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Japan's Alternative Projects for the Belt and Road Initiative: Competition Over the New Silk Road and Beyond *Japonya'nın Kuşak ve Yol Girişimine Alternatif Projeleri: Yeni İpek Yolu ve Ötesinde Rekabet*

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Abstract

This study attempts to analyze Japan's alternative projects for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although Japan stated that it could join the BRI and provide some funding, it has not become a member, yet. This paper begins with examining how the BRI is presented by China and how it is perceived by Japan. Then it elaborates on why Japan holds a different opinion and needs to develop its own alternatives for the BRI. Japan's alternative projects are examined in three parts. The first one is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, in which Japan plans to cooperate with India, ASEAN countries and the democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The second one is the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a joint project by India and Japan, including the whole African continent, surpassing the scope of the BRI. And last of all is the Japan-EU Partnerships, which include economic, strategic and infrastructural cooperation. Japan's alternative projects and partnerships all together cover and surpass the areas of the Belt and Road routes. It is important to note that Japan does not explicitly present these as an alternative to the BRI. Yet, having examined the relevant documents and maps of the projects, it is obvious that Japan has been developing alternatives for the BRI. What is most striking about all three of these projects is that Japan and its partners emphasize democracy, rule of law and human rights, the values that are not considered to be shared by China.

Keywords: Japan, China, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, Cooperation

Öz

Bu çalışma Japonya'nın, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ne (KYG) alternatif projelerini ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Japonya KYG'ye üye olabileceğini ve fon sağlayabileceğini belirtmiş olmasına rağmen, henüz bu girişime üye olmamıştır. Bu çalışma ilk olarak KYG'nin Çin tarafından nasıl sunulduğunu tahlil etmekte ve girişimin Japonya tarafından nasıl algılandığını incelemektedir. Ardından, Japonya'nın neden farklı bir görüş içinde olduğunu ve KYG'ye niçin kendi alternatiflerini geliştirme ihtiyacı duyduğunu ele almaktadır. Japonya'nın alternatif projeleri üç kısımda incelenmektedir. Birinci kısımda, Japonya'nın Hindistan, ASEAN ve Hint-Pasifik bölgesindeki demokratik ülkelerle işbirliği yapmayı planladığı Özgür ve Açık Hint-Pasifik Vizyonu açıklanmaktadır. İkinci kısımda, Hindistan ve Japonya'nın ortak projesi olan, KYG'nin kapsamını aşarak bütün Afrika kıtasını kapsayan Asya-Afrika Büyüme Koridoru irdelenmektedir. Sonuncu olarak ise ekonomik, stratejik ve altyapı işbirliğini içeren Japonya-AB İşbirlikleri ele alınmaktadır. Japonya'nın alternatif projeleri ve ortaklıkları bir araya geldiğinde, Kuşak ve Yol rotalarını kapsayan alandan daha geniş olduğu göze çarpmaktadır. Japonya'nın bu projeleri açıkça KYG'ye alternatif olarak sunmadığını da ayrıca belirtmek gerekir. Ancak söz konusu projelerin ilgili belgeleri ve haritaları dikkatli bir biçimde incelendiğinde Japonya'nın KYG'ye alternatif geliştirmekte olduğu bariz olarak su yüzüne çıkmaktadır. Bu üç proje açısından en fazla dikkat çeken şey ise Japonya'nın ve ortaklarının demokrasi, hukukun üstünlüğü ve insan haklarına, yani Çin tarafından paylaşılmadığı düşünülen değerlere vurgu yapıyor olmalarıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Japonya, Çin, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Hint-Pasifik, İşbirliği

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, China announced the One Belt One Road Project, which is now called the Belt and Road Initiative, connecting the Asian, African and European continents by land and sea. The BRI offers, first of all, win-win outcomes for its members, in terms of infrastructure and consequently, economic development. Since its announcement, two forums were held to which many countries in the world, including Japan, sent representatives. However, there is still some scepticism about the BRI and what China really aims with this massive project.

Japan is one of the main countries sceptical towards the BRI. Although Japan stated that it could join the project and provide some funding, if some transparency issues are resolved, it has not become a member of the initiative, yet. Furthermore, Japan's collaborations and partnerships with other states or organizations, such as India and the European Union (EU) seem to be a search for alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Japan's scepticism is not just related to the present political, and mainly territorial conflicts with China, but to China's historical claims in the region. Japan became a tributary state to China in the 6th century, accepting China's suzerainty. In this tributary system, Japan was in an inferior position and was under the protection of China, in return for paying tributes (Beasley, 1999: 20-24). China's recent rise is explained by some international relations scholars that a new tributary system is coming back. As much as it seems anachronistic to apply an archaic system to the international system of the 21st century, China's great power claim makes this argument plausible (Lee, 2018: 38). When the Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the Chinese foreign policy as the revival of the Chinese nation, and referred to a "peaceful rise", neighboring countries, including Japan, did not perceive it the same way. Xi's emphasis on China's imperial past is seen as an attempt to change the status quo. It is also alarming for Japan, for as recent as 2013, China stated that the former Ryukyu Kingdom, which is today Okinawa, used to pay tributes to China, implying that Japan's sovereignty on Okinawa might be challenged (Lee, 2014: 3-5).

