РЕЦЕНЗИИ

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Japan between China and Russia in Central Asia: Balancing, pragmatism, and cooperation*

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There is currently a great deal of spilt ink and televisual/internet airtime being committed to the question of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's rise, whether it will be peaceful or conflictual, whether the BRI is the exemplar of China's new infrastructure-based empire, and on, and on, occupies many international relations analysts and general observers. Many come laden with conflict underpinning assumptions of a new Cold War, an East Asia turned into tumult, and the usual need for Western nations to impose a new Truman-esque Containment strategy. What many of them do not consider is whether we have seen this before or not.

That is not what Nikolay Murashkin has done. In his book — *Japan and the New Silk Road: Diplomacy, Development and Connectivity* — Murashkin aims to highlight how Japan's relations with Central Asia (CA) between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, interesting and important though they are in their own right, demonstrate how China's capital and infrastructure plans run very akin to what Japan has been doing since the end of World War Two. China's BRI commitments to Central Asia are huge, and the Eurasian BRI section represents the geo-economic bridge north-west between China and south-south-Western Russia, west across the Caspian Sea into Turkey and further afield into Europe, and south-west into Afghanistan and Iran. This is why this book is such an important topic of focus. But Japan has also regularly forwarded such grand visions, from the Asian Highway Network to various Southeast Asia corridor-based frameworks. Indeed, has also been keen on developing infrastructure in Central Asia. Japan may have had its heyday in

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the 1980s when everyone wanted to study Japanese management and kanji characters, but Japan did not retreat into a cave and adopt a reactive foreign policy. Far from it, Japan has been active in the region building politico-economic connections. So, it is a welcome book that attempts to bring Japan's international relations back into the world of proactivity and strategic thinking that China often models its own activities on.

Equally as myopic and ahistorical from many observers is the simplistic view many have of Japan's foreign policy. Dominated by definitions of security based on military capacity and of the apparently in-built conflict laden into international relations, we see endless commentary of 'competition' and 'conflict' between great powers such as Japan and China while ignoring the many examples of cooperation. This is due (a) to the fact that many do not focus on security defined by economic power, which is how most international relations operate day-today, and (b) that many do not understand Japan's history, institutions, and personalities that operate its foreign policy. This author aims to dissolve these assumptions too. With a combination of Japan-specialist knowledge of history and institutions coupled with extensive field work elite interviewing, the author reveals in this book how and why Japan's relations with Central Asia have shifted over the past three decades, and why there is no sharp-ended Kipling-esque 'Great Game' going on in Central Asia.

It is this oscillation between proactivity and reactivity that motivates Murashkin. Why is it that Japan's interest in CA waxes and wanes? The author's assumption is that structural conditions, domestic and international, are what guide these shifts. Japan's oscillation in approach to CA from the late 1990s till today is one of adaptation to circumstances. The author's five-point argument is: (1) Japan's CA policy largely results from the activity of three of its ministries (MOF, METI, and MOFA) coupled with the geopolitical climate; (2) where domestic politics has an impact on foreign policy in CA, it is due to lack of expertise rather than ideology; (3) domestic politics in CA, particular the shifting class and patrimonial networks, are a major factor behind stagnation in relations; Japan cannot do whatever it wants; (4) development finance and the role of Japan's Ministry of Finance are crucial and under-explored in the literature, particularly development finance in the area of infrastructure; and (5) structural factors are more important to understanding Japan's foreign policy in CA than individuals, eg: what China or Russia are doing.

Murashkin's approach is informed by a balanced neo-Realist logic but with significant Japan Studies case study expertise, with a slight tinge of Criticality throw-in. Keohane and Cox complimented each other well in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, and there is no problem bringing together neo-Realism and Critical political-economy. He blends together actors, institutions, and finance to tease out Japan-CA relations, methodologically informed through a great deal of field work and elite interviewing in Japan and the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan); although there is a leaning more on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan it seems.

From this argument and approach the author challenges many key assumptions. First, that Japan's interests are neo-mercantilist, competitive, and suspicious of its neighbours. Rather, there is a good deal of cooperation and pragmatism as evidenced through CA. Second, that Japan is reactive and passive in foreign policy. Rather, Japan shows a good deal of anticipation, forward thinking, and planning. So much so that Japan can be regarded as laying the groundwork for China's current BRI mega-project framework.

Third, that Japan acts as unitary monolith. Rather, there are various competing bureaucratic interests in Japan and these policy entrepreneurs are crucial. The author's extensive interviewing really pulls these voices out. Fourth, that Japan is beholden to the US. Rather, Japan in CA shows a considerable degree of latitude and a different approach to the US and the West generally. Fifth and finally, that military relations are the prime lend through which to interpret international relations in CA and Asia generally. Rather, economic relations especially development finance and infrastructure, are preferable mediators for understanding how Japan and other states relate to each other.

