates the construction of a collective understanding of norms on how development
is to be achieved.

In terms of engaging this region, China focused on constructing partnerships with states in its
“neighbourhood.” Japan, on the other hand, could not use the notion of “neighbourhood” and
instead used the notion of “open regionalism.” China, as is the case with other states, has

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{32} Dadabaev, “Japan’s search for its Central Asian policy.” Also, see Dadabaev, “Chinese and Japanese foreign policies towards Central Asia from a comparative perspective.”
\bibitem{33} Akio Kawato, “What is Japan up to in Central Asia?” in \textit{Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead}, ed. Christopher Len, Tomohiko Uyama and Tetsuya Hirose (Washington, D.C. and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2008), 16.
\bibitem{34} For details, see “Chouu Ajia hatten no kokusaiteki jyoken to Nihon (Development of Central Asia: International conditions and Japan),” \textit{Gaiko} (Journal edited by MOFA of Japan), 34: 32–33.
\bibitem{35} Christopher Len, Tomohiko Uyama and Tetsuya Hirose (eds.), \textit{Japan’s Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead} (Washington, D. C. and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2008), 111.
\end{thebibliography}
emphasized closed cooperation schemes with neighbouring countries based on respect for non-interference in their sovereignty as the main principle of interaction.38

Such Chinese discourse on non-interference, peaceful coexistence and unwillingness to become expansionary is certainly a form of rhetoric that is not always accepted at face value by the CA states, as a previous reference to rising Sinophobia in CA suggests. Such Chinese rhetoric and visionary language may also be harnessed to match more strategic purposes, as many experts suggest. However, for the time being, this discourse is accepted as official policy in China, and whether China will be able to balance its ambitions in this region with concern for the interests of smaller states remains to be seen.

Japan, however, opted for constructing engagements with this region based on the notion of “open regionalism” due to its distance from this region, its legacy of having a strong economic outreach, Japanese government support for open trade between countries and the prevailing economic objectives in setting Japanese foreign policy priorities. The main values to which the Japanese foreign policy adheres in the process of such regional construction are the “universal values” of democracy, a market economy, the safeguarding of human rights and the rule of law. In addition, much emphasis of regional cooperation in the Japanese efforts is placed on the initiative of CA countries. The Japanese scheme was designed to encourage these states to seek alliances with each other, while Japan would provide technical and financial assistance for such alliances. However, as many in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan conceive, this has been an over-inflated expectation, and there remains a gap in the understanding of the importance of cooperation among CA states.39 In contrast, the Chinese approach to region-building in CA is free of conditions. Moreover, China substitutes liberal Western values with the notion of the Shanghai spirit, as explained in previous sections.

With the recent visit of PM Abe, one can observe that a more goal-oriented, practical approach to cooperation with CA, focused on functionality and the practical outputs of such cooperation, has been prioritized over the value-based approach. This shift may be part of a realization by Japanese leadership that, for CA, the process of democratization is a longer-term objective, while the economic opportunities of cooperation need to be used in the short term. To some extent, the pattern of Japanese interactions in CA in which Japan emphasized the importance of human rights but did not insist on immediate implementation represents the norm when both sides agree on the importance of the values of liberal democracy but also display flexibility in their implementation. This action also signifies a difference between the Japanese approach and those of other liberal democracies. However, focusing on functionality in approaching this region reflects the interests of CA governments and the failure of previous Japanese approaches and is consistent with the general pattern of engagement in CA by other players. China might be more accustomed to such a pragmatic approach, but Japan enjoys a great degree of trust (both from the general public and leadership) in this region. Such trust paired with the new practical approach of Japanese leadership may yield remarkable results.

Interestingly, there is one similarity in “selling” strategies of Chinese and Japanese governments: both countries claim that they are in a position to understand the concerns of developing nations. China has maintained the rhetoric that it is and will remain a developing nation.40 In contrast, Japan, emphasizes that it was a recipient of economic aid before it reached high economic growth.

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39 For an interesting interview with MOFA official on CA plus Japan scheme efficiency, see Makhmudov, “Sengo Nihon no Chuou Ajia Seisaku to Senryaku.”

indicators. However, both have contrasting approaches to the task of engaging CA countries due to differences in their interests, motivations and identities, as described in the section above.

South Korea has the same limitations, with its distant location and lack of transportation infrastructure to and from CA markets, which are somewhat similar to the limitations of Japan. However, South Korean usage of the “Silk Road” rhetoric has a somewhat more practical connotation than Japanese usage. South Korean corporate economic interests were present and more active in the region beginning in the early 1990s, with Daewoo building a major car manufacturing plant in Uzbekistan; in addition, a large number of assembling and manufacturing facilities were built under the Samsung and LG brands in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to locally produce electronics parts. In the early 1990s, the ROK was among the leading investors in this region. In addition to building the car manufacturing plant in Andijan, the ROK has also been involved in setting up a number of enterprises that have built and sustained the Uzbek and Kazakh economies. Among these were the Daewoo Unitel (communications company) and Kabool Textiles (cotton processing and textile production company) plants in Uzbekistan and the Samsung assembly plants in Kazakhstan.