It should be also noted that Japan is wary of any vengeful activity by China. At the end of the 19th century, Japan underwent a serious political and military modernization. Consequently, in 1895, Japan defeated China and obtained a large amount of money and land, including Taiwan (Westney, 1987: 13). Even though Taiwan was returned to China in 1945, following the Japanese defeat in the war, the nationalist Chinese who fled from the communists founded the Republic of China in Taiwan. This state was recognized as the legitimate Chinese government until the 1970s (BBC News, 2019). Hence, the present "Taiwan issue" and China's claims over Taiwan can be traced back to Japan's pursuit of being a leader in Asia in the 19th century. Furthermore, during the same period, Japan began to be more active on the Silk Road, challenging the Qing Dynasty's dominant position in the region. China's new Silk Roads both on land and sea by means of the BRI, therefore, have the potential to create a competition and risk for the Japanese interests (Esenbel, 2017: 17-18).

One of the most striking things about the BRI in the historical context is that it is compared to Japan's "Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" between the 1930s and 40s. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1937 and exploited the natural resources there by establishing a company to grow its own economy. Yet, the breakout of the World War II and the need for more oil and some precious metals made Japan turn towards Southeast Asia and colonize the countries in the region (Beasley, 1999: 244-247). At that time, Japan claimed that the "Co-Prosperity Sphere" would benefit all the nations in Asia and liberate them from the Western colonization. Nonetheless, Japan's motto "Asia for Asians" turned into nothing more than "Asia for the Japanese" (Tipton, 2008: 143-145). Today, China's emphasis on the "win-win relationship" reminds some the "Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", and it is questioned whether it is going to benefit all the nations included (Adem, 2015: 707). Xi Jinping's speech in the Communist Party Congress in 2017 is another reminder of Japan's failed project. Xi declared that a new Asian power will rise and protect its region, replacing the declining Western influence (Hanson, 2017).

Against this historical backdrop, this study attempts to analyze Japan's alternative projects for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It defends that Japan's disbelief towards the BRI has led Japan to develop alternative projects with other countries, which are also cautious about China's initiative. This paper begins with examining how the BRI is presented by China and how it is perceived by Japan. Then it elaborates on why Japan holds a different opinion and needs to develop its own alternatives for the BRI. Japan's alternative projects are examined in three parts. The first one is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, in which Japan plans to cooperate with India, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The second one is the Asia-

Africa Growth Corridor, a joint project by India and Japan, including the whole African continent, surpassing the scope of the BRI. And last of all is the Japan-EU Partnerships, which include economic, strategic and infrastructural cooperation.

1. How China Presents the Belt and Road Initiative

In September 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. In his speech, he reminded the audience of the Silk Road during 206 BC and 24 AD, which had connected China to the Central Asia and Europe. Xi proposed that a new Silk Road can be built again, on the basis of “mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit, mutual tolerance and learning from each other, as well as cooperation and win-win outcomes.” He also emphasized that China would “never intervene in internal affairs of the Central Asian countries, seek leadership in regional affairs, or operate sphere of influence.” He called this initiative the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and summarized its aims in five points; policy communication, road connectivity, trade facilitation, monetary circulation, and people to people exchanges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013).

The belt, passing through the Central Asia, aims to connect China's underdeveloped areas to Europe, while the road, called the Maritime Silk Road, seeks to connect the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean via ports and high-speed railways (Cai, 2017). According to the *Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative*, which might be one of the rare official documents on the BRI, the initiative aims to improve the connectivity between the Asian, African and European continents and their sea routes. Thus, the BRI will contribute to the development of the countries along the continental and maritime routes (The State Council, The People's Republic of China, 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative aims to provide connectivity by these six economic corridors:

1. New Eurasia Land Bridge: involving rail to Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland.
2. China, Mongolia, Russia Economic Corridor: including rail links and the steppe road—this will link with the land bridge.
3. China, Central Asia, West Asia Economic Corridor: linking to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey.
4. China Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor: Viet Nam, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Malaysia.
5. China, Pakistan Economic Corridor: This important project links Kashgar city in landlocked Xinjiang with the Pakistan port of Gwadar.
6. China, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor: This is likely to move more slowly due to mistrust over security issues between India and China (OECD, 2018).

