"Silk Road" as foreign policy discourse: The construction of Chinese, Japanese and Korean engagement strategies in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT
Through analysis of the evolution of the Japanese, Chinese and South Korean narratives of the Silk Road, this paper argues that the content and the nature of these Silk Road strategies changed with time and the international environment. Thus, this paper claims that, the notion of the Silk Road has changed from a static concept of a historical trade route into a product of social construction of a number of powerful states – strategies that are constantly shaped, imagined and re-interpreted. In this sense, the Silk Road is not a foreign policy doctrine but rather a discursive strategy of engagement that largely exists in the realm of narration. This narration is also a matter of social construction that is subject to change depending on the international environment of the country (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) that produces such narratives, context of a receiving region, the alternative narratives that compete for wider international acceptance and the country's vision of “self” and the “other” in the international context.

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in the emergence of a number of new regions. The southern periphery of the Soviet Union, consisting of five stans (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), is one of these newly emerging regions. In the Soviet era, this region was divided into Middle Asia and Kazakhstan; in the post-Soviet era, it has been largely referred to as Central Asia (CA). In geopolitical terms, however, this area has often been referred to as the Silk Road region. Many states have used the rhetoric of reviving the Silk Road to imply closer engagement with the CA region and its eventual integration into a network of economic ties. For instance, in its first initiative in the Eurasian region, Japan launched its Silk Road Diplomacy as early as 1996 under PM Hashimoto’s administration (Dadabaev, 2013). In 1999, the US proposed the Silk Road Strategy Act to expand the US presence in this region and to sustain Russian dominance (Cooley, 2015). South Korea subsequently launched a number of similar strategies through 2009–2013 under the “Silk Road” umbrella, to connect South Korea through Russia, China and CA railroad networks to energy and other resources in Eurasia. Finally, the Chinese official discourse has evolved from an emphasis on reviving the Silk Road through constructing Eurasian land bridges in the early 1990s to establishing the “One Belt, One Road” initiative in 2013 to revive the Silk Road region by linking China to other markets through the various infrastructure networks of CA.
The content and the nature of these Silk Road strategies changed with time and the international environment. The concept carried different meanings depending on the country that chose the Silk Road as a brand for its foreign policy engagement with the CA region and evolved depending on the tasks each of the countries employing it sought to accomplish through their “Silk Roads”. In this sense, the notion of the Silk Road has changed from a static concept of a historical trade route into a product of social construction upon which various states have built their relations within the CA 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. In this sense, the Silk Road is not a foreign policy doctrine but rather a discursive strategy of engagement that largely exists in the realm of narration. This narration is also a matter of social construction that is subject to change depending on the international environment of the country (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) that produces such narratives, the alternative narratives that compete for wider international acceptance and the country’s vision of “self” and the “other” in the international context.

This paper thus focuses on the manifestations of such Silk Road narratives in Chinese foreign policy and their Japanese and South Korean counterparts and raises the following questions: How do the “Silk Road” narratives in the Chinese, Japanese and Korean engagements in CA evolve? What is the process of their social construction? What is the mutual relevance of these narratives, if any? The primary objective of this paper is to address these questions and to stimulate debate on the use of the Silk Road narrative between both academics and policy makers.

Thus, by seeking an answer to these questions, this paper aims to demonstrate the evolution of the Silk Road narrative historically, geographically and in terms of the existential maturation of this foreign policy concept. Additionally, this paper aims to highlight the similarities and differences in the construction of the Silk Road narrative by expert (policy and academic) communities to demonstrate the mutual relevance of the Silk Road to the states seeking relations with the CA region.

Methodologically, this paper critically re-considers the Chinese, Japanese, South Korean and alternative cooperation discourses related to the Silk Road to which CA states are exposed. To accommodate this methodological process, this paper specifically engages in analysis of the Chinese Silk Road revival discourse as it developed from the early 1990s to the implementation of the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) initiative using the narratives contained in the works of influential Chinese experts (including academicians and policy officials). While such narratives are limited in official governmental statements, there are several Chinese academic inquiries that have informed the Chinese Silk Road discourse and shaped Chinese foreign policy toward CA. To examine the case of Japan, this paper discusses the Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy of PM Ryutaro Hashimoto (1997), the Central Asia Plus Japan Initiative (CAJ) under PM Junichiro Koizumi (2004) and the intentions of PM Shinzo Abe’s CA initiatives (2015). To explore Korea’s Silk Road discourse, the paper focuses on the President’s Roh Moo-

2. Internalizing the post-Soviet vacuum in Chinese, Japanese and Korean engagements in CA

China, Japan and South Korea faced similar uncertainties in their relations with post-Soviet states following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eventual independence of CA republics. Lack of a clear understanding of the foreign policies of the newly independent states complicated the task of formulating clearly defined interests in the region. In the aftermath of the Cold War, both China and Japan also confronted changes in their own economies and international standings and in the development of their international affairs. Therefore, the interests and foreign policies that they developed toward this region were largely socially constructed through interactions with these new states, as seen in the dynamics of the constantly changing agendas of the Chinese (Silk Road to Shanghai Five toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and OBOR) Japanese (Eurasian/Silk Road Diplomacy towards CA-Japan and PM Abe CA) and South Korean (Roh Moo-hyun’s Comprehensive Central Asian Initiatives of 2006 to Lee Myun-bak’s New Asia Initiative of 2009 and Park Geun-hye’s Eurasia initiative of 2013) initiatives.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was an unprecedented and unpredictable event that left many inside and outside the USSR uncertain about how to conceptualize approaches toward this region. This uncertainty was felt both in China and Japan immediately after the fall of the USSR. It is not coincidence that the first proper studies of the CA region were not published in China until the mid-1990s. Attempts to shape the understanding of the Chinese expert community appeared to intensify beginning in approximately 1995 with the publication of Zhōng yà yan zy'yu (Research into CA) (Li, 1995), Zhōng guo he xin du li di Zhōng yà guo jia guanxi shì (Relations of China with newly independent states) (Xing, 1996), Zhōng yà ugo gaikukan (The general situation of 5 CA states) (Pei, 1997), Zhōngguó yuì Zhōng yà (China and Central Asia) (Xing, Zhao, & Sun, 1999) and others. These studies offer initial insights into the domestic and foreign policies of CA states and attempt to integrate them into the Chinese foreign policy agenda. However, as is stated in these and similar studies, although relations with CA states were of high priority, they
were not considered of crucial importance for China at the time (Wang & Ding, 1997).

