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For information on annual subscription please contact

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BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND GEOECONOMY – THE SILK ROAD DISCOURSE IN DIPLOMACY OF JAPAN

Slobodan POPOVIĆ¹

Abstract: The main purpose of the paper is to critically analyze the manifestation of the Silk Road discourse in Japanese foreign policy behavior on both diplomatic and practical levels. That will be done through usage of the content method analyses and approaches which stem from critical geopolitics and geoeconomic thoughts. Proposed methodological framework and theoretical approach have been chosen with an aim to attest the general hypothesis of the paper, which is: Japan uses the Silk Road discourse as a tool to improve its geopolitical and geoeconomic position and interconnectivity in the Central Asian region. The first part of the paper will tackle the meaning of discourse as a social construction and its interlacement with strategic moves of foreign policy. This part of the paper will be helpful to understand the reasons why the Silk Road as a social construction and diplomatic discourse possesses enormous importance to Japanese geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies towards the Central Asian region. The second part of the paper will analyze the development of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Central Asian states since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with a focus on multilateral diplomatic initiatives that Japan has triggered and still pursues in the Central Asian space. The third part of the paper will be dedicated to the analyses of infrastructural projects that Japan has implemented in Central Asia. In the Japanese case, those projects express the conditionality between geopolitics and geoeconomy.

Key words: Japan, Central Asia, Silk Road discourse, diplomacy, geopolitics, geoeconomics, interconnectivity, infrastructural projects.

¹ Slobodan Popović, PhD Candidate. University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the analyses of the Japanese version of the Silk Road discourse and its manifestation. Our main focus will be on the Central Asian republics.² The time frame will be the dissolution of the USSR onward. Through this paper, the following questions will be answered. Why is this discourse important regarding Japan's national interests? What kind of changes has this discourse experienced through the time? Why did those changes occur? Why is Central Asia important to Japan in terms of geopolitics and geo-economy? What is the Japanese perception of the Central Asian republics? What is the Japanese perception of the New Great Game? What is the role of the above-mentioned discourse for the Japanese perception of both domestic and international security concept?

Although Japan started much earlier than China to invest in Central Asia with the aim to develop their neglected infrastructure and other types of interconnectivity, academia was more biased towards analyzing Chinese interests in that region.³ Consequently, Japanese geo-economic and geopolitical influence among the Central Asian states as a scientific category among scholars is unjustly undervalued, downplayed, overlooked, under-researched and defined as a 'newcomer'. Asia is not Sino-centric, yet, it is multipolar. Japan, as an independent state and until recently the first Asian economy and the main American ally in Asia, is trying to reinforce its influence in regional security architecture, especially now with Abe's Doctrine and *Abenomics* as the official politics (Mitrović, 2015). It is quite expected that Japan will try to boost its advantages and to soften disadvantages when it positions itself in Central Asia, especially in sectors which it defined as strategically important. But, it is familiar that advantages and disadvantages are two faces of god Janus. In this concrete case, geography, history and balance of power can be underlined. Japan and the Central Asian states do not share a common border. History does not record Japanese expansionist and militaristic intentions towards the Central Asian states. Some scholars, but also Japanese politicians, used these geographic, strategic and historical facts to emphasize that Japanese actions towards Central Asia are not motivated by traditional selfish and geopolitical interests. Contrarily, they represent Japanese efforts to boost economic, infrastructural, social and

² Central Asia has been chosen as a spatial part of the paper due to the fact that Japan under the administration of Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro was trying to implement the above-mentioned discourse amongst ASEAN member states. The main tool was the New Asian Industries Development Plan (New AID), (Marushkin, 2018)

³ Since the 90s Japan has been presented in Central Asia through Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC). Besides Central Asian and other former Soviet Republics, the Program included Xinjiang, Mongolia, Pakistan (Paramanov, Puzanova, 2018; Moore, 2013).

educational power of the ex-Soviet republics.⁴ But, it would be very naïve if one state invested money abroad without any aims regarding national interests. Japan through diplomacy, geopolitical and geoeconomic initiatives, succeeded to obtain support from the Central Asian republics to become possibly a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Furthermore, those states supported the Japanese view on the North Korean nuclear weaponry issue. Also, Japan imposed itself as the first buyer of Central Asian uranium. Besides historical and geographical factors, Japanese strategies towards Central Asia are also shaped by the balance of power in this part of the ex-Soviet Union. In addition to the Russian traditional presence, China is emerging on both bilateral and multilateral levels and in both geopolitics and geoeconomy. Aside for Chinese and Russian influence, Japan faces the influence of Turkey, India, America, the European Union (UN) and recently South Korea in Central Asia. Through the Silk Road discourse, Japan is seeking to obtain better position amongst the Central Asian countries as an independent state or a suitable partner to states that have similar or even different geopolitical and geoeconomic intentions and strategies towards the same region.