Besides the BRI, China also established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in December 2015. The AIIB is a multilateral development bank similar to the Asian Development Bank and World Bank. The AIIB was founded to support “sustainable economic development, create wealth and improve infrastructure connectivity in Asia by investing in infrastructure and other productive sectors” and to “promote regional cooperation and partnership in addressing development challenges by working in close collaboration with other multilateral and bilateral development institutions”. Presently, four of the G-7 countries (France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) are members of the AIIB (Weiss, 2017). As of August 2020, the bank has 82 members in total, and Japan is still not one of them (AIIB, 2020). In 2015, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe referred to the AIIB's “lack of stable lending policies or a formal governance system”, indicating that Japan should be wary of becoming a member (Ito 2019:124). It might be suggested that Japan's cautious position towards the AIIB is also related to the understanding that the AIIB aims to compete with the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The President of the AIIB refuted this claim, stating that the AIIB is not a rival and that both banks can cooperate on “the common objective of promoting economic and social development in this region” (The Japan Times, 2017).

Despite China's efforts to present its initiative as a win-win project, there is scepticism about what China really aims. The establishment of the AIIB is considered as China's aim to have “its own World Bank”, so that it can have more sphere of influence than the US, challenging the US centered economic system. Since the AIIB is to help finance the BRI projects, it is speculated that China may have

more power to influence the trade and investment in the region, and even change the status quo (Weiss, 2017).

In 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* interviewed the Chinese President Xi Jinping regarding the speculations around the BRI and AIIB. Having been asked whether China is “trying to rearrange the architecture of global governance, away from the U.S. and toward China”, Xi Jinping replied that China is part of the global governance and that China has no objective to change the international order. Xi also emphasized that China and the US share responsibilities and that they should cooperate for regional and global security and stability. Regarding the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), Xi stated that the bank will meet the funding needs of the infrastructure projects in Asia. Furthermore, he stressed that China has no expansionist policies and has never had such policies in the past, either (Wall Street Journal, 2015).

In addition to the scepticism about the AIIB, it should be mentioned that Japan’s fear of entrapment between the US-China trade war is another significant factor. Japan has strong economic and security ties with the US, while its economic ties with China is stronger. Following the World War II, Japan has relied on the American security umbrella and has benefitted from the US leadership in the region, focusing largely on its own economic growth. Yet, this trade dispute threatens the liberal and multilateral economic sphere, as two different economic blocks, led by the US and China, might emerge. Japan does not wish to get into a position where it has to choose between the two blocks, because it means compromising either its security or its economy (Satake and Sahashi, 2021:19).

Although the BRI was presented as a massive project, and even “the project of the century” by Xi Jinping, an official document has not been released by the Chinese government about which projects and countries are included. The lack of a detailed report leads to ambiguity, and then to each country’s own interpretation regarding what China really targets by the BRI. In other words, seven years after the announcement of the BRI and despite two BRI forums chaired by China, there is still disbelief towards the project by the non-participant states (Ang, 2019). In October 2019, Tadashi Maeda, Governor of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation voiced his country’s doubt towards the BRI during his speech at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. He stated that the BRI has no plan or program, and that it does not have a clear definition (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2019).

That Xi Jinping has previously implied his aim to make China a global power and bring in “new type of international relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016) is widely regarded as China’s effort to build dominance first in Asia and then in the whole world. Therefore, it is presumed that the BRI does not just target interconnectivity between continents and people, but it also aims to politically affect the countries along the BRI, as well as the ones such as Japan and the USA (Heiduk and Sakaki, 2019: 94).

2. Japan’s Perception and Suspicion of the Belt and Road Initiative

In the Japanese Diet meetings, the issue of joining the AIIB was evaluated before discussions about joining the BRI. In 2015, some politicians suggested that Japan should join the Bank, but as of September 2020, Japan is one of the three G-7 countries that are not a member, besides the US and Canada. The reason behind why Japan does not join the AIIB is primarily related to the transparency problems about the loans. In March 2015, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe asserted his doubts on the “AIIB’s lack of stable lending policies or a formal governance system”. Finance Minister Tarō Aso, too, remarked that Asia needs infrastructure, however, there is uncertainty about whether the AIIB has the governance structure and the know-how required for financing the infrastructure projects. Aso also indicated that Japan’s doubts regarding these matters have not been answered, therefore, Japan is not willing to join the AIIB, unless there is transparency (Ito 2019: 124). For many Japanese commentators, the BRI is a part of China’s expansionist foreign policy in Asia and in the world. The initiative is seen as a defiance against the global sphere of influence of the US (Heiduk and Sakaki, 2019: 103).