The primary objective of Chinese foreign policy at the early stage of CA states’ independence was not to construct a cohesive and long-term Chinese dominance strategy in this region. Rather, the Chinese expert community and general governmental policy were attempting to preempt the negative influence of CA states on Chinese domestic and foreign policies. In addition, in the context of the post-1989 intensification of anti-China sentiment in the West following the Tiananmen Square protests, China was attempting to build a coalition of China-friendly countries (Cornelissen & Taylor, 2000). During this period, China’s internally oriented policies also showed the first signs of shifting, with greater attention being devoted to the intensification of Chinese foreign policy in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. Such intensification was both “defensive” in its intention to counter the negative impact of the events of 1989 on the international image of China and “offensive” as China sought new opportunities in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR (Zhao, 2013).

The new environment in the CA region that China had to adapt to required new patterns of interaction, with negative and positive consequences. In terms of the negative consequences, the following were mentioned by various Chinese authors as requiring careful attention.

First, China had previously had to consider the interests of only one state, namely, the USSR. With the collapse of the USSR, Chinese policy makers realized that they had to manage relations with a multiplicity of states, which required greater flexibility with respect to this region (Xing, 1996). Interestingly, many conclude that, in the early years of CA independence, China did not aim to benefit from interactions with CA states and was not engaged in rivalry with any states in this region. Such rhetoric is similar to the rhetoric of the Japanese government described below.

Second, the Chinese agenda with respect to CA in the early 1990s did not involve economic expansion into this region but focused more on resolving territorial disputes and preventing support for separatism. In addition, Chinese policy makers emphasized that China needed to consolidate regional support for the “one China policy” and prevent CA states from recognizing Taiwan (Xing, 1996; Xing et al., 1999).

Third, pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic calls in some CA states were received as alarming signs in China due to their potential expansion into Chinese territories (Xing, 1996, p. 101; Xing et al., 1999, pp. 155–170).

Fourth, though post-Soviet CA republics were endowed with natural resources, the potential development of these resources was complicated by the differences in the states’ approaches and lack of common vision, which hindered the regional integration of these states. These differences, according to the Chinese expert community, were considered a weak point that could be exploited by groups with evil intentions. In addition, Chinese policy makers regarded regional rivalry among CA states as a factor that further weakened their prospects for cooperation and development (Xing et al., 1999, pp. 135–140).

Fifth, China regarded initiatives by other states in the CA region in the late 1990s as attempts by larger states to exploit this region (in the case of the US, as a containment strategy against Russia or China (Xing et al., 1999, p. 212), and in the case of Russia, to consider CA as its “backyard” (Xing et al., 1999, p. 209)), which China was not prepared to accept and tolerate. This last point does not necessarily imply that Chinese discourse on CA has been shaped by a decolonizing motivation. Rather, it implies that China was willing to oppose attempts by other countries to consider the newly created vacuum in CA as an opportunity to expand their dominance. This principle is not new to Chinese foreign policy, but in the CA context, it has been warmly received by CA counterparts who also feared that their relatively small countries would eventually become victims of great-power politics (Dellios, 2017).

The launch of the SCO was largely a response to these negative consequences and introduced a mechanism to address all of these Chinese concerns (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002). While the SCO’s objectives and the Shanghai spirit in the decision making of this organization implied security for all participating states, the Chinese rhetoric about this organization emphasized its importance for Chinese interests, while regional security was used as a tool primarily to secure Chinese interests (Fan, 2003). In this sense, the creation of this organization was pragmatic and utilitarian rather than focused on common identity formation (Sun, 2001a, 2001b, 2007).

In contrast with the negative consequences associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as mentioned above, there were several opportunities for Chinese participation that Chinese policy makers considered to be positive side effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

First, CA states received a chance to decolonize themselves and escape the dominance of Russia. Thus, Russian pressure in the areas bordering China diminished as China’s border with Russia shrank and “buffer states” were created between Russia and China.

Second, the independence of CA states offered new opportunities for China to develop alternative transportation infrastructure that would allow China to access European markets using the territory of the newly independent states rather than exclusively relying on Russian railroads. Although Chinese experts have not considered Russia to be an imminent threat to Chinese corporate interests, they considered CA alternative railroads to be a safeguard against potential Russian pressure should relations between China and Russia worsen in the future. In recent years, Chinese policy makers have adhered to the policy of creating as many alternatives as possible, as demonstrated by the construction of a railroad between Uzbekistan and China, the intent of which is to balance reliance on Russian and Kazakh railroads by constructing an alternative one running through Kyrgyz territory.

Third, the CA region can play a significant role in China’s ability to secure energy supplies (Xue & Xing, 1999). According to the Chinese narrative, this needs to be done by promoting the active participation of Chinese corporations in oil production, thus ensuring China’s energy security.

Fourth, the emergence of a number of smaller states between Russia and China allowed the Chinese government to reduce the number of troops stationed along the border with the former USSR as a result of the decreased
threat posed by Russia and the increased security provided by the buffer states positioned between Russia and China.

Similarly, Japan was also motivated to redefine its place in the changing international environment with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the emergence of newly independent states and the need to redefine its relations with Russia and China (Hashimoto, 1997). Thus, efforts to establish a Japanese engagement strategy in the CA region were launched in the form of Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy (1996–2004) by PM Hashimoto Ryutaro, who was a believer in interdependence, terming it “mutual necessity” (Hashimoto, 1997). He hoped to bring the nations of the former Soviet Union into a network of interdependence by establishing a largely economic and, to a degree, political Japanese presence in Eurasia and by facilitating Japanese participation in resource exploration. Although Japan achieved its aim of providing much needed economic and humanitarian assistance to the newly independent states, other goals of the initiative were hardly achieved. The failures of these early Japanese engagements were rooted in the following reasons.

