

**Asia's Turn to Geopolitics:
China and Japan in Central and Southeast Asia**

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Chinese President Xi Jinping toured four countries in Central Asia in September 2013, stopping at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan for a seminal speech urging regional states to join hands with China and “build a beautiful future together.”¹ This was the speech in which Xi first unveiled his vision for the revival of ancient Silk Road routes in Asia. In the speech Xi proposed transforming Central Asia into an overland trade and infrastructure corridor linking China with markets in Europe, and in a separate speech a month later added a maritime component running through Southeast Asia. Together the two came to be known as the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) initiative, forming the blueprint of a grand strategy to extend China’s influence across Asia.

Two years after Xi’s trip, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a similar tour in October 2015, visiting all five Central Asian states plus Mongolia. He, too, stopped for a speech at Nazarbayev University, promising “Japan will dramatically strengthen its relationship with the nations of Central Asia.”² Abe’s visit to the region, which so closely paralleled Xi’s, was a clear message that Japan would not be left in the dust on China’s One Belt One Road.

The two key regions of the OBOR initiative, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, are spaces where China and Japan compete for leadership of the continent. Both areas are

¹ Xi Jinping, “Hongyang renmin youyi, gongchuang meihao weilai” [Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future], speech given at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, September 7, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0908/c1024-22845281.html>.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Speech by Prime Minister Abe on Japan’s Foreign Policy Toward Central Asia,” Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, October 28, 2015, http://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ca_c/kz/page1e_000055.html.

made up of states smaller and less powerful than China and Japan, and are thus open to economic, security, and diplomatic influence from the two larger Asian powers. In Central Asia, China and Japan have each pursued access to energy resources and sought diplomatic cooperation since the republics of the region gained their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. China and Japan have maintained close economic relationships with Southeast Asian states for decades, and in recent years Japan has sided with several of them against Beijing in the South China Sea dispute. Given these dynamics, to what extent do China and Japan view themselves as engaged in competition in these regions, and ultimately for leadership of Asia?

This paper examines statements by Chinese and Japanese policymakers about their respective governments' engagement in Central Asia and Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era in order to better understand how China and Japan view competition for Asian hegemony. This review reveals that policymakers in both Beijing and Tokyo are increasingly framing their engagement in these regions in terms of geopolitical rivalry for a leadership role on the Asian continent. Geopolitics, for the purposes of this paper, is discourse about world politics that emphasizes state competition and geographical dimensions of power, particularly between sea powers and land powers. China's OBOR initiative draws on classical geopolitical concepts that seek to establish continental security on the state's land frontier in Central Asia in order to improve its position as a sea power via Southeast Asia. Japan, for its part, is stepping up engagement in these regions in order to keep pace with China, and doing so with a clear reference to geopolitical concepts that hold the exertion of economic, security, and diplomatic influence abroad as they key to being a strong power.

This paper addresses a gap between the level of scholarship on contemporary Japanese views of geopolitics and that on Chinese views. American scholars and political analysts, concerned about the implications of China's rise for U.S. interests in Asia, have paid considerable attention to how classical geopolitical theory has driven Chinese strategic thinking since the 1980s. This paper helps clarify why the OBOR initiative should be considered part of this geopolitics-infused strategic thinking, as opposed to a purely friendly economic project. On the other hand, since Japan is not a threat to the United States, there is little scholarship on how Japanese policymakers view the

importance of geopolitical rivalry, despite a shift in attitudes since Japan cast aside geopolitical theory after World War II. Accordingly, there is little concern for how Japan's efforts to apply these precepts to its foreign policy initiatives in Asia stack up against China's. English-language scholarship on Japanese foreign policy in Central Asia is particularly lacking in this regard, since the most comprehensive work in this area was written in 2008 and excludes significant initiatives undertaken more recently by the Abe administration.³ By putting Japan's use of geopolitics to the same scrutiny China's gets, this paper shows that both states are viewing themselves as engaged in geopolitical rivalry in Asia, a situation that has potentially dangerous implications.

The paper first provides a brief overview of the main principles of geopolitical theorists and discusses how they have been accepted in policymaking circles in China and Japan. It will then turn to an examination of the influence of geopolitical theory on Chinese policy in Central and Southeast Asia, respectively, demonstrating that the OBOR initiative is a strategy influenced by geopolitical theory of China enhancing its inland frontier in order to better compete in the maritime sphere. Next, it will discuss Japanese policy in the same two regions and show how it has been shaped by geopolitical principles. Through this examination, we see that Chinese and Japanese policy in both Central and Southeast Asia are driven by geopolitical principles that place China and Japan in competition for Asian hegemony. While Beijing's policies in those regions are aimed at putting China forward as a regional hegemon, Japan's policies are aimed at allowing Japan to remain a key player in the region. Though Japan's aims may not always directly conflict with China's, the fact that policymakers are both framing their efforts in these regions in geopolitical terms speaks to increasing geopolitical rivalry between the two on the Asian continent.

³ Indeed, Christopher Len writes, "Japan is ... often neglected in the analysis of Central Asia's security and economic interests with authors usually focusing on China, Russia, the United States and their neighboring Asian states." This lack of analysis on the security aspect of Japan-Central Asia relations helps explain why he and other scholars believe that "Japan should be understood as having a developmental rather than a geopolitical focus on the region." As discussed in greater detail below, Japan's engagement in Central Asia is heavily weighted toward development, but is not devoid of strategic concerns. Christopher Len, Uyama Tomohiko, and Hirose Tetsuya, ed., *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead*, 2008, 7-18.