DISCOURSE, GEOPOLITICS AND GEOECONOMICS

According to Timur Dadabaev, the notion of the Silk Road has changed from the static concept of a historical trade route into a product of social construction upon which various states have built their relations with the Central Asian region and beyond. Thus, the Silk Road as a term has come to represent the various CA engagement strategies of a number of powerful states – strategies that are constantly shaped, imagined and socially constructed (Dadabaev, 2017, p. 32). Furthermore, according to Nikolay Murashkin, the New Silk Road's definition has been ambiguous, both in terms of function and geography. Functionally, the post-Cold War discourse on NSR initially focused on the politics of international oil and gas pipelines and then shifted to connectivity, transport and logistics in a broader sense. Geographically, NSR initially designated CA and was sometimes extended to the Caucasus (including in

⁴ The unselfishness of Japanese involvement in Central Asia was accentuated by former Foreign Minister Kawaguchi, when she gave a speech, *Adding a New Dimension: Central Asia plus Japan*, on August 26, 2004, at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent. Namely, she said, "I can tell you emphatically that Japan has no selfish objectives towards Central Asia. A country that does not engage in the use of force and a country with no political, territorial or other potential sources of conflict with the countries of Central Asia, Japan is a natural partner for Central Asia, and the foundation has already been laid. In a reflection of Central Asia's geopolitical importance, Japan has a major interest in securing peace and stability in this region, as it affects the peace and stability of the entire Eurasian continent" (Takeshi, 2007, p. 80).

Japanese diplomatic rhetoric) and to South Asia (SA) (Murashkin, 2018, p. 457). It is becoming more obvious that the Silk Road discourse has been socially constructed and then used as an engine to promote its geopolitical and geoeconomic influence amongst the Central Asian republics. In line with that, states which have the Silk Road discourse within its foreign policy manifest are trying to impose developmental models, institutional arrangements, soft power ideas within this space (Junbo, 2018, Stanojević, 2016, Janković, 2016). That is also the case with the Japanese Silk Road discourse. This is why it could be presupposed that, under the “catchword” of the Silk Road discourse and overlapping of the new and old security interests, Central Asia is becoming, once again, a field of the New Great Game.

Perceiving the Silk Road discourse as a bridge between ideas and strategies and as a bridge between states and the Central Asian region will be our theoretical base. In line with that, our theoretical approach will be based on the traditions which stem from geoeconomic thoughts and critical geopolitics. Discourse is the platform of critical geopolitics. This kind of geopolitics argues that geopolitical thinking must include discursive practice. That is induced by changes brought by the different position of media and military within the context and usage of hard and soft power. The security of one state is a very complex puzzle composed of the traditional and non-traditional set of challenges. Besides territorial sovereignty, it presupposes energy, economic, food, technological and social security. Thus, providing security just by traditional geopolitical tools is obsolete and non-sufficient, and in the case of Japan – not possible. Thus, geopolitics, some will argue, is the first and foremost about practice and not discourse; it is about actions taken against other powers, about invasions, battles and deployment of military force (Tuathail, Agnew, 1992, p. 90). Geopolitical influence can be achieved by discursive and diplomatic practices, boosted by strategic and geoeconomic initiatives which will be demonstrated by the Japanese case. In that sense, without geoeconomic resources and carefully selected diplomatic discourses, Japanese geopolitical influence amongst the Central Asian states would not be possible. This gives us insight that geopolitics and geoeconomics are inseparable and mutually intertwined. Geoeconomics is a very useful tool for obtaining geopolitical *raison d’être*, without or evading the usage of military means (Blackwill, Harris, 2016). This can help us to understand why the Silk Road as a social construction and diplomatic discourse possesses enormous importance to Japanese geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies towards the Central Asian region.