First, despite historical references to the Silk Road connections, Japanese foreign policy poorly defined CA, as its policy in Asia often excessively focused on ASEAN countries (Dadabaev, 2013, 2014). Even in his Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy speech, PM Hashimoto stated that “the primary objective of Japan’s foreign policy was to maintain the peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region”, while the Silk Road region was defined as an ambiguous new frontier (Hashimoto, 1997, p. 2). In this sense, the task of “defining” the importance and place of CA for Japan has been and remains one of Japan’s greatest challenges due to its relative distance from the CA region, which makes it more difficult for Japanese policy makers to “frame” this region’s importance for Japan in practical terms. Some scholars suggest that this lack of interest is an advantage for the Japanese foreign policy approach in this region, as Japan could claim to be motivated by interest in developing the region rather than by possible benefits for Japan (Uyama, Len, & Hirose, 2008, p. 111). As recognized by several diplomats who established Japanese embassies in the region, most of the initiatives were achieved spontaneously through the enthusiasm and commitment of ambassadors and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Ministry of Finance and other related agencies. In 1997, PM Hashimoto referred to the ASEAN Regional Forum and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in his Eurasian speech as the main platforms “to stage Japan’s basic foreign policy”. His Eurasian diplomacy reflected such limitations and called for a needed “push to enlarge the horizon of our foreign policy” beyond the Asia-Pacific, building new ties with Russia, China, the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus (Hashimoto, 1997, pp. 2–3). However, even the “CA plus Japan” dialogue scheme of 2004 was modeled on Japanese engagement with ASEAN countries by borrowing the “ASEAN Plus 3” model and applying it to CA (Kawato, 2008). Some at the MOFA and in the expert community now suggest that this scheme can be used to create an ASEAN-like organization in the CA region (Chuou Ajia hatten no kokusaiteki iyoken to Nihon, 2015, pp. 32–33).

In terms of institution-building, in contrast to China and Russia, Japan advocates the notion of “open regional cooperation” in CA. All the Japanese Prime Ministers who championed CA engagement – including PM Hashimoto, with his Eurasian diplomacy; PM Koizumi, with his CA plus Japan initiative; and PM Abe, with his CA policy – referred to inclusive regional institutions (which do not exclude Russian and Chinese participations) that do not limit other countries’ participation. There are several reasons for such an approach. Japan traditionally supports fair and unrestricted regional cooperation in other parts of the world, as inclusive regional institutions offer members more flexibility than closed regional institutions. PM Hashimoto’s initiative emphasized the importance of Asian countries, with PM Hashimoto going so far as to say that “world diplomacy has shifted from axis of the Atlantic Ocean and Europe…to axis spanning the Eurasian landmass encompassing many nations, small and large” (Hashimoto, 1997, p. 3). The official Japanese discourse on the CA plus Japan initiative created under PM Koizumi’s watch also emphasizes that, by advocating open regionalism, Japan does not intend to curtail Chinese or Russian interests in this region.

Japan aims to use its distance from this region to gain a competitive advantage (when compared to other countries like China and Russia): it attempts to position itself as a neutral mediator for CA states by suggesting that its distant geographic location prevents it from dominating and exploiting CA states. In this sense, the official Japanese discourse states that this scheme was designed to encourage CA states to seek alliances with each other while Japan would provide the technical and financial assistance needed to support such alliances. This objective of the CA plus Japan initiative is rooted in the legacy of PM Hashimoto’s Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy. According to this initiative, it is “important for Japan to promote regional cooperation aiming to create a transport, telecommunications and energy supply system and for Japan to cooperate in developing energy resources in that region” (Hashimoto, 1997, p. 10).

Seeing common values as the basis for cooperation, Japanese foreign policy favors the notion of partnerships rooted in universal values (such as democracy, a market economy, the safeguarding of human rights and the rule of law). In this sense, Japan did not develop norms of behavior, similar to the Shanghai spirit. However, as many in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan believe, institutionalization of the global values mentioned above has been an over-inflated expectation, and an understanding of the importance of cooperation among CA states is lacking (Makhmudov, 2016, p. 83). Thus, while Japan hopes for the institutionalization of such universal values, these values are not used as a pre-condition for its aid programs. Japanese officials often display sympathy toward CA states’ difficulties in adopting universal values, claiming that Japan was also a recipient of economic aid before it attained the status of an economic superpower (Furuoka, 2007; Sato, 2011). In a sense, such duality of approach became a certain common norm of behavior between CA states and Japan: Japan does not completely abandon its commitment to universal values but does not use it as pre-condition for cooperation offering CA states an opportunity to adjust and build their domestic conditions for implementation of these universal values.
Retrospectively, PM Hashimoto’s Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy initiative of 1997 was followed by the Central Asia plus Japan initiative implemented in 2004 under the PM Koizumi administration to expand Japanese participation in this region and establish an organization through which Japan and other CA counterparts could discuss issues vital to CA regional development. The establishment of this initiative was followed by PM Koizumi’s visit to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2005. To further integrate this region into Japanese foreign policy, FM Taro Aso proposed the concept of “Central Asia as a Corridor of Peace and Stability” in 2006, which involved incorporating this region into larger Japanese initiatives in the Middle East, to which CA is also conceptually connected.

Since the 2015 visit of PM Abe, a more goal-oriented, practical approach to cooperation with CA focused on functionality and the practical outputs of such cooperation has been prioritized over the value-based approach. This shift may be due to a realization by Japanese leadership that, for CA, the process of democratization is a longer-term objective, and in the meantime, the economic opportunities of cooperation need to be taken.

