

A stepping-stone in exploring the narrative about the “Silk Road” in Central Asia

Timur Dadabaev, *Transcontinental Silk Road Strategies: Comparing China, Japan and South Korea in Uzbekistan*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2019; 180 pp., ISBN 9780367206734. £120.00.

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The concept of the New Silk Road, announced by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2012 in Astana, is firmly entrenched in the foreign policy strategies of Eurasian countries. Besides China, other Eurasian countries employed this concept in their rhetoric and foreign affairs strategy; Japan and South Korea are not exceptions. The peculiarity of this concept is that it is rather vague, while quite inclusive. Thus, it became possible to enhance foreign policy in Eurasia using the rhetoric of the New Silk Road. Dr Dadabaev, in his book *Transcontinental Silk Road Strategies: Comparing China, Japan, and South Korea in Uzbekistan*, analyzes cases of relations between China, Japan, and South Korea with the countries of Central Asia (with a significant focus on Uzbekistan) and compares the narrative around the concept of the “New Silk Road” built by these states. He outlines that China, Japan, and South Korea besides having material motivations to engage in relations with Central Asian partners also have socially constructed ones, namely “cultural environment and identity” and they “affect states’ behavioral incentives” (p. 49). Having socially constructed components among driving factors of Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean policies in the Central Asian region is one of the main thesis and message Dr Dadabaev transmits through his book.

The analysis, saturated with facts and data, showed that despite the presence of socially constructed factors, economic interests dominate in the case of South Korea. As Dr Dadabaev stresses that “the Korean government does not play the pivotal role of initiating entrepreneurial activities, but it is often pulled into playing a more prominent role in the region where Korean enterprises have already built a significant economic presence” (p. 158). Furthermore, as Dr Dadabaev adds, that success of Korean companies attracts other Korean companies to enter the country or regional market. While South Korean advancement in the

region is primarily driven by the interests of private conglomerates, the Government uses the “Silk Road” construct as a branding umbrella that encompasses the de-colonization component, developmental motivations, and region-building ambitions (p. 89). This approach echoes in South Korean middle power state rhetoric that is actively being used since Roh Moo-hyun’s presidency, which is sometimes considered as a branding instrument (Ayhan, 2019).

As for the Chinese approach, Dr Dadabaev demonstrates that there is a blend of constructivist and realist reasoning behind the motivations to engage with Central Asian states. From the constructivist standpoint, Dr Dadabaev emphasizes that China tries to build common identities around regional cooperation and good neighborhood rhetoric (p. 52); however, for China, economic motives are also very strong, but they do not have a spill-over effect as South Korean projects do. Unlike South Korea and Japan, for China, there is an extremely important factor: national security. As Dr Dadabaev outlines “[A]ny project that brings about development for the Chinese government has the implication of also addressing the socio-economic roots of terrorism and crime” (p. 71). So, it is in China’s interests to invest in the development of the Central Asian republics to stimulate their secularization, as China is afraid of religious movements, especially on the border.

As Dr Dadabaev shows, Japanese policy toward the Central Asian countries is the most humanitarian-oriented. Compared with Chinese and South Korean companies, Japanese companies are rather passive in penetrating Central Asian markets, and the government is concentrating on providing official development assistance (ODA) to develop the region. The additional strong factor that determines a difference in the Japanese approach is that unlike China, Japan is situated quite remotely in geographical terms, hence the Central Asian vector of Japanese foreign Affairs is considered as sub-vector of international affairs, where Japan tends to appeal to universal values (p. 27), rather than regional politics where, for example, China tries to build rhetoric around the regional cultural background. In that sense, Japanese behavior toward Central Asia is the most dependent on socially constructed factors.



Dr Dadabaev, in his analysis of the cases of relations between China, Japan, and South Korea with the Central Asian republics, operates with significant factual data, supporting his position. Moreover, this book is the most comprehensive comparative analysis of the policies of China, Japan, and South Korea in Central Asia to this date, giving a clear idea of the strategies and approaches that the East Asian trio uses in relation to this region, which has been described as the “last Asian frontier” (p. 1) for being significantly underexplored region.

Although this book is definitely useful for students and professionals who investigate the strategies of China, Japan, and South Korea in Central Asia, as well as who want to critically analyze the strategy and narrative of the “New Silk Road,” this book is among pioneering works that pave new research avenues. In particular, Dr Dadabaev has mainly focused on Uzbekistan in this book and to a much lesser extent on Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries, so subsequent research may touch upon the strategies of the trio of East Asian countries toward Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, Dr Dadabaev

developed the topic of constructing a narrative primarily from the point of view of the highest political circles, while with a constructive approach in the analysis, one can also evaluate how the constructed narrative is perceived by the authorities and people of the Central Asian states. Do they believe the narrated messages and symbols, do the public believe that they have a shared cultural identity emanating from the Silk Road heritage?

Thus, I would like to conclude that this book is an excellent, thought-provoking work, full of interesting and important factual information, offering to look at the relations of China, Japan, and South Korea with Central Asian partners (mainly Uzbekistan) through the prism of constructivism.

References

- Ayhan, K. J. (2019). Rethinking Korea’s middle power diplomacy as a nation branding project. *Korea Observer*, 50(1), 1–24.