JAPANESE “SILK” DIPLOMATIC SEARCH FOR CENTRAL ASIA

Analyzing Japanese Diplomatic Bluebook 2018, it can be understood that the Central Asian republics have a very important geopolitical and geostrategic position because they connect Asia, Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. The stability of these states influences the stability of the whole region. According to the above-mentioned document, Japan is supporting the “open, stable and self-sustainable development” of Central Asia, which is geopolitically important and is promoting the development-support diplomacy with the objective of contributing to the peace and stability of the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Japan is confirming that the Central Asian region is obtaining high value in its Panoramic Respective of the World Map (Mitrović, 2013).

Japan’s bilateral diplomacy towards the Central Asian space begins after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁵ Namely, after the end of the Cold War, five independent Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - were pushed to pursue the independent foreign, security and economic policy. That was a great challenge, but also an opportunity for Japan. At the very beginning, Japan mixed two approaches. On the one side, Japanese understanding of the Central Asian space was influenced by `wait-and-see` what would happen approach (Ferguson, 2007). But, at the same time, the end of the Cold War encouraged a rebirth of “Japan`s Asian Policy” with a change in the international environment during the 1990s (Takeshi, 2007, p. 68). This mixture, as an interpretation of inconsistency of the Japanese administrations, triggered the question whether Japan had a coherent and well-planned long-term strategy towards the region or its diplomatic initiatives were primarily aimed at short-term political objectives defined by each new prime minister? (T. Dadabaev, 2013, p. 513).

⁵ According to data available on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, official Tokyo established diplomatic relations with three Central Asian states on January 26, 1992, only exceptions were Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. With these states Japan established bilateral relations in February and April 1992, respectively. Embassies, also, were not opened in the same period. For example, the Embassy of Japan opened in Bishkek on January 27, 2003. The Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic opened in Tokyo in on April 22, 2004. With Kazakhstan, diplomatic relations were established on the same date, but the embassies were opened earlier. Namely, the Japanese Embassy in Kazakhstan was opened on January 20, 1993. The Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan opened in Tokyo on February 22, 1996. Regarding Uzbekistan, Japan opened its Embassy in Tashkent in January 1993. Uzbekistan opened the Embassy in Tokyo in February 1996. Japan opened the Embassy in Ashgabat in January 2005. Turkmenistan opened the Embassy in Japan in May 2013. Japan opened the Embassy in Dushanbe on January 26, 2002. The Republic of Tajikistan opened the Embassy in Tokyo on November 28, 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan).

The first noticeable change in Japan–Central Asia relations occurred when Obuchi Keizo paid a visit to Russia, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan from June 28 to July 9, 1997. In the history of Japanese diplomacy, this was known as the *Obuchi Mission*. The main goals were to discuss the development of Japanese–Russian relations with their Russian counterparts in Russia, especially within the framework of the Asia-Pacific perspective and to visit four Central Asian countries to discuss with leading figures the development of relations between Japan and these countries, seeking a future of cooperative relations (Takeshi, 2007, p. 70). The Obuchi Mission report was the platform for Eurasian diplomacy initiated by Hashimoto Ryutaro (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1997).⁶ Later, this diplomatic initiative as the first one with so wide geographic realm after World War II was supported by the Silk Road Action Plan. This Plan, released in 1998, was a product of joint efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Eurasian diplomacy proposed three areas of engagement in Central Asia: strengthening political dialogue, providing economic and natural resource development assistance, and cooperation in facilitating regional democratization and stabilization (Dadabaev, 2013, p. 515). This was also part of the ‘Krasnoyarsk Process’, previously developed during the G8 Summit in Denver. According to Togo Kazuhiko, Hashimoto’s Eurasian diplomacy can be boiled down to a single strategic principle, to draw Russia into the Asia Pacific and introduce a new regional dynamic that would give Japan more room to maneuver vis-à-vis China and the United States. In the process, he meant to resolve the single biggest outstanding issue in Japanese international relations: the territorial dispute with Russia over the Northern Territories, four islands north of Hokkaidō seized by the Soviet forces in the final days of World War II (Kazuhiko, 2014). Anyway, this diplomatic initiative did not achieve great success, although it was expected very much from it. Oleg Paramanov and Olga Puzanova said that ‘Hashimoto’s Eurasian Doctrine’ did not live up to the high hopes it engendered in the world community. Never a fully developed concept, the doctrine was purely public and declarative in nature (Paramanov, Puzanova, 2018, p. 137). The reasons for that could also be found in Japanese geographical and strategic focusing on the East Asian region.⁷ Besides that, the reason could be

