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India's Role is Key for Including Central Asia in Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Shutaro Sano

Central Asia has become an increasingly important region for the international community including Japan. Tokyo initially pursued bilateral relationships with each of Central Asian country through its "Silk Road Diplomacy" in the late 1990s, but started to strengthen the relationships by initiating the multilateral "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue in 2004. Since then, Japan has strived to become a "catalyst" for regional cooperation that would enable the Central Asian countries to achieve "open, stable and autonomous development." A more developed and secure Central Asia is also expected to provide Tokyo with a reliable alternative source of energy supply such as oil, natural gas and rare earth metals including uranium. Japan's growing acknowledgement of Central Asia was highlighted by Prime Minister Abe's visit in October 2015, when he became the first Japanese leader to visit all five Central Asian countries. Today, Japan's cooperation covers a broad range of areas, including regional security arrangements (nuclear non-proliferation, countering terrorism and narcotics), trade and investment, development (disaster reduction and maternal and child health), and people-to-people and cultural exchanges. Notably, cooperation in energy and socio-economic infrastructure has been the immediate priority for Tokyo as strengthening the connectivity inside and outside Central Asia would enhance overall regional development, thereby promoting stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

Yet Japan's involvement in the landlocked region has been marginal compared to countries such as Russia and China. The gross disbursement of Japan's ODA to the Central Asia and the Caucasus, for instance, has increased over the years, but it accounted for only 2.5 percent of the total ODA in 2015. In this respect, India, which seeks to play a more active role with Japan through the Special Strategic and Global Partnership, has become a promising partner for Tokyo. New Delhi not only shares civilizational heritage with Central Asia from the Mughal period, but also has been more engaged in regional cooperation and security arrangements through its "Connect Central Asia Policy." Indeed, the development of Iran's Chabahar port and Afghanistan's Zaranj-Delaram Highway, in which India played a critical role with the support of Japan, have begun to provide Tokyo and New Delhi valuable access to energy-rich Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan bypassing Pakistan. Furthermore, India's proposal to integrate land routes in Central Asia with the International North-South Transport Corridor, to which Japan could also contribute, would expand the geographical scope of connectivity to include not only Central Asia, Caucasus and South Asia but also Europe.

Shutaro Sano,
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of Japan, explains that "A
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However, Japan's engagement in Central Asia faces challenges. First, Japan needs to balance its policies towards Central Asia and China in a very sensitive manner with India in mind. This is particularly important as Tokyo is now willing to cooperate, under certain conditions, with China's \$1 trillion cross-border infrastructure development project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative, which includes the development of Central Asia, poses considerable challenges to New Delhi, which clearly sees the BRI as part of Beijing's long-term strategy to contain India; notably with the establishment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Furthermore, the dominance of China and the presence of Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) may limit India's role in the organization. Therefore, Tokyo would need to alleviate New Delhi's concerns by, for example, linking its own regional connectivity efforts with the BRI with an aim to strengthen regional integration in the Indo-Pacific as a whole rather than any projects that could be seen as isolating any specific country including India.

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Second, Japan is entering an already-crowded region of competition including regional rivalries such as between Russia and China. So far, China has adroitly refrained from developing an extensive hard security footprint in the region, but the regional imbalance of power has widened significantly in favor of Beijing as China's trade with the five Central Asian countries spiked over the past decade, nearly doubling the amount of Russia's by 2016. Meanwhile, Iran has also become more involved with the region as it reportedly seeks to build a "Persian axis" in the heart of Central Asia as well as to stop the flow of Afghan illegal drugs. Furthermore, the Central Asian countries have not necessarily been on the same page as illustrated by the energy inequality among the regional states as well as by membership in the SCO; in which Turkmenistan refuses to become a member. In light of these events, Japan would need to avoid becoming embroiled in the new "Great Game" which also includes the United States, and continue its low-profile political engagement which has been welcomed by the regional states. Specifically, Japan should exert its effort exclusively in strengthening regional connectivity without developing strategic ambitions in Central Asia. It is also important that Japan continue to refrain from imposing democratic reforms to the Central Asian countries as a condition for economic cooperation.

Third, Japan will need to give considerable attention to the security conditions not only in Central Asia but also in Afghanistan. After gaining membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007, Afghanistan has become a potentially vital economic hub connecting Central and South Asia in trade, transport and energy. Kabul also lies at the center of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program which links markets in 11 countries with six corridors. However, the fight against the Three Evil Forces (terrorism, ethnic separatism and religious extremism) remains a huge challenge for regional integration as well as Japan and India's involvement in Central Asia. Therefore, Japan together with India would need to continue its engagement in Afghan reconstruction and help Kabul fill the security vacuum that may be exploited by armed groups. Meanwhile, Japan and India need to pay substantial attention so that cooperation in Afghanistan will not jeopardize the India-Pakistan relationship.

Given the growing significance of Central Asian, it is essential that Japan strengthen its policy towards the region by seeking greater cooperation with India. Consequently, this will promote Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" which aims to provide assistance to the region's long-term stability and sustainable development. Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" is not just applicable to the vast maritime space, but also to the Eurasian landmass of Central Asia.

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