Japanese opinion towards the Chinese initiatives was negative at first, but there was a change of tone in the following years. In November 2017, Prime Minister Abe attended a press conference following the APEC summit and talked about Japan’s stance towards the BRI, which was then called the One Belt, One Road:

As for the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, we look forward to this initiative making contributions in a forward-looking way to the peace and prosperity of the region and the world by adequately incorporating the thinking held in common by the international community

regarding the openness, transparency, economic efficiency, financial soundness, and other such aspects of the infrastructure. Japan wishes to cooperate from this viewpoint (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2017).

It is notable that the official Japanese discourse regarding the BRI has changed. However, Japan's stance is considered as a hedging strategy towards China. Japanese policies are presented as if Japan is willing to cooperate with China due to economic and political reasons. In economic terms, Japanese companies would like to be involved in the infrastructure projects in the BRI, and in political terms, it is more logical to cooperate with China, because President Xi will be in power for a long time (Ito 2019: 125). In 2018, the Chinese constitution was revised by the National People's Congress, and the two term (ten years) limit for the presidents was abolished. This amendment has enabled Xi Jinping to stay in power for life. Therefore, it is expected that Xi will attempt to expand China's sphere of influence by means of the BRI (NHK World, 2018).

Despite the changing discourse, Japan still approaches to the BRI in caution, and sees it more than an interconnectivity project. In 2019, NHK, Japan's national broadcasting channel, published a three-part article series on the BRI on its official website. The articles aim to explain what the BRI is, and it can be suggested that they also represent Japan's standpoint. The first article points out to the ports that are managed by China, via the BRI. It is stated that every country has access to the high seas, therefore, there is no point in drawing a line on the sea routes. Yet, the locations of the ports are of significance, as a state can position its military bases and navy vessels there. The article underlines that China finances the construction of various ports and gets their management rights, as is the case with Australia's Darwin port, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port and Greece's Piraeus Port. This means that China can use these ports however it wants and can even deploy armed ships (NHK, 2019a).



Figure 1. The Ports of Which China Has the Rights of Management or Use (NHK, 2019b)

Even though Xi Jinping emphasizes “mutual benefit” for everyone in the BRI, the NHK article focuses on China's internal demand for new markets. Following the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the Lehman shock in the same year, China increased its expenditure for the domestic infrastructure to avoid economic stagnation. In a couple of years, the whole China had access to high speed trains, in addition to the subsequently built highways and internet infrastructure. However, around 2013 there was a surplus of steel and cement, and it is when President Xi Jinping announced the BRI. In short, the BRI is a means for China to use its surplus products in the international investments (NHK, 2019).

Ito (2019: 118) draws attention to China's “double surpluses” problem, which is related to the aforementioned surplus of construction materials, as well as the surplus of foreign currency. In addition,

he asserts that China's GDP growth rate has decreased as of 2010, and the BRI is seen as a solution to the surpluses problem. What is more, it is suggested that BRI is also associated with China's "Made in China 2025 Strategy" (Heiduk and Sakaki, 2019: 95). China presents the BRI with "win-win outcomes", however, the projects are undertaken by Chinese companies and Chinese standards are imposed. These make other countries think that China has some other motives, such as expanding its sphere of influence by making developing countries dependent on China (Heiduk and Sakaki, 2019: 96-100).

On the other hand, Ehara compares the flying geese model to the BRI, and suggests that just like Japan used to be the leader of the flock of developing countries, now it seems like China has taken that role. And this time, there are more countries and international organizations in the flock. It is possible that Japan has not yet become a member of the flock, as it is too proud as a former leader and plans to form its own flock, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (Ehara, 2018: 43).

Shinichi Kitaoka, the head of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), evaluates China's management rights of Hambantota and likens them to the imperialist policies of Europe and Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries. He explicitly asserts that China has expansionist policies and Japan, as a neighbor to China, should work together with the US to counter any confrontation with China. Kitaoka acknowledges the need for infrastructure worldwide, but suggests that the BRI aims to increase China's political influence. He calls for "conditional cooperation" with the BRI, stating that China's intentions should neither be overestimated nor underestimated (Kitaoka 2019: 10-14).

3. Japan's Position Towards and Alternatives for The Belt and Road Initiative

It can be claimed that there are two main reasons why Japan attempts to develop alternatives for the BRI. One of them is regarding the economic issues and the other one is about security. In terms of economy, it is known that in 2010 China overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy. And especially after the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Japan has tried to lead the regional economic partnerships (Kuo and Nagy, 2018). As the US President Trump pursued more isolationist policies¹, Japan has begun to take on the leadership role against the Chinese plans both in Asia and in Europe (Johnson, 2018). Furthermore, the trade frictions between China and the US affect the countries in Asia more than those in the other regions. ASEAN member states, for instance, do not wish to be obliged to make a choice between the US and China. Therefore, the alternative projects led by Japan are mostly welcomed (Mukherjee, 2018: 835-59).