⁶ But even before these initiatives, Togo Kazuhiko, then deputy director general of the Department of European and Oceanic Affairs, had realized the geopolitical importance of the Caucasus and Central Asia and proposed that Japan should not fall behind in filling the vacuum in this region. It was argued that Japan’s clout there would benefit her diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, China, and the Middle East, even if there was little specificity about what benefits actually might be realized. (Kawato, 2007, p. 230).

⁷ Even Hashimoto Ryutaro emphasized that the basic objective of Japan’s foreign policy is to maintain the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region (Kantei, 1997).

the Japanese blurry bureaucracy, especially the sector for relations with the Central Asian region.⁸ In addition, many scholars emphasize the Asian financial crises from 1997 and the murder of a Japanese UN observer and political advisor, Akino Yutaka, in Tajikistan.⁹ Also, according to Yuasa Takeshi, Eurasian diplomacy was not, after all, an everlasting concept. Although it adapted positively during the Hashimoto administration and its successor the Obuchi administration (from July 30, 1998 to April 5, 2000), the chance of presenting the concept as a specific direction of Japanese foreign policy decreased with time, while the Krasnoyarsk Process failed to meet the deadline to conclude the bilateral peace treaty (Takeshi, 2007, p. 74).

Furthermore, Japanese strategic thinking towards Central Asia was questioned once again when China initiated the SCO and the USA announced the war on terror. At the same time, Japan faced great challenges and opportunities. Regarding the SCO and the `Shanghai Spirit`, Japan understood that it was promoting Western fateful values such as democracy, human rights, market economy, and did not offer anything from its rich history and tradition (Paramanov, Puzanova, 2018). At the same time, Japan used the war on terror to change some laws regarding the deployment of the military. As Peter Katzenstein notices, after the 9/11 attacks the Diet passed legislation, in record time, permitting the dispatch of the Japanese navy to the Indian Ocean to provide logistical support for the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. After the US invasion of Iraq, the Diet enacted legislation permitting the deployment of the Japanese army to Iraq to aid in reconstruction, and the stationing of the Japanese navy and air force in the Persian Gulf to provide logistical support for the American war. In 2003 the Japanese government agreed to acquire a ballistic missile defense system which should be fully operational by 2011. And legislation introduced in 2005 gave the prime minister and the military commanders the power to mobilize military force in response to missile attacks without cabinet deliberation or parliamentary oversight (Katzenstein, 2008, p. 15). As it is known, America used the war on terror to widen and boost its military presence on a global level, which by its geographic realm included Central Asia as well. Namely, the Bush administration established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

⁸ The proposal to transfer Central Asian diplomacy from the European Affairs Bureau (called the “European and Oceanian Affairs Bureau” until 2001) to the Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau was rejected. (Tomohiko, 2008, p. 107).

⁹ As additional factor Timur Dadabaev appends the deficiency in Japanese governments’ information gathering and crisis-management capacity in and with regard to Central Asia became obvious when, in 1999, several Japanese geologists were taken hostage in Kyrgyzstan; this put Japan in a very difficult situation with very few options (Dadabaev, 2011, p. 446).

This could be a very good reason that Japan enriched its Silk Road discourse by military and security means.

However, Japan continued to develop relations with Central Asia mainly through financial means, building the “peak” of relations. In July 2002, the Japanese government organized the Silk Road Energy Mission headed by Sugiura Seiken. This was based on a speech that Junichiro Koizumi gave on the Boao Forum on April 12, 2002. Koizumi wanted to use the possibilities offered by the Central Asian geographical position and mineral richness. From 2002 onward, Japanese diplomacy towards Central Asia was enriched with the “Silk Road Energy Mission”. This mission was comprised of Japanese industry, government and academic experts, to encourage further cooperation between Japan and Central Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2002).