South Korea has the same limitations as Japan, with its distant location and lack of transportation infrastructure to and from CA markets. However, South Korean “Silk Road” rhetoric is somewhat more practical than Japanese one. South Korean corporate economic interests were present and more active in the region beginning in the early 1990s, with Daewoo building a major car manufacturing plant in Uzbekistan; in addition, a large number of assembling and manufacturing facilities were built under the Samsung and LG brands in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to locally produce electronics parts. In the early 1990s, the South Korea was among the leading investors in this region. In addition to building the car manufacturing plant in Andijan, the South Korea has also been involved in setting up a number of enterprises that have built and sustained the Uzbek and Kazakh economies. Among these were the Daewoo Unitel (communications company) and Kabool Textiles (cotton processing and textile production company) plants in Uzbekistan and the Samsung assembly plants in Kazakhstan (Hwang, 2012, pp. 1–7).

However, conceptually, engagement with CA received a boost with the President Roh Moo-hyun administration of 2003–2008. This period featured two visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2004 and 2005, respectively followed by the international conference launched by the government of South Korea in December 2005. As a result of that meeting which included participants from CA countries (to include governmental representatives and various public organizations), the South Korean government “Comprehensive Central Asia Initiative” has been formulated and adopted in 2006. The goal of the program was to establish a proper standing for South Korean interests in Eurasia and in practical terms, to secure long-term energy resources supply.

In 2006, Uzbek President Karimov and his Korean counterpart signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership, providing a new framework for South Korea investments in Uzbekistan. This paved the way for extraction agreements in 2006 between Korea National Oil Corporation (KNOC) and Uzneftegaz granting KNOC exclusive exploration rights of Chust-Pap and Namangan-Terachi.

Such intensification of contacts between South Korea and CA states resulted in Korea-Central Asia Forum establishment, the first of which has been held in Seoul in November of 2007. The goal of this forum is to create a platform for enhanced exchange of ideas between government and private sector participants regarding possible ways to enhance cooperation between South Korea and CA states (Park, 2016). Up until 2017, the forum was held annually. However, in 2017, as if reflecting the need for further intensification, The Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat has been established in Seoul as a joint permanent body (Shin, 2017). Although the branding and the function of this forum is somewhat similar to the Japanese one, the implementation and structure of the Japanese forum includes several tracks of dialogues (SOM meetings, dialogues of intellectuals, etc.) without permanent body. In a sense, the Japanese platform aims to shape otherwise chaotic tracks of dialogues while the Korean forum aims to organize a permanent institution for cooperation. As of now, efficiency of both bodies is unclear as no clearly defined outcomes are produced by both.

Prime Minister Han Seung-soo’s visit to Central Asia in May 2008 resulted in South Korea signing a contract to purchase from Uzbekistan 2600 tons (worth around $400 million) of uranium in between 2010 and 2016 which equaled an amount roughly 9 percent of South Korea’s annual uranium consumption. Similar agreement has also been concluded between South Korea and Kazakhstan. In particular, Korea National Oil Corporation agreed on a deal worth $85 million to obtain a 27 percent stake in Kazakhstan’s Zhambylo oilfield, located in the Caspian Sea. According to this agreement, the South Korean corporation agreed to jointly explore that oilfield together with KazMunaiGaz. In addition to the interest in energy resources as well as humanitarian assistance plan which included $120 million economic aid to Uzbekistan and additional aid for improvement of medical facilities, there were few other factors which influenced South Korean motivations in CA. As mentioned above, the South Korea has also been proactive in transportation infrastructure construction, with Hanjin Group establishing and developing a Navoi logistics hub (Hwang, 2012, p. 3).

After a visit in 2009, President Lee Myung-bak again visited CA in 2011 and participated in opening several enterprises with South Korean capital in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Thus, geographically, the South Korean Silk Road in the CA region largely refers to these two countries, while other countries are of lesser interest (Lee, 2009). Similar to the Chinese and Japanese concepts, the Korean Silk Road strategy also evolved in response to the growing opportunities for Korean enterprises in CA focusing on energy resources and logistics as well as manufacturing. In this sense, the practical application of South Korean initiatives somewhat resembles the Chinese and the Japanese ones in an attempt to pragmatically use emerging new opportunities. However, the Chinese, Japanese and Korean Silk Road projects are somewhat different in scale of coverage, agenda and primary motivation. In this sense, Korean engagement under the umbrella of the Silk Road
largely represents a branding strategy for economic engagement rather than being an ideological driver, as seen in the Chinese and Japanese patterns of establishing their presence in CA.

As a side effect of such successful cooperation, Uzbek President Karimov appointed a Korean national to serve in his government charged with the task of building the e-governance system which signified the degree of trust toward the South Korea. Eventually, e-governance has been largely considered to be a success story which facilitated appointment of another Korean national into the government under the new President Mirzieev's administration. In addition, notions of smart cities and urban management as well as systems used in South Korea have been accepted as the modes for application in Uzbekistan. In this sense, the South Korean influence has been felt not only in the area of economic cooperation but also in political and societal modernization.

3. Chinese, Japanese and Korean politics of the “Silk Road”

As stated above, the notion of the Silk Road is contested; there is no consensus on its meaning. As observed above, the Silk Road frequently represents a preferred framing for engaging CA states and other FSU countries, and it has become a contested concept in terms of both its constituent principles of such engagements and the region that it covers.

The Chinese narrative regarding CA was initially a response to various challenges that China regarded as constraints on its own position in this region. Thus, the initial attempts at conceptualizing a new Chinese positioning in this region were made in response to such challenges. However, after 2000 and with the successes of the SCO, China sought to consolidate its security, economic and political agendas under the same umbrella. One of the most difficult tasks was to frame this new agenda in a way that would make it acceptable to CA states and Russia. For this task, the notion of the Silk Road and its historical connotations proved highly useful.

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The Japanese Silk Road narrative and its modern re-emergence are connected to the values of common historical heritage and cooperation between Japan and CA countries. PM Hashimoto, in his speech, emphasized that “Japan has deep-rooted nostalgia for this region stemming from the glory of the days of the Silk Road”. He cited the common heritage of the Silk Road as “a solid foundation upon which to build firm relations with these (CA) countries as friendly states” (Hashimoto, 1997, p. 4).