Geopolitical Discourse in Japan and China

Geopolitics is a nebulous discipline, with the term itself often employed in popular usage as a catchall for global political activity in general. Geopolitics, broadly defined, is the study of how geography is implicated in global politics.⁴ Since the term was first coined in 1899 by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen, and taken up in Germany after World War I by former general Karl Haushofer, the field of geopolitics has encompassed many theories, many of them centrally concerned with the Eurasian landmass (the continents of Europe and Asia) as a pivotal area.⁵ As two countries on the eastern edge of that landmass, China and Japan have unique perspectives on geopolitics. Many of the ideas of the “grandfathers of geopolitics” are influential in Chinese and Japanese foreign policy today, where they have been employed in unique ways. Therefore it is necessary to discuss some of the main strains of geopolitics, particularly how they have informed strategic thinking about Asia.

British geographer Halford Mackinder introduced the idea that Europe, Asia and Africa together constituted a “World Island” surrounded by satellite states of lesser historical and potential power. At the center of the World Island is the Heartland, an area stretching from Eastern Europe to Siberia that is the key to global power because it lies beyond the reach of those on the coastal periphery of the World Island. According to Mackinder’s Heartland theory, “who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the World.”⁶ This Heartland includes Central Asia, one of the two key areas of interest in this paper.

The other key area is often discussed in the sea power theories of Mackinder’s contemporary, American admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan gave similar priority to the Eurasian landmass, but for him the key to global power lay in control of the oceans rather than land. In *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Mahan propounded the idea that sea lines of communication are the key to control of the coastal areas of the Eurasian landmass. In his *Problem of Asia*, he put forward the idea that the key geographical determinant of Asia was the “debatable ground,” the belt of land between

⁴ Jason Dittmer and Jo Sharp, *Geopolitics: An Introductory Reader* (Routledge: 2014), 3.

⁵ Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal), *The Geopolitics Reader*, 1.

⁶ Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, 150. The book summarizes ideas put forward in his earlier article, “The Geographical Pivot of History” (*The Geographical Journal* 23.4, April 1904).

30th and 40th parallels stretching from China to the Mediterranean, in which political conditions were unsettled and open to external political influence.⁷ He predicted that competition for influence of this area would determine the international political system of the 20th century, making competition for power over the landmass a central concern. He further argued that United States, Britain, and Germany should join forces with Japan in order to counter Russian control of the “debatable ground” and the Eurasian landmass as a whole.

In the first half of the 20th century, Dutch-American geostrategist Nicholas Spykman built on Mackinder’s Heartland theory and Mahan’s notions of sea power, asserting that controlling the areas on the periphery of the World Island, areas he termed the Rimland, would enable control of the Heartland.⁸ For Spykman, geography was a conditioning factor of a country’s politics, rather than a purely determinative one. Spykman further predicted that China would reemerge as a strong power in Asia, so the United States should ally with Japan in order to prevent China from emerging as a great power on the Rimland that could seek control of the Heartland.

In the post-World War era, Western strategists have adapted Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman’s ideas to the post-imperial world order. Some have popularized the notion of a return of geopolitics and applied their ideas to the post-Cold War international system, writing of a “New Great Game” in Central Asia. In the 1990s, Polish-American geostrategist Zbigniew Brzezinski updated older geopolitical concepts and applied them to the post-Cold War environment with his book *The Grand Chessboard* that revived popular writing about international politics in terms of strategic moves on a board game. More recently, writers such as Walter Russell Meade and Robert Kagan have proposed that the current era is experiencing a “return of geopolitics.”⁹ Chinese and Japanese thinkers have read these more recent writings on geopolitics, as well as the classical works of Mackinder, Mahan, and Spykman on which they are based, and have been influenced by them in different ways.

⁷ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies* (Boston: Little, 1900), 22.

⁸ Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942).

⁹ Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-04-17/return-geopolitics>.

Geopolitics in China

Much has been written by Western scholars in recent years about how classical geopolitical discourse, particularly the works of Mahan, has been popular in Chinese military circles since the 1980s. Mahan's writings first made their way to China in 1901 via Japan, after a Shanghai-based publication published a Japanese translation of *The Influence of Sea Power on History*.¹⁰ China's Qing dynasty collapsed a decade later, and for decades China had little interest in naval strategy as it was consumed by domestic issues and had only a small navy. In the latter part of the 20th century Mahan made a comeback among PLA Navy thinkers.¹¹ In particular, the influential Liu Huaqing, who served as PLA Navy Commander from 1982 to 1988, wrote so extensively on the British thinker in the 1980s and 1990s that American military strategists nicknamed him "China's Mahan."¹² Liu's use of Mahan's concepts formed the basis of much of China's recent military modernization and advancements in naval capabilities. Since 2004, Beijing's Defense White Papers have included numerous references to "command of the sea," a concept put forward by Mahan.

The popularity of Mahan in Chinese military circles also engendered discussion of Mackinder. For example, Xu Qi, a Senior Captain in the PLA Navy and deputy director of the Strategic Research Office of the Naval Affairs Science Research Institute in Beijing, discussed the respective merits of Mahan's and Mackinder's sea power and land power concepts, respectively, in an influential essay on maritime geostrategy.¹³ In addition to referencing specific works of geostrategists, Chinese policymakers have also raised concerns about intensifying geopolitical competition in general. For example, China's most recent Defense White Paper notes concerns about the increasing complexity of the international security situation, saying "international strategic competition

¹⁰ Hou Angyu, "Zouxiang haiyang yao zhixing heyi" [To move toward the seas there must be unity of action], *PLA Daily*, January 4, 2015, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/intl/2015-01/04/content_4561871.htm.

