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Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia: Successes and failures (1997–2017)

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ABSTRACT

Eurasia has never been one of major directions of Japan's foreign policy, but its importance for Tokyo is growing. This article analyzes its increasing significance to foreign policy of Japan, causes and consequences of this policy's duality and inconsistency. It also studies the reasons for the limited success of Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia and discusses possible prospects for growing Japanese involvement in the region. It concludes that Japan's Eurasian policy is inconsistent and is likely to remain so since the cause behind it remains unchanged – that is, the contradiction between Japan's actual economic interests and its willingness to follow in the ideological and geopolitical footsteps of the U.S. The path Japan takes in the future will largely depend on the economic results of the implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt, its linkage with the plans of the Eurasian Economic Union, the progress of Russian–Chinese cooperation, and the project of Greater Eurasian partnership put forward by Russia and supported by China. If the economic projects of Eurasia's non-Western players prove effective, Tokyo will be more tempted to cooperate with them despite its close ties with the U.S. However, if Eurasia's non-Western states, and particularly China, are overly active with their foreign policy and militaries in the Asia Pacific, it will push Tokyo to create a variety of structures that would curb and serve as a political counterbalance to Chinese and Russian influence.

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Eurasia has never been one of the major directions of Japan's foreign policy, but its importance for Tokyo is growing. In the end of the 20th – beginning on the 21st century, the Japanese government put forward several programs of cooperation with Eurasian region by which it

usually understands the Asian part of the former Soviet Union. However, the effectiveness of these programs was rather limited. The key “big account” on Tokyo's diplomatic agenda in Central Asia, for example, has been Official Development Assistance (ODA) and infrastructure building (Murashkin, 2015a, 2015b). But, according to Timur Dadabaev, “despite the substantial amount of economic aid Japan has poured into the region, Japanese influence remains limited, with several avenues of involvement that are yet to be explored” (Dadabaev, 2016, p. 1).

At the same time there exists a significant interest in Central Asia in intensifying cooperation with Japan as economically prosperous, generous and politically relatively independent player. This interest is growing against the

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background of China's promoting its Belt and Road initiative and Russia and China cooperating in creating the greater Eurasian partnership. This article analyzes the growing importance of Eurasia to Japanese foreign policy, the causes and consequences of that policy's duality and inconsistency. It also studies the reasons for the limited success of Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia and discusses possible prospects for growing Japanese involvement in the region.

Japanese foreign policy is determined by two main factors – its military and political alliance with the United States and the fact that Japan is the most important player in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition to the U.S., Tokyo also places a high priority on its relations with China, the situation on the Korean peninsula, its difficult interactions with Russia, and its ties with ASEAN countries. However, Japanese foreign policy in Eurasia has been gaining importance in recent years as well. This stems from a number of new developments in Eurasia. First is the sharp growth in China's economic and political role as a result of its ambitious Silk Road Economic Belt initiative aimed at creating a new trade route to Europe through its own northwest regions, Russia, and the states of Central Asian – and simultaneously developing the infrastructure of each. Second are Russia's early steps toward implementing news plans for the development of its Asian regions. Third are the infrastructure development initiatives put forward by several regional players, projects such as Kazakhstan's Bright Road, Mongolia's Steppe Road, and others.

Tokyo reacts to these plans by its partners and competitors with a mix of envy and apprehension, and with a desire to gain some benefit from the new projects. Its alliance with the United States pushes it toward some sort of alternative plan to arrest the growing influence of "authoritarian" Russia and China, toward isolating them and pulling the Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India out of their orbit and into the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (essentially, a pro-U.S. coalition). However, the reality of a still stagnant economy dictates that Japan exploit the trade and investment opportunities resulting from the development of Eurasian states to avoid losing out to its more active neighbors, primarily China and South Korea.

Speaking in Tokyo on June 5, 2017, at the 23rd Future of Asia international forum, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that Tokyo was "prepared to expand cooperation" on the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project. He said such cooperation would be conditional upon "harmony with a free and fair Trans-Pacific economic zone" and project infrastructure that all can use and that would be developed through open and fair tenders (Pollmann, 2017). The Japanese media also reported that Tokyo was considering joining another regional structure that China established in 2014 – the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) ("Japan and 'One Belt, One Road'," 2017). News that Shinzo Abe was changing his attitude toward Chinese infrastructure projects in Eurasia stood in sharp contrast to the tensions in Japanese–Chinese relations caused by the conflict in 2012 over sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands.

The Chinese OBOR initiative to create a global transport and investment infrastructure is a combination of two projects, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt. Chinese President Xi

Jinping announced his intention to create a "big family of harmonious coexistence" ("[Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum](#)," 2017), although skeptics see this as a thinly disguised attempt by China to position itself as a great power by investing in strategically important infrastructure projects which, in many cases, are very difficult to implement. For example, construction of a high-speed railway from Jakarta to Bandung in Indonesia would strengthen China's influence in the South China Sea (Azuma & Walker, 2016).

Shinzo Abe made similar proposals following his decision to send Japanese Liberal Democratic Party General Secretary Toshihiro Nikai – who advocates improved relations with China – to a major international conference in Beijing promoting the OBOR project. During his visit with Xi Jinping, Nikai presented the Chinese leader with a message proposing an exchange of visits between the leaderships of the two countries. Xi Jinping, in turn, expressed his desire to improve bilateral ties and noted that the OBOR initiative would serve as "a new platform" for cooperation between China and Japan ("[Japan and 'One Belt, One Road'](#)," 2017).

However, in an October 25, 2017, interview with the Nikkei news agency, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono announced that, during a meeting in Tokyo on November 6, 2017, between U.S. President Donald Trump and S. Abe, the Japanese president planned to offer his U.S. counterpart the creation of a permanent strategic dialogue between the leaders of their countries, plus those of India and Australia, with the aim of establishing a zone of security and safe and free navigation stretching from Asia to Africa. The Foreign Minister said, "We are in an era when Japan has to exert itself diplomatically by drawing a big strategic picture" and that "free and open seas will benefit all countries, including China and its Belt and Road initiative" (Onchi & Hayashi, 2017). Kono also explained that he had discussed the idea of establishing such a format for cooperation with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on the sidelines of a summit in Manila in August of this year. Later, in responding to a Nikkei journalist's question as to whether the group of four countries would be aligned against China, T. Kono avoided denying this outright, noting only the importance of India's participation (Press Conference by Foreign Minister Taro Kono, 2017).

On the whole, the statements by Kono reflected the nature of the Japanese–Chinese rivalry, as did the tour of Central Asian states that the Japanese prime minister made in October 2015 – and that the expert community viewed as an attempt to create a counterbalance to the Chinese OBOR project and the AIIB. As a result of that trip – the first in nine years by a head of the Japanese cabinet to post-Soviet Central Asia – Abe brought back contracts and agreements worth more than \$27 billion. The largest of the public deals was an \$18 billion agreement with Turkmenistan to build plants for natural gas processing and gas and chemicals. The next largest, at \$8.5 billion, was a package of agreements with Tajikistan that includes a contract for the construction of a fertilizer plant, as well as a number of projects related to logistics, telecommunications, and the chemical and extractive industries. The Japanese leader also signed contracts worth up to \$100

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