

Briefing Memo

The Traditional Structures of the International Environment in Central Asia and the Potential for Change

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The Central Asia region has no close ocean access, which makes it difficult for Japan to become fully involved in the region. Nonetheless, it is a region that is receiving geopolitical attention with Russia, China, and the United States becoming involved, so understanding its characteristics and looking at change bears a certain degree of significance in thinking about the security of East Asia. This article focuses on two major aspects of the potential for change, while touching on the traditional structures of the region's international environment.

1. Traditional structures: The Soviet Union's legacy and China's economic involvement

The five countries of Central Asia were formed in the Soviet Union and gained their independence after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The southern oasis zone was a domain of Persian culture that spanned modern Iran and Afghanistan, and its trading cities prospered. Here, the Turkic nomads of the northern steppes moved south and seized political power in a region, which would be called Turkestan. In the 18th century, the Qing dynasty encompassed eastern Turkestan in what would be Xinjiang, while in the 19th century, the Russian Empire subordinated the Turkic countries in the west. When the Soviet Union was established in the 20th century, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbeks of the Turkic origin, and Persian-speaking Tajiks formed its modern ethnic groups. Each ethnic republic and their actual inhabitants were intricately combined together.

The residents of Central Asia adopted modern education and industry under Soviet rule for about 70 years, and even after independence of the five republics, the Moscow-centric industrial structure remained. A framework for deepening economic partnerships between the independent countries was built up by leveraging independence, resulting in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015. The word "Eurasia" originally comes from academic views in the early 20th century, to combine the words of "Europe" and "Asia" as the origins of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and it has come to be used for the purpose of political discourse. Russia tends to emphasize its role in the integrity of the former Soviet territory while Kazakhstan emphasizes its role as a link between the East and the West.

Although the role of major ethnic languages is increasing in each Central Asian country, the use of Russian is still strong in higher education, academia, and international organizations that include Russia. In the military, systems and education are Russian, inherited from the Soviet Union. Russia has a high level of leadership in joint training through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to which the former Soviet republics belong. Russia also maintains bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Neighboring China to the east is also a major force involved in the region. Four former Soviet republics and China began discussions in Shanghai to stabilize the border, which culminated in the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, to which China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were member nations. The SCO places much emphasis on anti-terrorism cooperation, and its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) plays a role in exchanging information in the Uzbekistan capital of Tashkent. Although the SCO is not a strong organization in jointly expressing its intentions and taking action, Russia and China use the organization's constant consultation framework to understand each other's movements, which is significant for deepening mutual understanding between Central Asian countries and China's governing elites. Also, a gas pipeline connecting China through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan came online in 2010, meaning Russia no longer controls energy exports in the region.

The United States has also had a strong presence as a diplomatic player since 2001, transporting supplies based in Central Asia for military operations in Afghanistan. In addition, energy development companies such as Exxon Mobile continue their involvement in the region. In addition, the European Union (EU), South Korea, Japan, and others have shown initiatives to enhance the connectivity of Central Asia and encourage its integration and growth.

However, there are limits to what these extra-territorial powers feverishly continue to prioritize, and it is still Russia and China that have a clear and persistent presence. Russia plays a major role in the security of region, with China's continued cooperation on this front and its strong presence primarily in finance. This has been the basic structure in the region until recently.

2. China's proactivity: Connectivity and political involvement brought about by the Belt and Road Initiative

China's presence, however, has reached a stage where it is not limited to finance due to the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative (SREB), one pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative, in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana (renamed Nur-sultan in March 2019), proposing to heighten connectivity and connect people and the economy. Promoting this initiative has resulted in large great flows of Chinese funds, activated Chinese companies, and energized diplomatic activities.

In fact, cooperative projects to improve connectivity between China and Kazakhstan had already started before the SREB. Both countries have invested in improving the freight infrastructure and improving the efficiency of product exports to Europe through a continental railroad in joint projects on the land border of the Khorgos region between China and of Kazakhstan and in Lianyungang on the Yellow Sea. Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev worked for many years on the policy of developing domestic resources to connect with the East and the West, as well as Russia. He also launched the “Nurly Zhol” (the Bright Road) initiative in 2014, and actively promoted cooperation with China via the SREB. In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin, together with President Xi Jinping of China, signed a document for cooperation between the EAEU and SREB.