¹¹ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 27-30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ Xu Qi, "Maritime Geostrategy and the Development of the Chinese Navy in the Early Twenty-first Century," trans. Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, *Naval War College Review* 59:4 (2006), 47-67.

centering on international order, comprehensive national strength, and geopolitics has intensified.”¹⁴

Geopolitics in Japan

Geopolitical discourse has a longer and more complicated history in Japan, where it is currently making a comeback at the same time as it remains haunted by lingering concerns over its close linkage to Japanese militarist policies during World War II. The writings of Mackinder and Mahan formed an important part of the considerations of the imperial military in the early part of the 20th century. The term “geopolitics” was first introduced to Japan in 1925 through a translation of the works of Swedish political scientist Rudolph Kjellen.¹⁵ However, by the end of the 1800s Mahan’s ideas of sea power had already heavily influenced the Japanese navy, to the point that the Imperial Naval Academy considered inviting him to lead the school in 1899.¹⁶ The 1920s and 1930s saw the launch of several journals of geopolitics in Japan. Despite a number of Japanese intellectuals’ criticism of the racism and Eurocentrism they saw in many geopolitical works, the discipline was heavily influential in the interwar period in Japan, which was the launch of a number of journals on geopolitics.¹⁷ This movement was less concerned with the Anglo-American geopolitics of Mahan and Mackinder and more influenced by areas of the field popular in Germany, such as works based on Karl Haushofer, Rudolf Kjellen, and Friedrich Ratzel. In the 1930s and 1940s, geopolitics in Japan fell into three main streams: the Kyoto school, which was concerned with developing Japanese indigenous and nationalist geopolitics; the German-influenced school, which applied concepts such as *lebensraum* (living space) that were popularized by the Nazis to Japan and its colonies; and the school of the Japanese Journal for

¹⁴ Information Office of the State Council, “China’s National Defense in 2010,” March 31, 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm.

¹⁵ Keiichi Takeuchi, “Japanese Geopolitics in the 1930s and 40s,” in Dittmer and Sharp, 67.

¹⁶ Yoichi Hiramama, “Mahan’s Influence on the Japanese Navy (Mahan ga nihonkaigun ni ataeta eikyō),” *Journal of Political Economy and Economic History (Seiji keizai shigaku)* 320 (February 1993), 1-21. Republished at http://hiramayoihi.com/yh_ronbun_senryaku_mahan_nihoneikyō.htm.

¹⁷ Takeuchi writes, “While being fully aware of the irrational or illogical nature of geopolitical argument, in spite of this, or, in fact for this very reason, many Japanese intellectuals accepted an supported geopolitics.” “Geopolitics and Geography in Japan Reexamined,” 22.

Geopolitics (*Nihon Chiseigaku Kyoukai*), which carried out geographical studies that supported political aims of the imperial regime.¹⁸

After World War II, geopolitics was relegated to the status of a taboo topic in Japan because of its association with militarist Japanese and Nazi regimes. At the end of World War II, many of the Japanese geographers who had engaged in geopolitical studies were purged from public service during the American occupation.¹⁹ In the 1970s there emerged several studies of Japan's wartime geopolitics, but these were largely limited to the history of the discipline. In short, Japanese geopolitics was inactive for a long time after World War II.

After being relegated to the sidelines for most of the postwar period, geopolitics is starting to see a resurgence in Japan in recent years amid a reassessment of Japan's current security position following the end of the Cold War. This renewed interest has been on Anglo-American geopolitics, rather than the German-influenced geopolitics popular during and ahead of World War II. Works of Mahan and Mackinder have been republished in Japan since 2000. In 2011, several scholars at the Human Geographical Society of Japan established the society's first-ever Political Geography Research Group. In a 2012 paper reviewing the major developments in the field, founders of the group declared, "Political geography is a re-emerging field in Japan," giving the establishment of their group as an example of this trend.²⁰ Since the 2000s there has been a "remarkable" change in interest in geopolitics and the field has been "reactivated," partly due to the change in political conditions surrounding Japan since the end of the Cold War, they observed. This renewed interest is not limited to the academic sphere, but is also visible in the policymaking sphere. For example, a review of all of the Diplomatic Blue Books since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began publishing them in 1972 shows that use of the term "geopolitics" was rare before the year 2000, but the term has appeared in every edition since 2001 save one (2007).

Amid renewed interest, some Japanese intellectuals have called for further application of geopolitics in Japanese foreign policy, as well as an end to shying away

¹⁸ Keiichi Takeuchi, "Geopolitics and Geography in Japan Reexamined," (*Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 12:1 (November 1980) 19-22.

¹⁹ Takashi Yamazaki, Akihiko Takagi, Shinya Kitagawa, and Yuichi Kagawa, "Reemerging Political Geography in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Human Geography* 64.6 (2012), 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

from geopolitics because of its associations with World War II militarism. For example, Yoichi Funabashi, a former journalist and chair of the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation think tank, has asserted that Japan should not be afraid of dismissing geopolitics due to its “politically incorrect” associations with World War II, and must develop a greater understanding of current geopolitical realities in the global system if its foreign policy is to be competitive. Interestingly, he observes that China has done better than Japan in incorporating geopolitical considerations into its foreign policy, warning that Japan cannot afford to be left behind. “We must remember that the Chinese excel at geopolitical thought, and that a wide intellectual gap exists between us and the Chinese when it comes to geopolitical acumen,” he wrote in a recent newspaper commentary.²¹

Japanese policymakers have already taken some steps in this direction, integrating geopolitical concerns into national security assessments in similar ways to their Chinese counterparts. Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy, adopted in December 2013 by Abe’s newly formed National Security Council, stresses the importance of Mahanian sea power concepts and raises concerns about changing balance of power in the international system due to China’s rise. The document notes that Japan’s geographical situation as a maritime state “surrounded by sea on all sides” has been the key to its prosperity, raises concern for protection of the “global commons,” a term coined by Mahan to refer to the high seas in an 1895 essay, and calls for “sea lanes of communication,” another Mahanian concept.^{22 23} The document also warns of an “increasingly severe” security environment surrounding Japan. “Since the beginning of the twenty first century, the balance of power in the international community has been changing on an unprecedented scale, and this has substantially influenced the dynamics of international politics,” it says, naming the rise of China as a primary driver of this change. These statements reflect similar concerns to those expressed in China’s

²¹ Yoichi Funabashi, “Japan needs geopolitical skills,” *Japan Times*, April 15, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/04/15/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-needs-geopolitical-skills>. To be sure, Funabashi is careful to point out that he is not calling for a return to the same geopolitical concerns as were popular in Japan before World War II; he warns that Japan should not become “overly consumed” by geopolitics.