The book proceeds across the themes of diplomatic history (45 pages), party politics (25 pages), finance (52 pages), natural resources (50 pages), and China/infrastructure (24 pages). If we take the first two first, as these deal with the politics of Japan-CA relations, then deal with the last three chapters second as they deal with the economics of Japan-CA relations.

The broad sweep observation of Japan-CA relations from Murashkin is that they used to be more energetic in the 1990s than they are now. The story begins with the development of Japan's Eurasia policy in the 1990s. Originating from bureaucrat Togo Kazuhiko in the MOFA and politician PM Hashimoto Ryutaro, Japan's initially stumbled approach meant to chart a course between shifting China and Russia behaviours in a post-Soviet landscape. The author points out this making these initial connections was very difficult given the CA country's internal clan politics — a hybrid authoritarianism, with each country being socially structured by a combination of personalized strongman who balances between clans — coupled with varying foreign policy priorities between each CA country; pro-Russian or pro-Western. The author makes the well-founded point that there was and is also a lack of understanding from Japanese elites in socio-political affairs *a la* CA. Language skills, this sociology of clan dynamics, and then resultantly, the politics that emerge, are all lacking from the Japan side.

A further complicating factor for Japan is the Russia — China dimension, combined with Western/US priorities to Japan's CA policy. The author makes the point that a CA centered on either the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Russian and China) or a developing G2 (US and China), Japan constantly hedges so as to not be left out of the party when the music stops. The US moving towards China is just as much a concern for Japan as it is for China to move against Japan. But push comes to shove, Japan will usually (but not always) come in-line with the Western values led approach in CA.

And this in a nutshell is the basis for the author of approaching not only Japan-CA relations but Japan's foreign policy generally — to examine the domestic contexts combined with the international shifts. Japan has its own unique ways of doing foreign policy which need to be understood, the 'black box' that most do not bother opening needs to be opened, each CA country has its own structures and priorities, and Russia-China-US relations are constantly shifting. Japan is proactive and anticipatory but not dogmatic. Combining domestic circumstances and international winds helps explain Japan's tip-toeing approach to either developing or reducing relations.

For example, in Japan, intra- and inter- ministry figures and their positions, party faction groupings (*zoku* politics), parliamentary friend associations, intellectual organizations are all crucial in understanding Japanese policy. It is highly unusual to have a strong leader created policy. Bureaucrats and 'policy entrepreneurs' are more important. The centrality of people such as Chino Tadao who eventually becomes a CA point person as he swam between Japan's Ministry of Finance and the Asian Development Bank, or the equal importance of married couple Nakayama Kyoko and Nakayama Nariaki of Japan's LDP's *seiwaken* who are part of the MOFA's "Russian School" in developing projects in CA are a better focus. The author identified these through his desire to conduct interviews with key inside officials. When these key figures change position, retire, or die, international relations are affected. When the author does a before/after between chapters 1 then 2, comparing the LDP years with the DPJ years (2009–2012, three Prime Ministers in three years), he highlights this by demonstrating not much real change in Japan-CA relations occurred. This is because in Japan, politicians and parties, despite being a democracy, do not really drive policy. It is the invisible people in the background who need to be watched and luckily, this author knows who they are and likely interviewed them. Not only people are important but institutional dynamics are important. Inter-ministry rivalries are very real, intra-ministry rivalries are very real, and in foreign affairs, the rivalry can often divide between those in Japan and those operating abroad. JICA Tokyo and JICA Kazakhstan may, indeed probably, dont necessarily think alike. I have found this in my own work in Southeast Asia and the author points out a similar phenomenon in action in Central Asia.

Turning to the second half of the book that focuses on the political-economy of Japan-CA relations, embodied in chapters 3 (finance), 4 (natural resources — oil/gas plus rare earths and uranium), and 5 (China and infrastructure), we have some serious findings.

As pointed out at the beginning, too many observers of Japan's foreign policy focus on politics and security defined in military terms. Japan is severely circumscribed in its military power and so it exercises day-to-day external influence through economic mechanisms, eg: ODA, FDI, energy and infrastructure projects. This may be beginning to change in recent years but for the entirety of Japan's post-WWII foreign relations is has been economic power that has been Japan's main foreign policy toolkit. Therefore, why do many still focus on military security? The tendency to do this leads to a big black hole, a limited view, a grey picture of Japan's influence in its regional neighborhood, resulting in the tendency to claim Japan to be a reactive, band-wagoning, 'diplomatic pygmy' state. I have encountered this myself in my own work where even Western diplomats when asked to explain Japan's activities in, for example Thailand, will say something like: "we know Japan is important but we do not really know how they do it, we just assume they won't rock the boat too much". The difference in outlook is the prioritization of singular nation-state relations vs. multi-dimensional networked relations, with Japan being very skilled at the latter.