For Japanese PM Hashimoto, the areas of interaction included, first, assisting these states in establishing affluent, prosperous domestic systems under a new political and economic structure. Additionally, by providing assistance, Japan aimed to help these states forge peaceful and stable external relations. Second, Japan aimed to utilize the great potential of these states to serve as bridges to create distribution routes within the Eurasian region (Hashimoto, 1997, p. 4). In terms of particular directions, Japanese Silk Road Diplomacy channeled Japanese foreign policy toward CA states into three areas: political dialogue; economic cooperation, including cooperation for natural resource development; and cooperation in peace-building, nuclear non-proliferation, democratization and fostering stability. These areas and directions were largely inherited by the subsequent administrations. Interestingly, the prospective areas and principles of interaction within Japanese Eurasian (Silk Road) Diplomacy bear many similarities to the Chinese engagement principles, as explained below.

PM Hashimoto emphasized three main principles of Japanese engagement: establishing trust, establishing a mode of “mutual benefit” and “maintaining a long-term perspective” that would allow the outcomes to be inherited and further built upon by subsequent generations. These are also strikingly similar to the principles of Chinese engagement discussed below.

Under the 2nd Abe administration, the same common heritage has been re-emphasized, with FM Kishida stating during his visit to Turkmenistan in May 2017 that “for many Japanese people, Central Asia is associated with the Silk Road, as it brought Buddhism, which is the basis of the Japanese culture, and enriched Japanese culture by introducing civilizational and cultural influences of the West; all were communicated through the Silk Road” (Interview with FM Fumio Kishida, 2017, p. 3).

The task of prioritizing areas of interaction with these CA states was another important issue for both China and Japan. Both countries attempted to build their relations with this region based on their historical connections with CA and on new Silk Road projects.

The Chinese frames of engagement in the CA region defined in the late 1990s resemble those outlined in Hashimoto’s Eurasian diplomacy platform. In particular, similarities can be found, in defining areas of cooperation, in China’s adherence to the principle of mutual benefit in economic relations and adherence to the market economy system, maintaining balance of imports and exports between China and CA states. In addition, the Chinese discourse on efficient cooperation outlines transportation and logistics as among the most important areas with high potential (Xue & Xing, 1999, pp. 102–106).

Another similarity shared by the Japanese and Chinese frames of engagement can be found in the fact that both Japanese and Chinese official discourses assert that corporations should take the lead in facilitating economic projects. Both Japan and China emphasized the importance of facilitating transportation connectivity and access to CA markets through Chinese railroads and logistical hubs. However, as stated by Chinese scholars, many Chinese companies felt hesitant to enter CA markets without governmental guarantees and support because of the high risks related to these newly formed markets (Xue & Xing, 1999, pp. 127–130). The Chinese government dealt with such concerns by establishing governmental support frameworks for the foreign expansion of Chinese corporations, as detailed in the section on the OBOR initiative below. However, for the Japanese corporate community, similar concerns existed and still exist as the main obstacles to wider Japanese participation in CA markets.

There are also similarities in terms of how China and Japan conceptualized the exclusivity of China–CA and Japan–CA relations, respectively. The Japanese concept of Eurasian
Diplomacy in the Silk Road area emphasized regional building based on the principle of open regionalism under the leadership of the Japanese government and including China and Russia. The Chinese discourse of the late 1990s portrays this region as one that has yet to define itself under the constantly changing circumstances, thus making it premature to define certain aspects or areas (be it security, trade or production) in which China could establish its own sphere of domination in this region (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002, pp. 9–11). Thus, Chinese policy and scholars depicted Chinese engagements in this area as hypothetically open to Russia and other states, including those within the SCO. Therefore, many in the Chinese academic community did not rule out that Japan could contribute and participate in this region together with China (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002, pp. 9–11).

In terms of the concept of providing stability and security to this region, again the notions outlined in Hashimoto’s Eurasian speech and the contemporary discourse of Chinese academics and policy-makers bear striking similarities. Both emphasize the importance of developing the economic structures of the CA region by encouraging the creation of production capacities, because both Japan and China frame this task as the most important for ensuring security. China appeared to be aware of the problem of cheap and low-quality Chinese products flooding CA, which the Chinese expert community believed would damage long-term Chinese interests and China’s image in this region.

Finally, both Japan and China envisaged their own models of development for CA states. In the Hashimoto initiative, the PM of Japan emphasized the importance of facilitating the transition to a market economy using Japanese experience. Similarly, China also emphasized that the Chinese experience of modernizing the Socialist system might be useful for the CA states (Xing, 1996, pp. 152–8). Thus, both countries claimed to possess a model of development that could serve as an example that CA states could adapt to their own conditions.

However, there are also differences in the Chinese and Japanese approaches. For instance, in the Japanese case, the government is the primary agent of Japanese penetration into CA, while other non-state actors are not delegated proper roles. In the Chinese case, policy makers and academicians emphasize the importance of not only government-to-government interaction but also region-to-region ties. Thus, areas of China with close geographic proximity to CA are expected to play significant, if not the most important, roles in this process.

The Korean usage of romanticized images of Silk Road to emphasize common heritage and mentality is somewhat similar to the Japanese rhetoric. For instance, in 2014, President Park made reference to Ahal-Teke, a horse breed in Turkmenistan, and compared it to the history of economic development stating that “Just as the Ahal-Teke became an excellent steed as a result of endless self discipline, in order to survive in a rugged mountainous area, we too will be able to make the Eurasia Initiative a success if both the government and companies push forward by gathering power with the spirit of challenge and talent” (Yoon, 2014). However, the emphasis of her speech was more on energy and transportation specifically realization of South Korean “Eurasia Initiative” of which “Silk Road Express,” is consistent part. According to these plans, South Korea aims to connect the Trans-Korean (TKR) and Trans-Siberian (TSR) railroads by linking Busan, China, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. This makes the usage of “Silk Road” branding by the South Korean government more compact and pragmatic than the Silk Road Diplomacy of Japan, as the South Korean government basically follows the lead of its corporations to secure wider access to CA markets.