As stated above, there is also the security side of the issue. Japan has territorial disputes with China on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands located in the East China Sea. As China gets stronger in the economic sense, it spends more for its military build-up. China sends patrol ships near the islands, which are currently under Japanese administration, and sometimes violates the territorial waters of the islands. Japan, pursuant to the 9th Article of its constitution, do not hold a regular army, and is dependent on the US for its security and defense. Consequently, the weakening American hegemony both in the world and in the region, and a stronger China are concerning matters for Japan. On top of these, China's ongoing nuclear tests and support for North Korea increase the threat perception for Japan (Mukherjee, 2018: 835-59).

China's nine dash line claims in the South China Sea may also pose a problem for Japan, as Japan's flow of commercial goods and natural resources are provided via this route. On the other hand, some government-backed Japanese private companies are carrying out hydrocarbon search and extraction missions in this area. Hence, if the number of Chinese naval ships increases in the South China Sea, it has a potential to pose a commercial and energy security threat for Japan (Wallace, 2018: 886). Although the Belt and Road Initiative aims to interconnect Asia, Africa and Europe from land and sea, considering the problems in the East and South China Seas, the security problem becomes more dominant. According to Japan, this Initiative shows China's plan to turn into a hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific, rather than China's initial aim to develop this region (World Politics Review, 2018).

Japan, for the time being, chooses not to be a member of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe previously indicated that Japan could be a contributor, if some conditions are

¹ By isolationist, I specifically mean Trump's "America First" policy. In his 4-year term, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Agreement, the UN Human Rights Council and even UNESCO. This isolationist policy goes against the multilateral foreign policy approach that the US has pursued following the World War II (Lehnert & Kelly, 2020). Japan, the US's foremost ally in the Asia-Pacific has been negatively affected by this policy, especially in the case of TPP, where a multilateral trade agreement would benefit each member state more than the current bilateral ones.

met. Of these conditions are transparency and good management of the debt of the countries that are invested in. At this point, the prominent transparency problem is the “debt trap”. China signs infrastructure agreements with the countries on the Belt and Road route, and provides loans to finance the infrastructure projects. When a country, where the infrastructure is built, cannot pay its debt, as is the case in Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, the debt increases, and the infrastructure is leased to China for 99 years. Presently, China has the rights of management or use of various ports from Greece to Australia (NHK, 2019b).

3.1. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision goes back to Abe’s first premiership. His speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007, usually called the “Confluence of the Two Seas”, stands out, for he emphasized the responsibility of India and Japan in the region as the democratic countries in Asia:

We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the Two Seas is coming into being. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A "broader Asia" that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability -- and the responsibility -- to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007).

It is also necessary to point out that Abe delivered this speech years before the BRI, when China’s assertive behavior in the region was already apparent. Abe kept emphasizing this vision during his second term of premiership. In his opening speech for the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) on August 2016, Abe, once again, highlighted the significance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He stated that if these two oceans and the Asian and African continents are united, the world will be in full of prosperity and stability. He underlined Japan’s responsibilities in the Indo-Pacific to make the region “a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016a).

Prime Minister Abe declared the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” in his speech to the National Diet in 2018. It is noteworthy that Abe emphasized how the people in the region have benefited from the freedom of navigation and the rule of law, since ancient times, which reminds Xi Jinping’s reference to the ancient silk road. Yet, Abe focused more on “democracy, human rights, and the rule of law”, and stated that Japan is planning to work with the US, Europe, ASEAN, India and other countries that share these values. It should not be overlooked that the speech also included Japan’s intention to work with China in the infrastructure projects in Asia, on the condition that China accepts the aforementioned shared values (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2018).

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision intends to unite two continents, Asia and Africa; and two oceans, Indian and Pacific Oceans, and it has three aims. First of these is embedding the rule of law, free navigation and free trade in the region. Second one is to provide economic prosperity through establishing physical connections with the infrastructure projects, involving ports and railways. Furthermore, it includes interpersonal connections such as education and friendship, and institutional connections via free trade agreements. The third aim is related to the peace and stability responsibility. This aim contains the application of maritime law, humanitarian aid and counterterrorism. Japan plans to cooperate with many countries in the region, first of all with India and ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016b).