Department for Central Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, run by Michii Rokuichiro, in 2003 expressed the will to improve relations with the region. After the strategic calculations, Yoriko Kawaguchi paid a visit to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The result of this visit was establishing of the “Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue” (Dialogue) in 2004. But, Japan faced an obstacle stemming from the rivalry between the Central Asian republics. Namely, both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan expected from Japan to recognize them as the region’s leading economic and political states. Their rivalry forced Japanese diplomats to announce the scheme in Uzbekistan but to hold the first meeting in Kazakhstan, satisfying the ambitions of both countries (T. Dadabaev, 2013, p. 512). In line with that, the first meeting was held in Astana on August 24, 2004. Up to now, within the Dialogue, six Foreign Minister Meetings were held. However, the predicted schedule of having meetings every two years did not come to life, that is, the member parties did not follow it. It seems that the member states do not perceive the Dialogue as an important asset in foreign policy. Also, it can be perceived that member states are not yet sure about cooperation fields. Thirdly, they presumably want to boost bilateral relations with Japan, and in line with that the Dialogue is just a “plan B”.

During the first meeting, three main principles of cooperation were defined. They are following: respect diversity, competition and coordination and open cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2004). Also, five main areas of cooperation were defined: strengthening of peace, stability, and democracy in the Central Asian region; strengthening of the region’s economic foundations, promotion of reform and the social development of the region, including the correction of intra-regional disparities; strengthening of intra-regional cooperation by the Central Asian countries; maintenance and development of good relations between Central Asia and neighboring regions as well as with the international community; cooperation between Japan and Central Asia with

respect to both regional issues and issues having international dimensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2004).

The second meeting was held in Japan in 2006. Intra-regional cooperation, stabilization of Afghanistan, fighting terrorism, drug smuggling, cross-border organized criminals and appeasing the consequences of natural disasters and improving the Central Asian sectors, such as agriculture and water resource management, were re-emphasized. Representatives of Afghanistan were also the participants of this meeting. Afghanistan shares borders with the Central Asian republics, therefore, Japan wanted to become proactive in achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan. Representatives of the member states discussed possible ways to include Turkmenistan without breaking his policy of neutrality (UN, 2017). The main result of the second Meeting was the adoption of the Action plan. The Plan specified more clearly five areas of cooperation and emphasized the importance of interconnectivity through infrastructural projects (Paramanov, Puzanova, 2018). Here, it is important to accentuate that in the same year, 2006, Taro Aso, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan gave the speech known as *Central Asia as a Corridor of Peace and Stability*. Through this initiative Japan, once again, denied the recognition of the New Great Game. Japan recognized 'open regionalism' among the Central Asian states as a platform for collaboration based on the three following guidelines: approach region from a broad-based perspective; support for "Open Regional Cooperation"; seeking partnership rooted in holding universal values in common (Aso, 2006). The main intention of Japan was to give the opportunity to act independently in foreign policy. Japan cannot allow Central Asia to be tossed about by or forced to submit to the interests of outside countries as a result of the New Great Game. The leading role must be played by non-other than the countries of Central Asia themselves (Aso, 2006, p. 491). In another speech, the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" that Aso gave on March 12, 2007, for the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Japan Forum of International Relation INC., Central Asia was once again highly ranked. Namely, Aso wanted to create an Arc from Northern Europe, crossing the Baltic States, Central and Eastern Europe, then through the Caucasus and Central Asia, with rays through Afghanistan, India, Turkey and the Islamic nations of the Middle East. Moreover, the Arc continues farther to the north and east (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007). Quite understandable and predictable, China raised the question of containment strategy. Even in this initiative, Japan was still insisting on the universal Western values as the best choice for Central Asia.

The third meeting was held in Tashkent on August 7, 2010. The meeting was held in working and stimulating atmosphere with the aim to ameliorate, deepen and widen the cooperation between Japan and Central Asia. For the first time, there was the representative of Turkmenistan. It was Soltan

Pirmuhamedov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkmenistan to the Republic of Uzbekistan. During the meeting, delegates of the member states analyzed achieved results and introduced new developmental plans. They also discussed security, economic, cultural and political situation on both regional and global levels. At the meeting, a consensus was built that a permanent dialogue among the countries in the region was crucial for regional stability and prosperity. In this regard, the delegates shared the view that they would hold a Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) annually within the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue" and utilize the meeting as a forum to exchange views in a timely manner (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010). Also, during the meeting delegates agreed to organize Japan-Central Asia Economic Forum as a supplementary tool for promoting economic cooperation, the flow of goods, capitals, ideas, and peoples between Japan and this region.