In terms of evolution of South Korean initiatives, President Roh Moo-hyun administration launched “Comprehensive Central Asia Initiative” as early as in 2006, served as the basis for the “energy Silk Road diplomacy” established by President Lee Myung-bak.

President Lee during his visit to CA in 2009, secured an agreement to build a petrochemical plant in Attyrau with a budget of USD 4 billion, a USD 4 billion contract to construct power generation plants in Balkhash and a USD 4 billion deal to participate in development of a gas field in Uzbekistan (Fumagali, 2015, 45). In 2011, during another visit by President Lee, the construction of the Ustyurt gas chemical complex was launched. In addition, South Korea’s Hanjin (parent company of Korean Air) received exclusive rights from Uzbekistan to develop its Navoi International Airport into an intercontinental logistic hub.

In the same year, the Ministry of Strategy and Finance announced that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would be receiving a package cooperation deal, while other smaller CA countries would benefit from a deal-to-deal approach (Hwang, 2012, pp. 1–7). While both China and Japan differentiate between smaller and larger countries in CA, the South Korean approach clearly distinguishes Uzbekistan as the most populous and energy-rich and Kazakhstan as the most economically viable and energy-endowed countries in the region. South Korea therefore approaches these countries with particular interest. Thus, geographically, the South Korean Silk Road in the CA region largely refers to these two countries, while other countries are of lesser interest.

President Park Geun-hye was also supportive of the energy-related and transportation focused South Korean engagement in CA by developing this initiative not only to include the energy cooperation but also expand the notion of Silk Road to build “Silk Road express” which is a idealized concept that refer to the railroad to connect North and South Koreas, Russia, Central Asia and Europe (Yoon, 2014).

If this transportation network is realized, South Korea receives an additional transportation network for two pillars which are of crucial importance for South Korean economy namely, international trade and investment areas. As a result, this might lead to the diversification of its economic ties. In terms of principles of South Korean engagement, Park administration’s Eurasian initiative envisaged several goals: first, enhancing partnerships with Eurasian states and integration with Eurasian states for development of new markets for South Korean companies; Secondly, developing transportation linkages and trade networks to balance South Korean connections which are currently focused on China and the US by developing Eurasian direction. And thirdly, to facilitate positive impact on North–South (Korea) relations by promoting economic growth through networks and linkages mentioned above. Interestingly, similarly
to the Chinese and the Japanese rhetoric, South Korean initiatives also emphasize the principle of “win-win” cooperation for all those involved (Fumagali, 2015; Kim, 2015).

One additional factor for South Korean attempts to engage CA states, which drastically differs from both Japan and China, is the substantial ethnic Korean community mainly residing in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan but also present in Kyrgyzstan and other states of the region (Calder & Kim, 2008). As is well covered in the relevant literature, the Korean diaspora in CA is one of the largest in the world. It emerged as a result of mass deportation policies in late 1930s from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia. Under this policy, the Koreans were settled in CA. They were well-received by CA populations and thus integrated into the structure of their societies contributing to development of republics where they re-settled.

4. OBOR as the Chinese “self” and its Japanese/South Korean “others”

The idea of the revival of the Silk Road as a concept for the enhanced cooperation of the states along its historical route is not new. In 1992, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the re-emergence of the Silk Road was referenced by the Foreign Minister of China at that time, Qian Qichen, during his visit to Uzbekistan. In 1994, PM Li Pen also confirmed the importance of the Silk Road for relations with CA states and the potential for its re-emergence. However, the discussions regarding the intensification of contacts along the Silk Road were mostly focused on transport infrastructure development, as exemplified by the construction of the Second Euro-Asian Continental Bridge (the first being the one connecting China to Europe through Russia), which was completed in September of 1990 and opened to full traffic in June 1992. The railroad has been used by many countries, including China and South Korea. The support for the Second Euro-Asian Continental Bridge was overwhelming within the Chinese expert community (with some referring to it as a Golden Belt), as it offered the advantages of being shorter (and thus economically more beneficial), politically independent of Russian control (in the case of a hypothetical worsening of relations with Russia) and covering areas of smaller countries that cannot exert pressure on China (Xing, 1996, p. 168). The economic benefits of the second bridge have been obvious for China, as the railroad has brought in revenue from the transportation of goods through China. At the same time, it also benefited Japan and South Korea, as they were presented with an economically sound route for transporting their goods to Europe.

Building on this success, discussions regarding additional railroads and a new Eurasian land bridge have been held regularly among China, its CA counterparts and Russia. However, the most comprehensive plan, which goes beyond one railroad project and aims to create an infrastructure network and intensifies the mutual integration of regional economies, was formulated only in 2013, when the Chinese government proposed the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (consisting of six economic corridors, of which the Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia, and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” are relevant to CA) OBOR concept (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017, pp. 11–17). The AIB that was established as an alternative to regional and global financial institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank (in partnership with the BRICS New Development Bank, the Silk Road Fund and the SCO Interbank Association), will serve as the financing arm of the OBOR (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). In addition to the economic benefits of this project, the Chinese government aims to address the lack of trust among some of its smaller neighbors (which was recognized in the early 1990s and described in the first section of this paper) by offering infrastructure development, which sends a message to CA states that China is genuinely interested in contributing to their development (Joint Declaration on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between the People’s Republic of China and Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015). Such efforts are designed to further strengthen the “soft power” potential of China in Central Asia by offering a non-coercive, non-military (non-security-focused) approach.

The OBOR initiative represents an increasing effort to shape positive Chinese involvement in CA that constructs a sense of common belonging. Such efforts can be considered part of China’s response to the calls from regional states to implement wider integration and “to create common political, economic and informational space and to instil in the peoples of the six nations a sense of a shared destiny” (Nurgaliev, 2009).