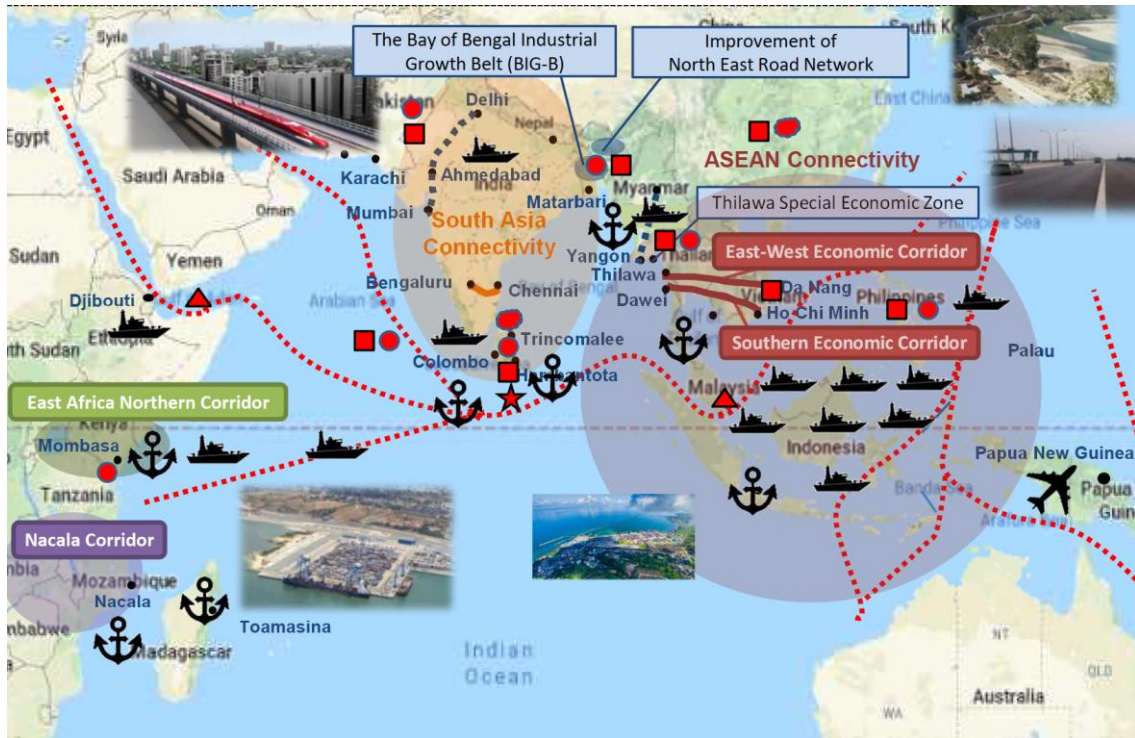


Figure 2. Japan’s planned and ongoing projects for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016b)

When the map for this vision is examined, it can be seen that the Japanese initiated infrastructure projects are almost parallel to China’s BRI projects and that they are very close to the ports under the Chinese control. At present, there are ongoing and planned projects as part of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision. It is shown on Table 1 that the initiatives are not limited to infrastructure, but also include joint security projects, such as mine cleaning, maritime security and so on.

Table 1. Japan’s projects and initiatives as part of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision (Prepared by the author based on the source below)

Project / Initiative	Country / Region
Port	Cambodia (Sihanoukville), Indonesia (Patimban), Kenya (Mombasa), Madagascar (Toamasina), Mozambique (Nacala), Samoa (Apia), Sri Lanka (Colombo, Trincomalee), Vanuatu (Port Vila), Bangladesh (Matarbari)
Airport	Papua New Guinea (Nazab)
Maritime Security and Safety	ASEAN, Brunei, Cambodia, Djibouti, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
Counterterrorism	Bangladesh, Kenya, Maldives, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Disaster Risk Reduction: ASEAN, Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam
Counterpiracy	Gulf of Aden, ReCAAP-ISC (in Singapore)
Mine Cleaning	ASEAN, Sri Lanka

Source: (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016b)

Similar to the Belt and Road Initiative, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision has also four economic corridors and two connectivity areas, which are:

1. East-West Economic Corridor
2. Southern Economic Corridor
3. East Africa Northern Corridor
4. Nacala Corridor: Mozambique
5. South Asia Connectivity
6. ASEAN Connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016b)

This vision has not been directly presented as an alternative to the BRI. As a matter of fact, it has been stated that the two projects should proceed in a way to complement each other (World Politics Review, 2018). Nevertheless, Japan's notable focus on international law and transparency points out to its problems with China, and it can be claimed that Japan adopts the motto of "keeping its friends close, and its enemies closer." Hence, Japan can increase its influence in Asia without confronting China (Brînză, 2018). Although it has not been explicitly stated, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision can be seen as a counter strategy against China, because Japanese politicians think that it will be better to take the initiative to form a wider alliance in the region before China does. They suggest that Japan should cooperate with the US, India and Australia, the countries that share democratic values such as human rights and rule of law (Hosoya, 2019: 21).