Murashkin does not make this mistake and uses the case study of CA to reverse-logic back to theory and speculate about Japan's general foreign policy approach. This point may have been better as a chapter to replace the DPJ chapter two as it is a large and important theoretical point of the book but nevertheless it is important to be included. He argues for a refocus on Japan's ODA which is not the same as aid as Western nations do it (the "A" in ODA stands for "assistance" not "aid") in addition to a refocus upon Japan's mighty Ministry of Finance (MoF).

His argument about Japan's economic power in CA countries is (a) that Japan's Ministry of Finance (MoF) is much more important than many think; (b) Japan's finance professionals are very aware of them representing a "Japan model" of development that is distinct from a Western model; (c) Japan's approach is often gradualist, non-judgmental, and promoted as being neutral in CA countries; and (d) Japan employs its own history in how it assists other countries rather than theories or ideologies.

Applying this understanding to the CA case studies, and the author's more general thesis of how Japan tries to balance local politics with global politics and then pragmatically chart a path through, the author teases out some major factors to explain why Japan's relations with CA countries have been on the decline and also, to go against the prevailing competition narrative, why CA relations also generate a good deal of great power cooperation too.

First and most important to the author are the natural resources buried in CA country geography; so much so that this is one of the largest chapters. Unsurprising given the division of natural resources into two: oil and gas, and rare earths. These two groupings of natural resources are of course different industries in themselves but also represent differing geopolitical interests, with Russia more important in the former and China more important in the latter. As such this chapter could perhaps have been separated into two but it is no huge problem to keep them together.

The author argues against the prevailing literature on natural resource acquisition in three ways. First, he believes the so-called Great Game of resource competition amongst great powers is exaggerated. Low in natural resources, dependent on the Middle East (and therefore the US security guarantee), heavily reliant on oil (around half of supply), and domestic energy politics that changed tack five times between 2007–2018; especially difficult after 3.11 and all nuclear reactors were switched off. Japan simply cannot afford to play a great game with energy — it needs to get it wherever it can. Second, he believes that j-gov and j-corp were anticipative rather than reactive in their energy acquisition in CA in the 1990s and early 2000s. Price premiums charged to Asian countries for Middle East oil created an incentive for energy alternatives in CA countries, coupled with the general lack production/manufacturing due to small populations makes Can countries attractiveness primarily natural resources. However, and third, this interest levelled off from the 2000s due to rising commodity prices in addition to the retirement or death of key CA officials back in Tokyo. Rather than competition with other East Asian powers as much of the literature stresses, the author believes key differences and changes within Japan 's ministries are more explanatory, particularly differences between MOF on one hand and MOFA + METI on the other.

Turning to rare earths and uranium, which essentially also means China policy and nuclear policy, we see for the author another nuanced mix bag of activities. CA country's abundance of rare earth, crucial for many of Japan's key electronics sector, are a useful risk diversification away from a China that has begun to protect its large monopoly (90 % share) on the technologically foundational material. Uranium became crucial due to Japan's "nuclear renaissance" between 2000–2011. Kazakhstan being second globally in uranium resources behind Australia, and other CA countries also being full of it, Japan eyed CA greedily as nuclear power generation became a key foreign policy objective for Japan. After Kazakhstan the author turns to Uzbekistan where it is recounted Japan had a difficult time. Trading companies Mitsui and Itochu suffered a decline in the business environment from around 2009 as Uzbek leaders began prioritising public companies rather than foreign private firms.

Across all of these resource J-gov and J-corp are very open to cooperation rather than competition. He cites many examples of cooperation, for example with China on a joint

Mitsubishi-China government mega project pipeline that was proposed for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, or cooperation with Russia on uranium as Russia has the world's largest uranium enrichment facility and through multiple public-private energy conglomerate alliances. Japanese and Chinese companies who were very cooperative in the 1990s but became less so, did so due to market and price factors rather than political Great Game such as the Senkaku Dispute. Although the author does admit that the Great Game does enter sometimes, especially if the Japan-US relationship is touched. This was the case with the US supported and later ADB-backed (under CA specialist Japanese official, Chino Tadao) Turkmenistan — Afghanistan — Pakistan — India (TAPI) Pipeline, that put Japan against Russia, China, and Iran.

Finally, Murashkin approaches the double-barreled topic of infrastructure plus China; the topic that gets many interested observers quick to cry "Great Game". Although at 17 pages compared the previous chapters 39 pages, the author seems to have a good preference for natural resources rather than the competition with China question. Instead of 'competition' the author skillfully uses the word 'interaction' to describe Japan-China relations on infrastructure moving forward. He paints the difficult picture that Japan is perpetually in: wanting to play a financial leadership position in Asia, but being constrained by skepticism from the US and other Western powers coupled with rising alternatives from Asian neighbors.