The fourth meeting was held in Tokyo in 2012. But, on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, there is no information about it.

The fifth meeting of the Dialogue was held in Bishkek on July 17, 2014. For the first time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan participated. This meeting was also the 10th anniversary of the Dialogue. During the meeting, Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fumio Kishida, presented Japan's vision of the development of the Dialogue for "the next 10 years". He stated that he was very proud to sign the Joint Declaration, which included words and ideas such as "proactive contribution to peace" based on the principle of international cooperation and the importance of a peaceful solution of conflicts on the basis of international law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). Besides the Joint Declaration, delegates also signed the Road Map for Cooperation in Agriculture. Nevertheless, delegates underlined the importance of the Action Plan adopted on the second meeting of the Dialogue.

In 2015 Abe announced a new vision for achieving interconnectivity in Asia, mainly by Japanese export, as a part of Abenomics.¹⁰ Namely, on May 21, 2015, Abe unveiled the plan for infrastructural development of Asia. This infrastructural promotion was based on Partnership for Quality Infrastructure – Investments for Asia's Future. In the first phase of this plan, Japan pledged \$110 billion, which would be invested in high-quality infrastructure during the next five years (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015a). However, it was understandable that Japan was facing the fiercest competition from China. In the same year, Japanese Prime Minister visited all five Central Asian republics

¹⁰ For Japanese infrastructure companies, overseas markets are still unexplored territory," Tadashi Maeda said. "The government and other public bodies need to get involved in individual projects to promote cooperation between the public and private sectors" to increase infrastructure exports (Nikkei, Asian Review, 2016).

and stated that Japanese diplomacy towards Central Asia was based on the following principles: dramatic strengthening of bilateral relationships; involvement in efforts to resolve challenges common to the countries in the region; and partnership on the global stage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017). During this visit, Abe accentuated instead of value-oriented diplomacy the importance of economic development and social stability. Abe was eager to promote a more goal-oriented practical approach to cooperation with CA. Focus on functionality and the practical outputs has been prioritized over the value-based approach (Dadabaev, 2017, p. 35). The result of the visit was signing the contracts and agreements worth more than \$27 billion. As it was planned, Partnership for Quality Infrastructure was gaining the momentum. Contracts were mainly focused on the energy sector, telecommunications, logistical support and modernizing the existing infrastructure or development of new – railways, pipelines, high-ways (Paramonov, Puzanova, 2018). After that, official Tokyo established Japan Infrastructure Initiative Company Limited in 2017. The main shareholders were Hitachi Capital Corporation 47.55%, Mitsubishi UFJ Lease & Finance CO., Ltd 47.55% and MUFG Bank Ltd 4.90% (Japan Infrastructure Initiative). Support for public-private partnerships also stemmed from Japan Bank for International Cooperation, the Nippon Export and Investment Insurance and Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Cooperation for Transport and Urban Development. By establishing all these institutions, Abe was trying to transmute the geoeconomic strength into geopolitical power. In Japanese terms, Abe was trying to connect Abenomics with Abe's Doctrine. But, transformation and connection are limited due to the American security umbrella, new Chinese influence and the traditional Russian presence amongst the Central Asian states.

The sixth meeting of the Dialogue took place in Ashgabat on May 1st, 2017. Participants signed the Joint Statement which tackled the North Korean unpredictable situation, terrorism, cross-border organized crime, and Japanese intentions to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The above-mentioned Partnership influenced the meeting. Participants signed the Roadmap for Regional Cooperation in Transport and Logistics, which consolidated cooperation in the transport and logistics field, the direction of further cooperation, and specific projects based on the belief that strengthening mutual connectivity inside and outside the region would contribute to regional development. Minister Kishida came out with the Initiative for Cooperation in Transport and Logistics on the basis of which Japan would undertake concrete cooperation in this field, and based on it, he announced that Japan would provide approximately 24 billion yen of assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017a). The meeting was also colored by the statement of Shinzo Abe at the 23rd International Conference on the Future of Asia that Japan might contribute

to BRI as an inter-continental infrastructure blueprint of development, but under certain conditions (The Japan Times, 2017; Pollmann, 2017, Chotani, 2017, Nagy, 2018).