²² Mahan, “The Future in Relations to American Naval Power,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1895, <http://harpers.org/archive/1895/10/the-future-in-relation-to-american-naval-power/>.

²³ Office of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, National Security Strategy (Provisional Translation), December 13, 2013, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

assessments of its national security situation. China's 2015 Military Strategy white paper notes "profound changes taking place in the international situation," including "historic changes in the balance of power" and in the "geostrategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific."²⁴ The document also stresses the importance of "strategic sea lines of communication" for China's national security. These documents illustrate that Chinese and Japanese security assessments are converging on similar geopolitical concerns.

Chinese Policy in Central Asia and Southeast Asia: One Belt One Road



China's policy toward Central and Southeast Asia has been linked together in the OBOR initiative. The evolution of the OBOR initiative shows that policymakers were concerned with how to address twin challenges of

land and sea power propounded by Mahan and Mackinder. The project is based in the notion that securing China's inland frontier through closer ties with Central Asian neighbors will allow China the security to pursue broader influence in the maritime world starting with Southeast Asia.

The OBOR policy is an initiative to build roads, railways, ports, and airports that will facilitate trade across Asia to link East Asian markets with European ones while promising increased prosperity for countries along the way. As the first regions outside of China that are to be on the Belt and Maritime Road portions of the OBOR, respectively, Central Asia and Southeast Asia are key regions for the project. After introducing the "Silk Road Economic Belt" portion of the project on his trip to Central Asia, Xi added a "Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road" component at a speech to the Indonesian parliament in October 2013 where he underscored the "shared destiny" of China and

²⁴ Office of the State Council, "China's Military Strategy," Xinhua News Agency, May 26, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm.

ASEAN members.²⁵ The Belt portion focuses on linking “China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe,” while the Maritime Road is aimed at connecting “connecting China with Southeast Asia,” then Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean and on to Europe, according to a March 2015 action plan on the initiative.²⁶ In the months after Xi announced the twin initiatives, he made them a domestic priority at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and at the Central Work Conference, when officials and reports combined references to the two into the term “One Belt, One Road.”²⁷ In late 2014, Chinese officials announced plans to establish the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund to support the OBOR, inviting China’s “friends and partners” to join.

The seeds of the OBOR initiative are found in PLA General Liu Yazhou’s writings from the 2000s, which addressed geopolitical concerns. Liu, an influential strategy thinker and considered one of the most outspoken establishment figures in China at the time,²⁸ was preoccupied with U.S. and NATO influence in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he viewed the region bordering Xinjiang as “China’s weak spot.”²⁹ In order to counter possible American encroachment on China’s borders that could potentially foment unrest in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, he proposed a “Chinese advance” into Central Asia, arguing it was imperative for China to do so in order to protect national security. Liu saw Central Asia as the “core” of a new foreign policy initiative that would also be “a scheme intended to influence the periphery and extend as far as Europe.”³⁰ In later writings he described China’s western frontier as a

²⁵ Wu Jiao and Zhang Yubi, “Xi in call for building of new ‘maritime silk road,’” *China Daily*, October 4, 2013: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/04/content_17008940.htm/.

²⁶ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21-st Century Maritime Silk Road,” March 28, 2015: http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

²⁷ “Chronology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua News Agency, n.d.: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/28/c_134105435.htm/.

²⁸ Alfred Chan, “Introduction,” *Chinese Law and Government*, vol. 40, no. 2, March–April 2007, p. 4 and “A Young Turk in China’s Establishment: The Military Writings of Liu Yazhou,” *China Brief* Volume: 5 Issue: 19,

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=3891#.VRxvkZPF_pA/.

²⁹ Liu Yazhou “The Grand National Strategy,” 2001.

³⁰ Liu, “The Grand National Strategy.”

“particularly important strategic springboard” to the Middle East and Europe.³¹ “In terms of geopolitical strategy, Central Asia bestrides the road from East Asia to Europe,” he wrote, clearly considering geopolitical concerns. Liu argued that in order for China to consolidate its land position in the northwest in order to be secure enough to pursue maritime conquests.

Against the backdrop of these efforts to prioritize stability in Xinjiang, Liu’s “March West” proposal was picked up with renewed vigor by officials and policy experts and expanded into a broader foreign policy strategy. Among the main proponents of the initiative was Wang Jisi, a prominent political scientist at Peking University. In his 2012 essay “Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy,” Wang articulated the March West policy as the Chinese response to the American pivot and rebalance to East Asia.³² His support for the policy as a geopolitically important one helped propel it to highest policy circles.

Some Chinese policymakers have sought to calm foreign alarm about China’s actions in Central Asia being motivated by geopolitical rivalry; however, Chinese analysts have acknowledged the project should be viewed as a security-oriented project. In May 2015, Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming sought to dispel Western concerns that OBOR was a Chinese bid to pursue Eurasian domination in accordance with Mackinder’s Heartland theory. At a speech in London, Liu said “nothing could be further than the truth” than the idea that OBOR “is a power play by China on the geopolitical chessboard.”³³ In an op-ed a few days later, he accused “skeptics” in the West of questioning whether OBOR was “a bid by China for greater land and maritime power in response to the U.S. pivot to Asia.”³⁴ But at the same time as dispelling notions of Mackinder-esque Heartland domination, Liu said the policy reflected a different type of geopolitical rivalry. Instead of a power grab, the OBOR is the expression of the

³¹ Liu, “Essay on the West,” *Fenghuang Weekly*, August 5, 2010, republished at <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/5d38c304e87101f69e319584.html/>.