On many occasions, Chinese officials have emphasized that OBOR is not an “expansion of China” but rather benefits all parties (Ambassador: ‘One Belt, One Road – is not expansion of China, 2017). As described above, China indeed did not contemplate a major economic offensive in CA in its initial engagement with the region. However, many in CA feel that the announced goal of improving the livelihood of people in the OBOR area could be threatened by the economic and cultural expansion of an economically, politically and demographically superior power (China) in this region (Auezov, 2013, 2015).

Thus, new Chinese initiatives aimed at reviving the Silk Road as an area of economic cooperation, although attractive in economic terms, raise concerns among the CA states. Initiatives toward cooperation along the Silk Road involve elements such as developing transportation infrastructure (pipeline, railroad and highway construction) and enhancing trade (supported by currency swap agreements). In principle, these economic initiatives are needed. However, in terms of economic structures and the capabilities of states, many regard these initiatives as largely benefiting China, using the resources and territory of the smaller CA states but producing very marginal growth or income-generating effects for them (KyrgTag, 2012). In particular, experts suggest that previous transportation infrastructure development designed to transport CA oil and gas to China also paved the way for the expanded penetration of cheap Chinese consumer goods into the CA region, leaving little opportunity for local production capacities to develop (Khodzhaev, 2007, pp. 69–72).

In addition, some of the projects initiated under the scheme have the potential to alienate smaller countries and
thus ignite intra-regional rivalry in CA, as exemplified by the railroad construction from Uzbekistan to China through Kyrgyzstan. This project connects the Uzbek city of Andijan and the Chinese city of Kashgar, with the route running though Kyrgyz Osh and Irkesham. This is the shortest route from China to Uzbekistan, and both countries are interested in its construction (Uzbekistan wants to build Andijan-Osh-Irkisham-Kashgar, 2017). Interestingly, this route was discussed between the governments of China and Uzbekistan in 1992 during the visit of the then-Foreign Minister of China Qian Qichen to Uzbekistan. In 1994, Uzbek President Islam Karimov spoke of the importance of constructing a direct railway from Uzbekistan to China through Kyrgyzstan during PM Li Pen’s visit to Uzbekistan (Khodzhaev, 2007, p. 103). While China has for years been interested in several transport corridors that would connect China with other markets in Europe through CA’s transport networks, this railroad is of particular interest and importance to Uzbekistan. In 1998, China signed an agreement with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to begin construction of this road and motorway (Khodzhaev, 2007, p. 103). The agreement allows China to shorten the transportation route for goods and to avoid using Kazakh railroads. In addition to the fact that the use of Kazakh railroads results in a longer transportation time and higher costs for China, Chinese experts were also concerned about overdependence on Kazakh railroads and the Chinese city of Kashgar, with the route running through Kyrgyz Osh and Irkesham. This is the shortest route from China to Uzbekistan and both countries are interested in its construction (Uzbekistan wants to build Andijan-Osh-Irkisham-Kashgar, 2017).

In 2012, Kyrgyzstan drafted its own railroad project along this route. However, for both China and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan’s plans would result in a longer transportation time for their cargo and much higher costs for the project in general, and they therefore appear to be difficult for China and Uzbekistan to accept (Pannier, 2017). Thus, what is convenient for China might incur the displeasure of both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

This structure of economic interactions led to a paradoxical situation: the higher the levels of interdependence and penetration into these regions by China, the greater the concerns expressed by local governments and business communities about the possibility of Chinese domination affecting the economic development of the smaller member states (Auezov, 2015). This situation again calls for a proper conceptualization of the OBOR initiative that reflects both Chinese interests and the long-term interests of all CA states.

In terms of Japanese involvement, similar calls for a more mutually beneficial structure of relations were heard from CA countries during the recent visit of Japan’s PM to CA from October 22–28, 2015. The visit of PM Abe to Central Asia can be termed historic because it was the first time a Japanese PM had visited all five Central Asian states. PM Koizumi visited CA in 2006, but his visit was limited to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. PM Abe’s visit built upon previous Japanese engagement strategies as mentioned above. Japanese experts generally attempted to differentiate Japanese engagement in CA from Chinese engagement by arguing that the Chinese “assistance” provided to CA was largely a gesture of goodwill, like a “firework shoot” before the launch of major infrastructure-related projects (Chuou Aija hatten no kokusaiteki jyoken to Nihon, 2015). This argument was supported by the earlier Chinese policy discourse regarding ODA being no more than a symbol of goodwill (Xing, 1996, pp. 104–106). Thus, in the Japanese official and academic discourse, the Japanese involvement in this area referred to as the Silk Road region in PM Hashimoto’s initiative was framed as a strategy that went beyond infrastructure construction and instead attempted to transfer technology and knowledge.

The goals of PM Abe’s visit to CA in 2015 partly confirm the description above and can be considered four-fold. First, the Japanese PM attempted to deepen and strengthen the presence of the Japanese business community in CA, as exemplified by the contracts signed during the visit for the joint exploration of gas fields in Turkmenistan (Galynikish), Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Such intensification of direct investments by Japanese companies with the support of the Japanese government has been encouraged by the majority of CA governments, as exemplified by the speech of the Tajik President, who explicitly emphasized the importance of a switch from humanitarian aid projects to foreign direct investment by Japanese companies (Joint Statement of Tajik President and Japanese PM, 2015). Second, the visit was an attempt by the Japanese PM to secure orders from CA countries for Japanese corporations, as exemplified by the Japanese and Kazakh commitment to work on the construction of a nuclear plant in Kazakhstan and the Japanese and Turkmen agreement (between Turkmengas and JOGMEC) on the construction of mineral resource processing factories in Turkmenistan. Currently, Kazakhstan is also negotiating with Russia on the possible construction of such a plant. Third, PM Abe aimed to further boost the “Cool Japan” soft-power initiative by supporting the construction of a Japanese university in Turkmenistan, cooperating on IT education in Tajikistan, launching the Youth Technological Innovation Center in Uzbekistan and starting similar educational initiatives in Kazakhstan (Joint Statements of Japanese PM and CA Presidents, 2015). Fourth, Abe’s visit offered further humanitarian aid to the smaller republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for various development-related projects.