3.2. Asia-Africa Growth Corridor

Along with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, Japan and India are also partners in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor project. Japan and India share common interests, as they both have territorial disputes with China; India on the Kashmir region and Japan on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Therefore, it seems natural that both countries want to avoid a Chinese order in the region (Mukherjee, 2018: 840). Similar to Japan, India is cautious about the current trade war between the US and China, and it is wary of any sanctions that might be imposed by the US, if India collaborates with Chinese technology companies, such as Huawei (Nanda, 2020).

It should be noted that not just their problems with China, but also India's increasing power is effective in terms of Japan's partnership with India. India is the second most populous country in the world with 1.2 billion people and is also the largest democracy. Following China and Japan, India is the third largest economy in Asia. India's geographic location makes it significant for Japan, as well, for the Indian coast is close to the Middle East, where Japan's energy security lies (Horimoto, 2015: 7).

Regarding the energy security of both countries, the "String of Pearls Theory" (NHK, 2019b) explains why the BRI poses a risk. Based on this theory, China surrounds the Indo-Pacific by means of the ports it controls, containing India. This is a potential security problem for both India and Japan, not just because China deploys war ships and submarines to these ports, but also because of China's increasing control on the crude oil route (NHK, 2019b). In this respect, the Gwadar Port in Pakistan is in a crucial point, as it is located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, where Japan's most of the oil demand is supplied from the Middle East. The port is part of the China – Pakistan Economic Corridor, and is presently managed and being built by China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), which has the management rights of the port until 2057 (Kanwal, 2018).



Figure 3. The String of Pearls (NHK, 2019b)

In May 2017, a month after Gwadar was leased to China for 40 years, Japan and India announced the Asia – Africa Growth Corridor. The project was declared in India in the 52nd meeting of the African Development Bank. It is also remarkable that the project was announced a week after the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The foundation of the Asia – Africa Growth Corridor, in fact, is based on the Japan – India Joint Declaration, dated November 2016. In this declaration, it is emphasized that both countries should encourage industrial corridors and networks in Asia and Africa (Panda, 2017).

The Japanese opinion states that the Chinese proposals submitted to African countries are not pertinent to international norms. Moreover, they are against the future development of Africa. Japan is in competition with China both in Asia and in Africa in terms of infrastructure projects (Panda, 2017). On the one hand, Japan is concerned that China will be influential beyond the Pacific, on the other hand, India is concerned about the strategic consequences of China’s commercial activities. Thus, both countries are attempting to create an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (Johnson, 2018).

Asia – Africa Growth Corridor project aims to unite the Jamnagar Port in India with the Djibouti Port; the Mombasa and Zanzibar Ports with the Madurai Port, also in India. Asia – Africa Growth Corridor proceeds in parallel with China’s Maritime Silk Road, part of the BRI and it also has a structure similar to the “String of Pearls Strategy” attributed to China (Brînză, 2018). The four pillars of the project, based on the vision document of the Asia – Africa Growth Corridor, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The Pillars of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (Prepared by the author based on the source below)

Enhancing Capacity and Skills	Quality Infrastructure and Institutional Connectivity	Development and Cooperation Projects	People to People Partnership
Human resource training, education Pan Africa E-Network Develop Capacities to Sustain Infrastructure	Design and Project Development Investment Opportunities Connectivity Infrastructure, Renewable Energy, Telecommunication	Agriculture and Agro-Processing Health and Pharmaceuticals Disaster Management	Exchanges among people Tourism Education

Source: (RIS, ERIA, IDE-JETRO, 2017:7)

It can be deduced from these pillars that the Asia – Africa Growth Corridor does not just aim to provide sustainable quality infrastructure to the Asian and African continents, but it also seeks to educate and train people, to provide energy resources, to cooperate in agriculture and health and to enhance interpersonal exchanges through tourism and education.

3.3. Japan –European Union Partnerships

Japan's search for alternatives to the BRI has made Japan turn towards Europe, as well. China's increasing influence in Central and Eastern Europe has made Japan and the EU come together. In 2018, Japan and the EU signed a trade agreement, before which Prime Minister Abe visited Eastern European countries one by one and sought support. This shows that Japan's competition with China in Asia has expanded to Europe, following Africa (Johnson, 2018).

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was signed in July 2018 and entered into force in February 2019. It is estimated that this EPA is to increase Japan's real GDP by almost 1%, which amounts to around 5 trillion yen (around 47 billion dollars). It is presented as "a model of economic order in the 21st century based on free and fair rules" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020). This partnership agreement is significant, because it is the largest free trade agreement in the world, overshadowing the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), with regard to GDP. It is also important to note that the EPA amounts to around 25 trillion dollars (Lungu, 2019).