³² Wang Jisi, “Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy,” Oct. 17, 2012: http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-10/3193760.html/.

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, “Speech by Liu Xiaoming at Young Icebreakers’ Dinner,” London, UK, May 22, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1265985.shtml.

³⁴ Liu Xiaoming, “New Silk Road is an opportunity not a threat,” *Financial Times*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c8f58a7c-ffd6-11e4-bc30-00144feabdc0.html>.

“inevitably emerging transportation network linking Eurasia’s economies” that Brzezinski envisaged when he wrote about the grand chessboard in the 1990s, he said.

Political analysts in China have viewed the project in a geopolitical lens. One researcher at Peking University, for example, wrote that the OBOR initiative marks “a return to traditional Chinese geopolitical thinking about Eurasia” that reflects twin historical concerns about sea power and land power.³⁵ In the same vein, political scientist Xie Tao notes that the Chinese government has insisted on calling OBOR an “initiative” rather than a “strategy” because the latter term “may smack too much of geopolitical ambitions,” and asserts that the economic interests driving the project “are necessarily geopolitical interests.”³⁶ Such assessments by Chinese analysts show that when viewed in the full context of Chinese strategic thinking, the OBOR initiative is properly considered a geopolitical project and that forms a key component of national strategy.

Japanese Policy in Central Asia

Japan’s recent Central Asia policy is a reaction to China’s engagement in the region under the auspices of OBOR. The primary aim of Japanese policy in Central Asia is not to contest for prime influence in the region, but to try to maintain a foothold and prevent Japan from being shut out by Chinese influence there. The evolution of Japan’s policy toward Central Asia from the time the republics gained independence in 1991 to the Abe administration’s activities today demonstrates increasing consideration of the region’s geopolitical significance. Moreover, Japanese leaders’ policy statements regarding Central Asia have exhibited a trend of increasingly viewing engagement of the region in terms of geopolitical competition.

Japan’s very first forays into diplomatic engagement with Central Asian States came with some understanding of the geopolitical importance of the region. In 1991, when Japan began establishing diplomatic relations with Central Asian states, it was a relatively new player in the region compared to China. Japan’s first embassies in the region were opened in January 1993 in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It also began giving

³⁵ Gong Ting, “Yidai yilu changyi de Zhongguo chuantong sixiang yaosu chutan,” September 6, 2015, http://www.ciiis.org.cn/chinese/2015-09/06/content_8211204.htm.

³⁶ Xie Tao, “Is China’s ‘Belt and Road’ a Strategy?” *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/is-chinas-belt-and-road-a-strategy/>.

ODA to these two countries in 1995. Even in these nascent stages of establishing diplomatic relations, Japanese officials were doing so with a keen eye to geopolitical considerations. According to Kawato Akio, former Japanese Ambassador to Japan and Tajikistan, during this early 1990s period there were some officials who had from the start approached Central Asia with “strategic considerations,” including Ministry of Finance officials who were interested in Uzbekistan “because of its geopolitical significance.” These officials saw it as important for Japan to have a strong diplomatic footing in the region because for them, “Central Asia, located between China and Russia, is vital for the maintenance of balance-of-power and stability in Eastern Asia.”³⁷

However, this sense of geopolitical concern was not focused on geopolitical competition with China. In fact, Japan paved the way for the Japan National Oil Corporation and private company Mitsubishi Corporation to cooperate with China’s National Petroleum Corporation on studies for a series of gas including an “Energy Silk Road Project” that would link Turkmenistan to Japan via China and South Korea. This cooperation indicated a willingness on the part of Japan to cooperate with China in Central Asia.³⁸

In the late 1990s, Japan made its first articulation of a clearly defined policy toward Central Asia, one that was exceptionally broad and autonomous of U.S. objectives compared to other Japanese postwar foreign policy initiatives (aside from Japan’s ASEAN policy).³⁹ Prime Minister Hashimoto framed the policy in terms of geopolitical concerns, arguing that Japan should play a leading role in the politics of the Eurasian landmass. In 1997, Hashimoto’s foreign minister Keizo Obuchi (who would soon be Hashimoto’s successor as prime minister) led a delegation of 61 Diet members, business community leaders, and scholars on a dialogue mission to Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.⁴⁰ Based on the findings of this mission, Prime Minister Hashimoto outlined a new policy toward Central Asia and Russia in a July 1997 speech to members of Japan’s business community that came to be known as his “Eurasian Diplomacy” speech. Hashimoto stressed that in the midst of a changing

³⁷ Kawato Akio, “What is Japan up to in Central Asia?,” 21.

³⁸ Len, 18.

³⁹ Yuasa Takeshi, “Japan’s Multilateral Approach in Central Asia,” 2012.

⁴⁰ Zaidan Hojin Kokusai Koryu Senta [Japan Center for International Exchange], “Roshiya Chuo Ajia misshon” [Mission to Russia and Central Asia], <http://www.jcie.or.jp/japan/nenji97/d07.htm>.

international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan “must greatly push to enlarge the horizon of [its] policy toward the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴¹ Echoing the traditional geopolitical obsession with Eurasia, he observed that world politics was moving toward traditional geopolitical focus on the Eurasian landmass. “One might go so far as to say that the focus of world diplomacy has shifted from the era of the Atlantic Ocean and Europe, based on the premise of antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union, to that of the Eurasian landmass, which encompasses many nations, small and large, crowded together,” he said.⁴² Due to this shift, Japan should “enthusiastically develop” a “Eurasian diplomacy” encompassing Russia, China, the Caucasus states, and the newly independent republics of Central Asia. In Central Asia, he called for the development of “more elaborated foreign policies than in the past” based on a three-pronged set of recommendations of the Obuchi mission, including enhanced political dialogue, cooperation on economic and natural resource development, and cooperation on building peace through nuclear nonproliferation and democratization. In short, Hashimoto sought to promote the idea that through enhancing its role in Central Asia, Japan as an Asian state could play a leading role in influencing Eurasian affairs.