Besides Foreign Ministers` Meeting, the Central Asia plus Japan Economic Forum and Senior Officials Meeting, within the Dialogue exist other sub-mechanisms such as Intellectual Dialogue (Tokyo Dialogue), the Meeting of Experts, and the Exchange between Foreign Ministers.

THE SILK ROAD DISCOURSE IN PRACTICE – JAPANESE GEOPOLITICS AND GEOECONOMICS IN CENTRAL ASIAN REGION

The main purpose of the Silk Road discourse as a geopolitical, diplomatic, geoeconomic and practical concept is to boost the economy, people-to-people and ideas exchange through interconnectivity. One way of creating interconnectivity is to develop infrastructure among countries. Infrastructural development is also one of Japan's foreign policy goals. In order to respond to infrastructure demands mainly in emerging countries and promote infrastructure exports by Japanese companies, a "Ministerial Meeting on Strategy Relating to Infrastructure Export and Economic Cooperation," consisting of relevant cabinet ministers with the Chief Cabinet Secretary serving as chair, was established within the Cabinet Secretariat in 2013. This approach is thoroughly presented in Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook 2017. Since then, a total of 28 meetings has been held as of the end of 2016, to focus on individual issues, including specific countries and regions, railways, and information communication, in addition to discussing the laying down of "Strategy for Exporting Infrastructure Systems" and following up on them, with the aim of strengthening qualitative and quantitative support through expansion of the risk-money supply, the speeding up of yen loans, expansion of targets for overseas loans and investments, implementing of strategic PR (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017b, p. 310).

When it comes to the Dialogue, infrastructural development was emphasized on many occasions and documents. The Action plan stressed the Dialogue. The fourth Tokyo dialogue was named "Future Improvements to Logistics Infrastructure in the Central Asia Region". Also during the latest, i.e. the 12th Senior Official Meeting held in Dushanbe on 26 January 2018, the importance of transportation and logistical support was underlined (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018).

Infrastructural projects are financed by ODA programs, ADB injection of capital, Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), through CAREC and

many other financial institutions and funds. But, among those institutions, projects and areas are overlapping. For example, CAREC demonstrated impressive progress between 1997 and the mid-2010s, evolving from the initial idea of improving regional cooperation between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (ADB 1998) to six fully-fledged connectivity corridors among ten countries. The corridors are both latitudinal (East-West, including China—similarly to GMS) and longitudinal (North-South, including Afghanistan and Pakistan). Regarding infrastructural connectivity, CAREC adopted two main strategies - Railway strategy and Road safety strategy (CAREC). Nevertheless, similar strategies were adopted by ODA. The CAREC's corridors exhibit a degree of similarity with the subsequently launched Silk Road, Economic Belt (2013-present). The similarities between CAREC and more recent BRI disprove the interpretation of Japan's recent infrastructural initiatives as purely catching up with China's (Murashkin, 2018, p. 464). Also, according to the data available on the CAREC site, ADB, CAREC and the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) have developed the Hasan Abdal-Havelin Expressway (E-35). That is a part of Pakistan economic corridors which was jointly developed by ADB and DFID (ADB, 2017). Furthermore, JBIC pledged to invest \$2 billion in the port of Turkmenbashi. According to the investment agreement and plan, new shipyards, terminals and additional port infrastructure will be included within the port's construction. The project forms an important part of the Turkmenistan government's strategy to create new high-capacity regional transport infrastructure (Port Technology, 2015). This can be very important for Japan for three main reasons. Firstly, Japan can export infrastructure, 'know-how' and modern technologies. From the other side, Turkmenistan is very rich in natural gas, thus Japan can ease the dependence on the Middle Eastern sources where America dictates the conditions of extractions and conveyance (Mitrović, 2005). Finally, this can be a new chapter in Sino-Japanese cooperation or competition, regarding Chinese and Japanese intentions for regional and global orders.

