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The Changing Eurasian International Strategic Environment and Japan's Response

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Subsequent to the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the Eurasian international strategic environment is currently in transition towards a new stage. To grasp the essence of this transition, geo-political point of view is indispensable. Today, the word "geo-politics" is often referred to as political competition for regional power. However, I would rather comprehend the term as the ways that each regional power looks at world map from their own perspectives, with themselves being in the centre of the map. With this awareness in mind, I would like to reflect on how China, Russia, Central Asia, Caucasus, and Europe look at Eurasia respectively. Before moving on, let me stress one point. That is, the declining influence of the US in Eurasia is hugely relevant to the changing strategic environment of the region. In the 1990s, the US set military bases all across Central Asia and secured political as well as military influences within the region and beyond. However, since the 9/11 in 2001 and the outbreak of Afghan Wars in particular, the US has shifted its strategic focus solely to its operation in Afghanistan. As a result, the US' influences in Eurasia significantly shrank, and I would like to set that as a premise for my discussion below. First, Eurasia from the viewpoint of China. China's international predominance has significantly expanded in recent years, and behind the expansion one can see China's ambition to take the lead in Chinese style global governance. Indeed, the way that China gained large international voice is well depicted in "One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR)" which Xi Jinping administration is promoting. In this respect, one should consider OBOR as strategic slogan for regional expansion, rather than economic expansion. And yet, the actuality is still abstract and not well outlined, hence it is questionable to what extent China can achieve its proposed objectives through OBOR in reality. Meanwhile, in relative terms with "New Silk Road by Land and Sea" that China also puts forwards, China is interested in the polar route over the North Pole that has become possible to sail through throughout the year due to global warming. On the one hand, this polar route inevitably leads us to reconsider the conventional idea of geo-politics in Eurasia. On the other hand, in the midst of such new geo-political environment, China incorporates the route in part of its regional power expansion scheme in Eurasia by way of strengthening "5+1 connectivities (communication on policy making; building transportation and telecommunication network; facilitation of trade; strengthening financial intermediation and currency circulation; encouraging mutual understanding and space, cyber and sea areas)."

Moving on, Eurasia from the viewpoints of Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus. In Russia, there have been publications on geo-politics since the 1990s and they are referred to as a tool to analyse how Russia sees international affairs. Russia's international disposition is characterised as; 1) neither like the dispositions of the West nor the East; 2) following the historical pattern of shrinking its land and regional power at the time of danger, and then recapturing them; 3) prioritising security over economy, and showing a tendency to become "major country" by means of tactical diplomacy and military power. In light of this, Russia established diplomatic relationship with China based on the idea of realism. That suggests Russia's relationship with China fluctuates in accordance with its relationships with the US and Europe. After the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 in particular, Russia's relationship with the US and Europe has fallen into decay and, as a result, Russia's views on the two have become critical. On the contrary, Russia's view on China has turned positive. As to the relationships between Russia, Caucasus and Central Asia, the Eurasia Economic Union (EEU: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO: the EEU states plus Tajikistan) are the two main regional agencies. Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan do not participate in neither of them, but these two countries maintain close bilateral relationships with Russia. The countries of Central Asia are said to be pro-Russia and tend to be in good terms with China comparatively. Turning to the Caucasus region, Azerbaijan holds on to neutral and balance diplomacy, Armenia takes pro-Russian stance and Georgia shows a disposition of pro-US and pro-Europe. Nevertheless, their views on Russia are still complex even among those that are pro-US and pro-Europe. In fact, even in Ukraine and Georgia one cannot ignore positive views on Russia and shared nostalgia for the Soviet time among the peoples.

Lastly, Eurasia from the viewpoint of the EU. To begin with, the EU's disposition to Russia has traditionally been ambivalent. That is one outcome of the EU's strategies which aims to maintain diplomatic balance with the US and China as well as Russia. However, since the dawn of this century, the EU has shown a tendency of becoming more and more cautious about Russia which has become major energy supplier and shown aggressive diplomacy under Putin's leadership. In particular, after the Ukrainian crisis this tendency has become evident, and the EU has strengthened measures against Russia. And yet, the EU's disposition to Russia is still unclear as seen in that Germany's former Chancellor Schröder holds a position in the board of Russian oil company, for instance. As to the EU's disposition to China, the EU has been alarmed by China's expansion strategies over Eurasia since 2012 when Xi Jinping spoke on "Chinese dream." Among multilateral frameworks for economic cooperation between China and Europe, there is one called "16+1 initiative." The framework itself is thought to be China's strategy to make the EU disintegrated, which led some to become even more alarmed at China. In light of this, the EU has been trying to further enhance its relationship with the countries of Central Asia as an extension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Starting from "EU-Central Asia:

Strategy for a New Partnership” in 2007, the EU has extending its support to Central Asia in terms of democratisation, human rights, good governance, security, counter-terrorism, energy and infrastructure in the fields of transport. In short, in the midst of receding US and expanding China, we have Putin’s Russia pushing diplomatic strategies independent from those of the US and Europe, which resulted in China and Russia having closer relationship, on the one hand. On the other hand, the EU is keen on reaching the post-Soviet countries as an extension of its enlargement policy. And that is the new direction of power balance in Eurasia at present. Although this article did not touch on India and the Middle East, these two regional powers also need careful attention. A problem at stake is, under such circumstances, how Japan should set up and implement diplomacy to Eurasia. Looking at Japan’s diplomacy to Eurasia to date, it appears that there are inconsistencies between different regions. In other words, there are some regions to which Japan is committed and the other regions where Japan has few diplomatic contacts. That testifies the need for reconsideration as to how Japan should distribute the objectives of its diplomatic strategies within Eurasia as a whole.

(This is the English translation of an article written by WATANABE Hirotaka, Professor, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, which originally appeared on the e-forum “Hyakka-Seiho (Hundred Flowers in Full Bloom)” of JFIR on November 20, 2017.)