Japan and the EU also signed a strategic partnership agreement in July 2018, based on "shared values and principles, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights." With this agreement, Japan and the EU plan to cooperate in various areas including cyber security, technology and industry, resolving the issues of weapons of mass destruction and so on (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). This strategic partnership agreement is significant also because of military cooperation between the parties. The EU is discussing the formation of a European Army and Japan has a new policy called "Proactive Contribution to Peace", which aims to make Japan more active in security related issues in the world. It is known that Japan and the EU already cooperate near the Horn of Africa against piracy. If and when the global security environment loses its stability, this strategic partnership agreement may become more noteworthy (Lungu, 2019).

In addition to the economic and strategic partnerships signed in 2018, Japan and the EU signed an infrastructure agreement in September 2019. The full name of the agreement is "The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure". This agreement is a part of the EU's "Asia connectivity", a counter strategy against China's Belt and Road Initiative. Both Shinzō Abe and Jean-Claude Juncker, who signed the agreement on behalf of the parties, emphasized sustainability. They indicated that there should be no debt left for the future generations, when establishing connections between countries. Furthermore, they stated that countries should have connections with one another, instead of being dependent on one country. Abe pointed out to the Indo-Pacific region and marked that the sea route leading to the Mediterranean and Atlantic should be free and open (The Japan Times, 2019). Expressions such as sustainability, debt and free sea routes reveal Japan's, and with this agreement, the EU's concerns about the BRI. Although developing countries turn towards China to meet their funding needs, the Japan – EU partnership seems to be a better choice (Sharma, 2019).

The agreement is an indication of cooperation in various areas. It is aimed to establish connections including transportation, energy, and communication between people. Japan and the European Union intend to provide quality infrastructure to the third country partners, considering their financial capacities and needs. These countries are the ones in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Indo-Pacific and Africa. Free flow of data is also underlined to support the development of digital economy, along with infrastructure. Furthermore, the EU and Japan will maintain their cooperation in the areas such as hydrogen and liquefied natural gas (European Union External Action, 2019).

Japan and the EU envision to have an open, transparent and inclusive market for the investors and businesses. They plan to foster "free, open, rules-based, fair, non-discriminatory and predictable regional and international trade and investment, transparent procurement practices, the ensuring of debt sustainability and the high standards of economic, fiscal, financial, social and environmental sustainability". Both parties aim to work with international and regional organizations such as G7, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. In terms of increasing the interaction between the

Japanese and European people, both parties plan to launch the EU-Japan Joint Master Program (European Union External Action, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to analyze Japan's alternative projects for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although China presented its massive project as a win-win for each member country, some countries including Japan have been sceptical towards the BRI, due to the lack of transparency of China's funding strategies. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Japan's scepticism surpasses the transparency issues. As China gets more powerful in the economic and military terms, its historical claims in its region as a former empire evoke some threats for the neighboring countries. The arguments regarding the resemblance between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, or theories on China's reestablishing a tributary system are considered as a move to change the status quo, thus, as a threat to national and international interests. Following some discussions in the Diet, Japan announced that it could join the BRI, on certain conditions. Yet, as of September 2020, Japan is not a member and it has already begun developing its own alternative projects with other countries both in Asia, Africa and Europe.

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision is apparently an alternative to the Pacific leg of China's Maritime Silk Road. Japan's planned and ongoing projects for this vision involve building ports, airports, roads and bridges to increase connectivity between the countries in the region. And it is not limited to infrastructure projects, but it also includes security cooperation, such as counterterrorism, maritime security and mine cleaning. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, championed by Japan and India, is a wider project than the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, as it also covers the whole African continent, not just the countries with a coast to the Indian Ocean. Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, too, is not limited to infrastructure projects and aims to provide education and training for the people in the countries that are included in the corridor. And last of all, Japan and EU Partnerships, consisting of the Economic, Strategic and Infrastructure Agreements, provides massive benefits for Japan and the EU member states. These partnerships, similar to the aforementioned projects, involves cooperation in a wide range of areas, such as infrastructure, technology, cyber security and education.

Japan's alternative projects and partnerships all together cover and surpass the areas of the Belt and Road routes. It is important to note that Japan does not explicitly present these as an alternative to the BRI. Yet, having examined the relevant documents and maps of the projects, it is obvious that Japan has been developing alternatives for the BRI. What is most striking about all three of these projects is that Japan and its partners emphasize democracy, rule of law and human rights, the values that are not considered to be shared by China.

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