Tetsuro Fukuyama, State Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Japan, stated that Japan through ODA programs implemented numerous projects in the Central Asian region. He underlined renovation, modernization, and enhancing the capacities of airports in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, railway constructions, according to him, were adjusted to geographical and strategic features of landlocked Central Asia. Regarding the fact that railway shipping constitutes 80 to 90% of ground transportation, Japan supported railway construction project in the area between Tashguzar and Kumkurgan in Uzbekistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010a).¹¹ Besides railways,

¹¹ The modernization of railway network in Uzbekistan is part of two broader programs known as Railway Rehabilitation Project and Railway Modernization project financed by ADB (ADB, 2010).

ODA programs were also focused on the road infrastructure. In line with that Japanese capital was a big part in the renovation of the road from Bishkek to Osh and the Kok-Art River Bridge on it. The effects were visible in revitalizing north-south passage in Kyrgyzstan, which had been hindered by treacherous mountains. Moreover, a renovation project on the West Kazakhstan road that runs east-west through the country has contributed to smooth distribution in the country's expansive land area. This route is positioned to connect Central Asia with Russia and Europe, and it also functions as a distribution route to neighboring countries. From this viewpoint, promoting efforts towards constructing a Central Asia "Southward Route" in parallel with efforts towards stability in Afghanistan is critical to the continued stability and development of the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010a, Official Development Assistance by Region – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). It can be underlined that through the Silk Road discourse the infrastructural connectivity will move from individual projects, scattered throughout the region, to the more integrated system of projects spread through the entire region (Janković, 2016, p. 7).

Building and enhancing the infrastructural network is a big part of Japanese efforts to create the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity and to position Central Asia as a Corridor of Peace. Consequently, Central Asia in Japanese discursive perception is defined as a gateway, instead as a shatter belt.¹²

CONCLUSION

Japan wants to establish a double impact on the Central Asian states both in geoeconomy and geopolitics. Simultaneously, Japan is an example of how diplomatic and discursive initiatives supported by geoeconomic resources and strategic thinking can produce beneficial geopolitical influence. Still, Japan has to be more cautious while selecting projects which it will implement in the Central Asian republics. The projects should be based on the needs of both sides, bilaterally or multilaterally, because the improper identification of the field of cooperation will make Japanese involvement less effective despite the scale of the financial resources that may be committed for such projects (Dadabaev, 2008, p. 133).

Introducing *Abenomics* and Abe's Doctrine, Japan changed its course. Namely, from value-oriented diplomacy, official Tokyo started to pursue a pragmatic and functionalistic approach amongst the Central Asian states. As a result, the Silk

¹² According to operational definitions shatterbelt is strategically oriented region that are both deeply divided internally and caught up in the competition between great powers of the geostrategic realms. Gateway states play a novel role in linking different parts of the world by facilitating the exchange of peoples, goods, and ideas. (Cohen, 2008, pp. 48-54).

Road discourse instead of enhancing the Western system of values, such as democracy and human rights, is now more biased towards pragmatic, goal-oriented and Asian business and political practice. Japan understood that through a more pragmatic Silk Road discourse, it would achieve stronger geopolitical, geoeconomic, diplomatic and security influence amongst Central Asian academia, public policy makers and citizenship as well.

In essence, Japanese stronger influence within Central Asia can promote this region more as a geopolitical gateway rather than a shatter belt. The confirmation that Japan perceives Central Asia as a gateway, we can also find in myriads of documents released by Japan or signed with the Central Asian republics. Here we can underline Central Asia as a Corridor of Peace and Stability, the Roadmap for Regional Cooperation in Transport and Logistics, Future Improvements to Logistics in the Central Asian Region and important position of Central Asia within Japanese endeavors to create the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity. The latest confirmation represents the Japanese initiative known as the *Asian Gateway Initiative* whose main geographical scope overlaps with the Central Asian space (Kantei, 2007). It is understandable that official Japan wants to stabilize and enhance the position of the Central Asian republics and the Japanese position amongst them through geoeconomic means. Furthermore, Japan showed us that for geopolitical influence military means are not necessary. It can be achieved through carefully selected and implemented diplomatic initiatives, reinforced by geoeconomic power and interconnectivity projects. In other words, the Silk Road discourse represents the nexus between domestic capital accumulation and intentions to accumulate overseas geopolitical influence through geoeconomic means.

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