The key point here is that the author believes China's big 'competition' instrument, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is not only similar to plans from Japan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) but that indeed they may be replicated from them. The author points to a number of proposals from Japan or the ADB that indicate plans very similar to China's BRI initiative that predate it. He states that (a) China is no more likely to lend to debtor countries that other states, (b) media-savvy headline grabbing projects are often if not usually not what they become in practice, (c) China is also increasingly risk averse and prefers collective financial cooperation in development financing. Claims of Japan becoming more competitive under Abe-II leadership are likely overblown for the author. Furthermore, the author finds cooperation between Japanese and Chinese officials within both the ADB and AIIB. Furthermore, Tokyo has softened towards the AIIB. Not only intra- but also inter- development organization competition for the author is overblown, as the ADB and AIID have differing objectives: the ADB as focused on poverty while the AIIB is focused on new infrastructure. Moreover, the ADB stimulated by the AIIB has been prompted to be more open than before, wishing to partner with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that had been previously viewed suspiciously. In sum, the author believes that any competition that does exist — and there is less than is claimed — will do more good than harm for CA countries.

This book by Nikolay Murashkin has a number of benefits for the reader that may not be immediately apparent from the niche topic of Japan-CA relations. This focus is interesting in itself and I certainly gained a lot from learning more about the internal and foreign relations of the countries of Central Asia. I was particularly interested two geopolitical considerations: the north-south spatiality of how CA countries can moderate or balance Russia and China in broader regional affairs, and also the east-west spatiality would allow the building of connections between North East Asia and the Middle East at the furthest extremes. However, the book also benefits from tangential intellectual gains to be had from understanding how Japan's foreign policy machine works. If you are interested in Japan's foreign policy as a standalone topic then this book is also of use to you.

This is because the author has taken the time to do proper research. Many do not. Murashkin combines a knowledge of International Relations with the multiple Area Studies disciplines of Japan Studies, Russia Studies (being Russian this a given), and Central Asian Studies. He is multi-lingual and has taken the time to incorporate sources that are Russian, English, Japanese, and Central Asian speaking, and has made the even more difficult effort of doing field research; something sorely lacking in a lot of armchair academic work. His elite interviewing technique at multiple stages in the book adds not only colour but also key empirical evidence to what happens inside Japan's foreign policy 'black box'. Bringing together analyses of key actors and what they actually think about Central Asia, with institutional analysis and history, the analysis that results is important for Central Asia Studies students to consider but Japan Studies students too.

There are of course points I would consider changing slightly and I have pointed these out above. The second chapter on the DPJ years could probably be replaced with the theoretical section on economic power. The large natural resource chapter could be divided into two: oil and gas, and then uranium and rare earths. And the final chapter on China is quite short given the importance of the topic in itself but also to the overall thesis. However, these are really just my hindsight judgement calls.

So to sum up, according to the author, do we need to presume yet another 'Great Game' in a different part of Asia?

Harold Adrian Russell Philby, aka. 'Kim' Philby, was the master British Cambridge spy who shortened his aristocratic four-barreled name to the namesake of Rudyard Kipling's Victorian novel *Kim*. In said novel the notion of a 'Great Game' was coined, whereby in Mackinder/Orwellian grand chess theorizing fashion, great forces of conflict were assumed to be inevitable between Britain and Russia in Central Asia. Philby and his Cambridge compatriots, ever keen on literature, let their imaginations run wild and let Kipling run through EM Forster, as Victorian great games became Cold War great games. With the dominance of neo-Realism in international relations theory, little has changed, as grand patterns of Eurasian conflict underpin so many people's worldviews. Such idealism should perhaps be far more measured in today's world.

The warning signs of the consequence of such thinking are perhaps to be found in the Philby family itself. Kim Philby's father was equally as idealistic as his son. St* John Philby (*pronounced *Sin*; he wasn't a saint!) was the irascible foil to T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). Sin Philby helped to found the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but after his recommendations being repeatedly ignored by British Foreign Office and army officials, he provided oil extraction information to an American company rather than British and found himself a lone voice in the wind of the Arabian desert. His son paid an equally high price for his own Great Game, not with Saudi Arabia but with the USSR. Defecting and spending the rest of his time in the Soviet Union drinking himself to death and being ignored by the Communist utopia he had dreamed of, Kim, like Sin, is a testament to what happens when the idealism of Great Game competition runs afoul.

Murashkin's analysis of Japan-Central Asia relations gives us pause to consider how these Victorian-Cold War narratives need to stop, or at least, be nuanced with non-judgmental pragmatism and empirical real-world research. His overall points are more important: the author's challenging of the Great Game competition narrative, the stressing of the need for more focus on economic power, the employment of local socio-political factors as being just as import as materialist power politics, and most importantly perhaps, the notion that there could be some degree of hope for a peaceful future in East and Central Asia.

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