In Uzbekistan, the Kamchiq Tunnel on the railroad between the Fergana Valley and Tashkent was opened in 2016, allowing for the smooth transportation without crossing a state border (traditional traffic routes pass through the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in a complex way). A joint project in an industrial zone in Jizzakh Region was also welcomed as an opportunity for the citizens of both countries to participate in. Furthermore, the establishment of a railroad from Kashgar in Xinjiang to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan is still in the planning stage, but if the gauge of the railroad should use the standard pushed by China, it would become a barrier to connecting to the wider gauge spreading in the territories of the former Soviet Union and would disrupt distribution with Russia.

China is also engaged in activities to boost affinity to China with the local community, and an increasing number of people are studying Chinese and studying at leading Chinese universities with support from China. However, those efforts are fraught with problems, such as students being unable to work relating to China even after graduating. There are also concerns over the fear of China from the past, the influx of Chinese workers into the region, and the status of Muslims in Xinjiang. Despite this friction, there have not yet been any cases of severe criticism against Chinese activities (something like criticism of “debt trap diplomacy,”) and local communities will gradually adapt as Chinese business makes inroads.

China is also slowly making its presence felt in the field of security. Xinjiang’s security is an important issue for China, and it has worked to monitor anti-government activities in Central Asia and Russia through cooperation with the SCO and other organizations. Furthermore, the need to increase the safety of economic activities has increased in order to advance projects that increase connectivity extending from Xinjiang to the west and to the south. China borders the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow sliver of territory that extends to the east in Afghanistan, with Pakistan to the south, and Tajikistan to the north. It is increasingly involved in traffic safety in this region. In February 2016, China established a bilateral anti-terrorism cooperation center in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. It also launched a multilateral anti-terrorism framework with Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan in Urumqi later in August. The PLA has also been recently reported to be stationed in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Some experts point out that these efforts have led to Russia

losing its hegemony in security that it has enjoyed since the days of the Soviet Union. However, Russia also signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to expand its military base in the country in March 2019.

3. More active diplomatic activities in Central Asian countries

What is even more noteworthy is the change in diplomatic activities by Central Asian countries. The borders between the former Soviet republics were intertwined with each other based on the premise that they were established in one country with Moscow as the capital. Now that each republic has its own sovereignty with those same borders in place, it is difficult to coordinate stances on the use water resources in countries upstream and downstream of rivers, for example. This has made relations with neighboring countries difficult to manage, and since these countries can reap economic benefits by maintaining relations with Moscow, relations between Moscow and each country have progressed more deeply than between Central Asian countries.

Uzbekistan, for example, experienced terrorist attacks in the 1990s, and President Islam Karimov was reluctant to have relations with neighboring countries as he felt that the free activities and movement of residents increased the threat to the political system and society. However, when President Karimov died in 2016 and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office, his first action was to visit neighboring countries, such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and rebuild diplomatic relations. Based on his proposal, summit-level discussions without Russia were held between five Central Asian countries in Astana, Kazakhstan in March 2018. While the organizers carefully characterized this not as decision excluding Russia but as consultation among the regional states, the participants discussed the issues of connectivity and water resources in the region. Turkmenistan also sent a representative of the parliament rather than its president, but it is noteworthy that it has become more active in improving its neighbor relations (Turkmenistan is generally reluctant to participate in the multilateral framework.) A second round of talks is scheduled to be held in Tashkent in 2019.

The reason why Uzbekistan took a new stance in its diplomacy with its neighbors seems to be the improvement of the security situation due to continued political stability. Central Asia suffered from civil war and terrorism in the 1990s, but in 2016, these were no longer immediate threats. The Global Terrorism Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) notes that Central Asian countries have lower risk indexes than Japan. The actual persistent problem is that Central Asians are recruited by militants when they migrate to work in Russia and become involved in international terrorist activities. Uzbekistan is also focusing its attention to monitoring these militant networks. That said, the need to strictly monitor traffic in and out of the local community and neighboring countries has declined.

In addition, China's SREB projects have become active, and regional countries basically welcome, accept, and use joint projects with China. At the same time, the possibility of increasing connectivity between regional countries has increased, meaning the need for consultation has increased.

Central Asian countries have changed in this manner, and regional countries have started to take action with China's growing involvement. However, each country has different directions and constraints, and it will take some time for Central Asian countries to institutionalize cooperation to deal with China and Russia. Kazakhstan, under the long reign of President Nazarbayev, is also exercising its autonomy, particularly toward Russia and China. It has established relations with the United States and Japan, and intends to continue down this path after Nazarbayev retired as president in March 2019. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are weak, and their economies are highly dependent on Russia and China, and they subsequently have difficulty exercising autonomy. Nevertheless, gradual changes are appearing in the Central Asia region. It will be necessary to monitor those changes closely as they may have significant implications.

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