In 2006, Uzbek President Karimov and his Korean counterpart signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership, providing a new framework for ROK investments in Uzbekistan. This paved the way for extraction agreements in 2006 between Korea National Corporation (KNOC) and Uzneftegaz granting KNOC exclusive exploration rights of Chust-Pap and Namangan-Terachi. In 2008, Korean Gas (KOGAS) signed a joint exploitation agreement with Uzneftegas regarding the Surgil gas site. Furthermore, in 2008, the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) signed an agreement with the Uzbek government to purchase of 2,600 tons of uranium. As mentioned above, ROK has also been proactive in transportation infrastructure construction, with Hanjin Group establishing and developing a Navoi logistic hub.

This makes the usage of “Silk Road” branding by the South Korean government a more pragmatic concept than that of Japan, as the South Korean government basically follows the lead of its corporations to secure wider access to the CA markets. The role of the Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is important but often overestimated in this sense. President Lee Myung-bak again visited CA in 2011 and took part in opening several enterprises with South Korean capital. In the same year, the Ministry of Strategy and Finance announced that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will be receiving a packaged cooperation, while other smaller countries of CA will benefit from a deal-to-deal approach. While both China and Japan differentiate between smaller and larger countries in CA, the South Korean approach clearly distinguishes Uzbekistan as the most populous and energy rich and Kazakhstan as the most economically viable and energy endowed countries of the region. South Korea therefore approaches these countries with particular interest. Thus, geographically, the South Korean Silk Road in the CA region largely refers to these two countries, while other countries are attributed lower degrees of interest.

Conclusions

This paper makes certain conclusions from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

First, in terms of theory, this paper argues against positivist (realist and liberalist) interpretations of the engagement strategies of China, South Korea and Japan by suggesting that the Silk Road and its “others” are socially constructed foreign policy agendas that arose from attempts by these states to react to changing foreign and internal environments. These foreign policies are also an


42 For details, see Hwang Bublina, “A New Horizon in South Korea-Central Asia Relations: The ROK joins the ‘Great Game’,” Korea Compass, December 2012, 1–7.

attempt to socially shape the image of “others” to win the hearts and minds of targeted states by demonstrating how the (Chinese, South Korean and Japanese) “self” varies and is much more advantageous than alternative “others.” In contrast to the positivist argument that such social constructs are formed against the common enemy or for a particular political/economic purpose (be it the expansion of Chinese corporate interests or Russian neo-colonialism), this paper argues that these schemes do not have pre-determined goals and aims but rather shape themselves according to changing perceptions and discursive categories of “self,” “threats” and “opportunities.” In addition, CA actors influence how these constructs are shaped by proposing their own visions of what they should be, thus sometimes challenging the visions of greater powers.

Second, when considering international engagement and cooperation schemes, scholars argue that they either develop from ideational commonality or from a practical functionalist logic of benefits and spill-over. In the case of the Silk Road imageries, this paper demonstrated that the engagements envisaged by China, Japan and South Korea are socially constructed schemes that are related to shared norms, values and patterns of identities, in line with constructivist logic. This paper further argues that functionality, pragmatism and the problem-solving focus within these engagements as well as the functionalist spill-over effect do not contradict constructivist explanations but can be regarded as generating norms and common values. States engaging in cooperation engage in certain interactions that can lead to trust, mutual understanding and spill-over into other fields and areas based on the newly emerged sense of common belonging generated from successful problem-solving experiences.

Second, the Silk Road rhetoric is not a defined foreign policy construct; rather, it is an engagement strategy that is easy for a target audience of states to comprehend and thus accept. This rhetoric, partly adopted for its resemblance to the historical trade routes, has a political meaning that is constantly contested by the various actors that choose to adopt it.

Third, one of the most interesting features of China’s OBOR initiative (and its Japanese and South Korean alternatives) is that it features both decolonizing and neo-colonizing potential with respect to CA states. At the same time, Japan and South Korea emphasize only the decolonizing potential of their engagement with the region, thus using the absence of neo-colonizing features (similar to the Chinese ones) from their schemes to obtain a competitive advantage.

Finally, while this paper focuses on the formal rhetoric and “visions” of leaders and top officials to demonstrate the process by which engagements in CA are socially constructed, there is a need to analyse the underlying identity concerns that may appear in other sources and forms of discourse over time. However, this task is beyond the scope of the analysis of the current paper.

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Competing interests

Timur Dadabaev declares that he has no conflict of interest.