Hashimoto’s framing of the Central Asia relationship in geopolitical terms reflected similar thinking among other policymakers who were keenly aware of the strategic importance of Central Asia. For example, Watanabe Koji, Japan’s former ambassador to Russia, told the *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper that “Central Asian countries’ development is important to the Eurasian continent because...it is desirable that they play

⁴¹ Office of the Prime Minister of Japan, “Keizai douyukai kaiin kondaikai ni okeru kouen” [Speech to the Association of Corporate Executives], Tokyo, Japan, July 24, 1997, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hasimotosouri/speech/1997/0725soridouyu.html>.

⁴² It is worth noting that the provisional English translation of the speech text provided by the Office of the Prime Minister has “the focus of world diplomacy” shifting from “an *axis* of the Atlantic Ocean and Europe poised on conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union to an *axis* spanning the Eurasian landmass” (emphasis added). However, the original Japanese text includes no mention of an “axis” (*jiku*) or similar term. Use of the term “axis” could indicate reference to Mackinder’s geopolitical concept of the Eurasian Heartland as an axial region or the “geographical pivot of history.” It is clear however that Hashimoto was not in fact speaking in such stark geopolitical terms. It is possible that the reference to “axis” was put in the translation intentionally for the English-language audience to reflect geopolitical language being used by the U.S. or other NATO countries.

Office of the Prime Minister of Japan, “Address by Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Provisional Translation),” Tokyo, Japan, July 24, 1997, <http://www.japan.kantei.go.jp/073/douyukai.html>.

a role as a buffer region for the maintenance of peace” in the broader continent.⁴³ Against this backdrop and under the aegis of “Eurasian diplomacy” Hashimoto and his successor Obuchi promoted engagement with Central Asia by increasing ODA to and encouraging Japanese private investment in the region.

In the mid-2000s, under Junichiro Koizumi’s administration, Japan deepened engagement in Central Asia, shifting to a multilateral approach. In 2004, Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi made a high-profile visit to Tashkent, Uzbekistan and introduced the Central Asia Plus Japan dialogue platform, modeled after Japan’s ASEAN policy (discussed below). Though Kawaguchi’s speech in Tashkent steered clear of references to strategic geopolitical concepts, it did reflect an awareness of the region as a key historical “crossroads between East and West” and “cradle of civilization.”⁴⁴

⁴³ “Central Asia Should Serve as a Eurasian ‘Buffer,’” *The Daily Yomiuri*, December 5, 1997. Also cited in Len, “Understanding Japan’s Central Asian Engagement,” 36.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Adding a New Dimension: Central Asia Plus Japan,” speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Yoriko Kawaguchi at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August, 26, 2004, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/uzbekistan/speech0408.html>.



Japan's multilateral approach to Central Asia to a broader policy toward the Eurasian landmass, while explicitly recognizing geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia as a reason for Japanese involvement in the region. As Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2006, Aso explained Japan's interests in Central Asia to visiting foreign ministers, saying that amid the U.S. war in Afghanistan Japan did not want to see a recurrence in Central Asia of the "Great Game"

geopolitical rivalry between Russian and British Empires in the 1800s. "We are not now in the age of imperialism. We cannot allow Central Asia to be tossed about by or forced to submit to the interests of outside countries as a result of a New Great Game," he said.⁴⁵ Aso expanded on this view with his introduction in 2006 of a new "axis" of Japanese foreign policy: the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity." Echoing Spykman's Rimland thesis, Aso pointed to "the successfully budding democracies on the outer rim of the Eurasian continent" and said Japan must "link them into a belt" to form an "arc of freedom and prosperity."⁴⁶ In the same speech, Aso again warned of the dangers of imperial-era rivalry, quoting from Rudyard Kipling's "Ballad of East and West."

Aso had little chance to forward this agenda in Central Asia as prime minister before the crushing defeat of his Liberal Democratic Party in 2009, but nevertheless his casting of Central Asia as a geopolitically important region had lasting effects. During the "revolving door" prime ministers period under the Democratic Party of Japan, several policymakers justified policy initiatives with Central Asia in geopolitical terms. For

⁴⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Central Asia as a Corridor of Peace and Stability (Unofficial Translation)" (speech by Taro Aso, Tokyo, Japan, June 1, 2006), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/speech0606.html>.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Jiyuu to han'ei no ko wo tsukuru [Creating an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity]," speech by Taro Aso to the Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, Japan, November 30, 2006, http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/enzetsu/18/easo_1130.html.

example, Naoto Kan's State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Yutaka Banno told the Japan-Central Asia Economic Forum in 2011 that the importance of the region to Japan lay in "the strategic importance this region has from a geopolitical standpoint," adding that its stable development was "of utmost importance to the stability of Eurasia."⁴⁷ Later that year Yoshihiko Noda's Parliamentary Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi spoke in similar terms at the Central Asia Plus Japan Senior Officials' Meeting, saying Central Asia is a "strategically vital" region whose stability is "extremely important" for that of the rest of Eurasia.⁴⁸ In general, policymakers espoused views in support of Japan's intent to use Central Asia as a "springboard" to the broader Eurasian region.⁴⁹