Some experts have argued that Japanese technologies and the loans for the projects mentioned above are a sign of competition between China and Japan because they offer alternatives (to Chinese projects) and thus competing sources of funding (Rakhimov, 2014). Some have even suggested that “incongruent interests between the two powers already hint at the potential for friction in the region” (Liu, 2016, p. 1). However, there is little evidence to suggest that these loans for Japanese projects in Turkmenistan aim to affect Chinese projects. Although the field of mineral extraction coincides with Chinese interests, Japanese loans and projects in Turkmenistan do not aim to exclude China’s investment there. In addition, the Japanese initiatives extend beyond energy resources to encompass human resource development, joint university and research facility construction and human security infrastructure (Interview with FM Fumio Kishida, 2017, p. 3). Additionally, as has been expressed by PM Abe, OBOR has potential; it is important that both Japan and China contribute to the peace, prosperity and resolution of international problems, and Japan is prepared to cooperate (with China) where it can (Shimbun, 2017). South
Korea has also attempted to use opportunities created by the Chinese OBOR initiative for Korean gain. However, it should be noted that South Korean Silk Road Diplomacy was launched earlier than the articulated OBOR initiative. Thus, it represents a branding umbrella scheme for expanding South Korea’s corporate interests in this region. By the time South Korea’s Silk Road Diplomacy was announced, South Korea’s economic presence in CA, in particular in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was significant in terms of ODA assistance, direct investments and human resource development. In terms of aid disbursement, Uzbekistan ranks the highest in the region, accounting for a third of the assistance volume, while Kazakhstan is second highest, accounting for approximately 6%. South Korean assistance and investment programs, in addition to considering the importation of resources from CA to South Korea (similar to the 2008 contract to import 2600 tons of uranium from Uzbekistan), also aim to link CA resources to international markets. In this way, these programs aim to establish economically sustainable production, extraction and reproduction cycles that are marketable in CA and beyond the region and benefit South Korean conglomerates.

Park Geun-hye’s Eurasia initiative in October 2013, aimed to further conceptually develop South Korean engagement in this region called for linking energy and logistic as is explained in the previous section. In attempting to construct an engagement of its own, South Korea is not counter posing this initiative to the Chinese OBOR initiative thus again supporting the point that there is no structural rivalry and competition between the Chinese, South Korean and Japanese initiatives both at the level of discourse and practice. Some even linked such South Korean behavior which shows the signs of hybrid of pragmatic opportunity-seeking in addition to idealizing and ambitious goal-setting to the notion of “middle-power diplomacy” and is interpreted as “a search for conceptual breakthroughs by political leaders and policy intellectuals, with the aim of elevating the country’s place in the world and enabling more proactive diplomatic roles” (Kim, 2016). As they conceive, the weakness of South Korean approaches (which to some extent can also be applied to explaining the Japanese policies in CA region) is that the concepts forwarded by such ‘middle-power’ states fallen short of articulating a clear, longer-term strategic vision linked to coherent policy practices (Kim, 2016).

5. Conclusions

As is demonstrated in various parts of this article, the notion of the Silk Road has been successfully utilized by a number of states in their engagement with the CA region. Although in foreign policies the Silk Road is presented as a static concept, this paper argued that the Silk Road as a term has come to represent the diverse concepts of engagement of a number of powerful states vis-a-vis the CA region. This article also demonstrated that the “Silk Road”-branded strategies of these states have initially been reactions to the collapse of the Soviet Union and attempts to minimize the negative effects. They have later grown into initiatives seeking CA countries within foreign policies of China, Japan and South Korea. Such attempts to place Silk Road into one’s foreign policy are undergoing constant evolution and social construction depending on international environment and constrains. As demonstrated by the policies of China, Japan and South Korea, the Silk Road is not a foreign policy doctrine for these states but rather a discursive strategy of engagement that largely exists in the realm of narration. This narration is also a matter of social construction that is subject to change depending on the international environment of the country (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) that produces such narratives, the alternative narratives that compete for wider international acceptance and the country’s vision of “self” and the “other” in the international context.

In a similar manner, Silk Road strategies are an attempt to both define “self” (what Japan, China and Korea stand for) and socially construct the image of “others” to win the hearts and minds of targeted states by demonstrating how the (Chinese, South Korean and Japanese) “self” varies and is much more advantageous than alternative “others”. In this sense, as demonstrated in this paper, China, Japan and South Korea had no pre-determined final goals or aims in their Silk Road strategies from the start. Rather, these states re-constructed and re-shaped their strategies according to changing perceptions and discursive categories of “self”, “identities”, “values”, “threats” and “opportunities”.

As is demonstrated by the discussion of each “Silk Road”, this rhetoric has been selected because it is one of the few available that can emphasize the common history, heritage, values and identity of such diverse countries. The “Silk Road” is also frequently referred to as an engagement strategy because it projects the image of decolonization and reflects the agency of CA states as independent actors, which is easy for the target states to comprehend and thus accept.

Finally, frequently, the “Silk Roads” are depicted as having no similarities with each other. Although their distinctions are obvious, this article also demonstrated that there are certain similarities in the logic of their construction and in the discursive expressions that are meant to be the “selling points” of these initiatives. In the cases above, these related to how China, Japan and Korea depict their genuine interest in contributing to the development of the CA region, how they create historical linkages to modern-day Silk Road projects and how they emphasize the “win-win” structure of their relations. However, these represent elements of coercion that are meant to ensure a better reception of the goals and objectives of the diverse “Silk Roads” envisioned by these powerful states.

In addition, the areas of energy-research development and transportation networks are always featured as the areas of high potential. However, these areas are attributed with different meanings and importance. While for South Korea, Silk Roads may imply construction of railroad infrastructure, for China, this type of infrastructure is no more than a tool in achieving ambitious tasks in the areas of security, political stabilization and economic expansion. The dynamism in cooperation along these areas differs depending on geographic proximity of each country. For China which shares borders with CA states, logistics of such cooperation is less problematic compared to South Korea and Japan.
Conflict of interest

The author does not have any conflict of interest.

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