Under Abe's second administration since 2013, Japanese policymakers have given prime attention to Central Asia's geopolitical importance. Abe's trip to Central Asia in 2015 has been understood by policymakers and analysts as a clear geopolitical move in response to China's "One Belt One Road" initiative. Though Abe himself shied away from references to geopolitical rivalries in his October 2015 policy speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, his message that Japan would not be left behind on Xi's OBOR initiative rang loud and clear in Japan. Akio Kawato, former Japanese Prime Minister to Uzbekistan, wrote in *Newsweek Japan* that "it is looking very much like the truth that this region is becoming the scene of a New Great Game among the U.S., China, and Russia," quoting Mackinder's maxim of the Heartland of Eurasia being the key to control of the world.⁵⁰ Taking a slightly different tack, physicist and foreign policy commentator Homare Endo, known in Japan for her memoir of her experience as a living witness to China's civil war, wrote in the same journal that Abe's trip was a Japanese step into "China's backyard" where Beijing has roped off a "sphere of

⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-Central Asia Economic Forum Keynote Speech," by Yutaka Banno, Tokyo, Japan, July 2011, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/svm/speech110726.html>.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Chuo Ajia Purasu Nihon taiwa dai rokkai SOM kaigou," remarks by Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi, December 1, 2011, http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/enzetsu/23/eymg_1201.html.

⁴⁹ David Walton, "Japan and Central Asia," in Emilian Kawalski ed. *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors* (Singapore: Routledge, 2010), 276.

⁵⁰ Akio Kawato, "Chuo Ajia wo sei surunowa dareka, Abe rekihou no katarezaru shinni" [Who Controls Central Asia: The True Significance of Abe's Visit], *Newsweek Japan*, October, 29, 2015, http://www.newsweekjapan.jp/stories/world/2015/10/post-4046_1.php.

influence.”⁵¹ China’s response to Abe’s visit was to run a state media analysis piece arguing that China is so far ahead of Japan in terms of infrastructure and energy investment as well as trade ties in Central Asia that Beijing need not be concerned about Japanese interest indicated by Abe’s visit.⁵²

Japanese Policy in Southeast Asia

Whereas Japanese policy toward Central Asia essentially began with the republics gaining their independence upon the breakup of the Soviet Union, its policy in Southeast Asia falls on a deeper historical context in which Japan has had to grapple with the legacy of Japanese occupation in World War II. Although Japan’s re-engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-World War era started out with a non-geopolitical focus on people-to-people and heart-to-heart engagement, in recent years under the Abe administration its focus has shifted to enhancing strategic cooperation with Southeast Asian states in a way that reflects geopolitical competition with China.

The foundation of Japan’s Southeast Asia policy rests on the Fukuda Doctrine, which was developed in the 1970s and steers clear of geopolitical competition. The Fukuda Doctrine was introduced by Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in 1977 after negative reactions to Japanese business activities in the region forced Japan to take a more comprehensive approach. Japan had reconstructed its relations with Southeast Asian states through a war reparations program that promoted Japanese investment, helping reconstruct the region as both an important source for raw materials for Japan’s economy and a key market for Japanese goods.⁵³ The rapid increase in Japanese economic presence in Southeast Asia provoked wariness among local populations, who perceived Japan as an “economic animal” exploiting Southeast Asian resources in an asymmetrical relationship that favored Japan.⁵⁴ After these negative sentiments spilled over into riots

⁵¹ Homare Endo, “Abe souri Chuo Ajia rekihou to Chugoku no ittai ichiro” [Prime Minister Abe’s Central Asia Tour and China’s One Belt One Road], *Newsweek Japan*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.newsweekjapan.jp/stories/world/2015/10/post-4029.php>.

⁵² Lin Yun, “Zhongguo bi Riben geng qiang, Anbei xiazhu Zhongya nan kangheng” [China Is Stronger Than Japan, Abe Puts Down a Bet in Central Asia], *People’s Daily*, October 23, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/1023/c70731-27734171.html>.

⁵³ Tang Siew Mun, “Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States,” in *Japan’s Relations with Southeast Asia: The Fukuda Doctrine and Beyond*, ed. Lam Peng Er (New York: Routledge, 2013), 95.

⁵⁴ Jusuf Wanandi, “ASEAN–Japan Relations: The Underpinning of East Asian Peace and Stability,” in Tadashi Yamamoto, Charles Morrison et al. (eds.), *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2003), 6.

that erupted in Southeast Asian capitals during Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka’s tour of the region in 1974, Japan made a major reappraisal of its relations. Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda introduced the new approach at a speech in Manila, explaining it would be based on three principles: 1) Japan would never become a great military power, 2) Japan will consolidate a relationship of “mutual confidence and trust based on heart-to-heart understanding” with Southeast Asian states, and 3) Japan will be an equal partner of ASEAN and cooperate with it to build peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia.⁵⁵ With its emphasis on non-militarism and people-to-people relations, the Fukuda Doctrine casts Japan as a non-threatening, peaceful actor that will not take part in geopolitical rivalry. Based on this non-threatening policy, Japan developed strong multilateral ties to ASEAN through the ASEAN Plus Japan dialogue platform in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, in recent decades Japan has increasingly departed from the non-threatening Fukuda Doctrine model and used Southeast Asia as a playing greater importance of the geopolitical significance of the region. The contrast between the Fukuda Doctrine and more recent, security-focused policy helps illustrate how Japanese thinking has shifted toward greater prioritization of geopolitical concerns.

In recent years, Abe’s concept of a “democratic security diamond” surrounding



Southeast Asia reflects clear geopolitical thinking about the region. Abe introduced the concept in late 2012 amid high tensions between China and some ASEAN states in the South China Sea. He warned that the South China Sea was in danger of becoming a “Lake Beijing,”⁵⁶ reflecting the language of Robert Kaplan who spoke of the Pacific as

⁵⁵ Fukuda Takeo, speech given at Philippine parliament, August 18, 1977. In *Japan’s Relations with Southeast Asia: The Fukuda Doctrine and Beyond*, ed. Lam Peng Er (New York: Routledge, 2013), 158-162.

⁵⁶ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>.

an “American Lake.” He goes on to propose that Japan, India, Australia, and the U.S. state of Hawaii “form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific,” calling for a tighter alliance among these countries. This “democratic diamond,” at the center of which lies Southeast Asia, bears remarkable similarity to Mahan’s call in 1901 for a closer alliance among the United States, Germany, and Japan to counter threats in Asia from land-based powers.⁵⁷

Abe’s administration has also taken steps to enhance security ties with ASEAN as well as bilateral security relationships with ASEAN members and South China Sea claimant states Vietnam and the Philippines as part of a strategy to make this “democratic security diamond” a reality. Since coming to office in 2012, Abe has pursued a strong pro-ASEAN policy, in 2013 becoming the first Japanese prime minister to visit all 10 ASEAN states while in office.^{58 59} Abe’s government has also sent Minister of Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida and other senior officials on frequent trips to ASEAN states and ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in Tokyo in 2013, where Japan secured a commitment by member states to enhance cooperation on freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters.⁶⁰ At the same time, the Abe government has strengthened bilateral security cooperation with SCS claimant states Vietnam and Philippines through ODA and defense equipment transfers. Since signing a declaration on strengthening strategic partnership with the Philippines in June 2015, Japan has agreed to provide 10 patrol boats to the Philippines and worked toward a defense transfer pact that would allow Japan to provide secondhand SDF aircraft to the Philippines.⁶¹ In Vietnam, Japan pledged in 2014 to provide six patrol vessels and in 2015 held defense consultations that resulted in a pact allowing Japanese vessels to use Vietnam’s

⁵⁷ Mahan, *The Problem of Asia*.

⁵⁸ Mie Oba, “Challenges to the New ASEAN-Japan Partnership in the Changing Regional Circumstances,” March 26, 2014, <http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/diplomacy/pt20140326014352.html>.

⁵⁹ “With visits to all 10 ASEAN nations, Abe’s China containment strategy complete,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 18, 2013, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201311180082.

⁶⁰ “Vision Statement on Japan-ASEAN Friendship and Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 14, 2013, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000022449.pdf>.

⁶¹ “Japan, Philippines strike broad accord on defense equipment transfer,” *The Japan Times*, November 20, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/20/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-philippines-strike-broad-accord-defense-equipment-transfer/>.

deepwater port at Cam Ranh Bay alongside the South China Sea.⁶² The provision of patrol boats to the two countries is aimed at enhancing their capacity to police waters in the South China Sea and is part of a move toward “strategic use” of ODA outlined as an objective in 2013’s National Security Strategy.⁶³ Through maritime capacity-building in Vietnam and the Philippines as well as diplomatic efforts with ASEAN, Japan is working to secure international support to deter Chinese aggressive activity in territorial disputes, all as part of a strategy of enhancing Japan’s geopolitical position in the region and preventing China from doing the same.

Implications

While Beijing’s OBOR initiative enhances China’s position on the Central Asian and Southeast Asian frontiers, Japan has been increasingly using geopolitical principles to step up its own engagement in the same regions and ensure it is not left behind. With ideas of how to enhance their states’ geopolitical positions on the Asian continent driving policymakers in both China and Japan to deepen engagement in these regions, the two countries seem to be headed on a collision course.

Geopolitical frameworks cast competition between China and Japan, as well as other U.S. allies in Asia, as a zero-sum game. The discourse of critical geopolitics helps explain the dangers of this approach: Gerard Toal writes that historically, classical geopolitics has “peddled dangerous simplifications” about world politics and given rise to nationalist and assertive unilateralist tendencies that push governments to resort to violence.⁶⁴ The more Chinese and Japanese policymakers adopt this framework, the more we can expect to see a resurgence of virulent nationalism and actors to take uncompromising stances on disputes such as those in the East and South China Seas. In Central and Southeast Asia, as China and Japan each invest more in their economic,

⁶² Mina Pollman, “Amid South China Sea Tensions, Japan Strengthens Ties With Philippines, Vietnam,” *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/amid-south-china-sea-tensions-japan-strengthens-ties-with-philippines-vietnam/>.

⁶³ Mizuho Aoki, “Abe looks to put his stamp on foreign aid,” *The Japan Times*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/06/23/reference/abe-looks-put-stamp-foreign-aid/>.

⁶⁴ Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal), “Understanding Critical geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22:2-3, 107-124.

diplomatic, and security engagement, they will be increasingly unwilling to step away from these projects or yield to one another in these relationships.

To be sure, there are a number of factors that mitigate the dangers of this geopolitical rivalry. Popular dissatisfaction in Japan with the Abe's security policies limits the extent to which his government can push a geopolitically-focused agenda, while economic interdependence between China and Japan serves to make both sides unlikely to engage in any direct conflict. More specifically, there is potential for cooperation between Japan and China on jointly funding infrastructure projects in Central and Southeast Asia, such as could happen if Japan were to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank. Nevertheless, if the two countries continue the trend of increasingly vying for influence in key regions of Asia at the same time as viewing themselves as locked in geopolitical competition, they will increasingly find themselves at each other's throats, thereby worsening an already somewhat tense relationship.

Geopolitical rivalry is only one aspect of the Sino-Japanese relationship, and policymakers in each state also view their relationship through other lenses and with an eye to containing competitive hostility. However, it is important not to ignore the fact that the lens of geopolitical rivalry is becoming increasingly salient in each state. Since China and Japan are increasingly viewing their actions in Asia through the lens of geopolitics, it is important for others to examine their interaction in the continent through this lens as well.