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WERNER PASCHA

**Silk Subway: Japan's Strategy for an
Age of International Connectivity Activism**

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WERNER PASCHA

Professor of East Asian Economic Studies – Japan and Korea at the Mercator School of Management and the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen

W https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/people/pascha_werner.php

E werner.pascha@uni-due.de

Institute of East Asian Studies / Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften

University of Duisburg-Essen

Duisburg Campus, Forsthausweg

47057 Duisburg, Germany

T +49(0) 203 37-94191

F +49(0) 203 37-94157

E in-east@uni-due.de

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WERNER PASCHA *

Silk Subway: Japan's Strategy for an Age of International Connectivity Activism

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Abstract

The paper deals with the issue of how Japan is positioning itself in the emerging and contested field of international connectivity initiatives. It starts with surveying the emergence of the connectivity topic in recent years, paying attention to recent infrastructure initiatives in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasian regions. Although the current public debate on connectivity is dominated by an attention on China's 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan has actually been engaged in international infrastructure schemes at least since the 1980s. This does not only hold for the Japanese state, but also for major multinational corporations of Japan. One is tempted to speak of a "Silk Subway": Japan has always been a very important, but not very visible player in international infrastructure connectivity. Several reasons for this low-key profile are pointed out. The recent upturn of Japan's engagement (PQI – Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, FOIP – Free and Open Indo-Pacific) is to some extent due to a shift of strategy: Whereas the country followed a rather unilateral approach in recent decades, the focus has shifted to strategic alliances embedded in a multilateral framework. Policy has become much more effective that way, while the role of Japan for international infrastructure connectivity still seems considerably underrated.

Keywords

Japan, infrastructure initiative, connectivity, Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

JEL Classification

F53, F55, H87, L91, O19, P45

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INTRODUCTION

In international economic relations, debates as well as policy strategies have traditionally converged on a number of international economic activities. These include trade, foreign direct investment, technology transfer and, in the financial sphere, exchange rate regimes and capital flows. In recent years, a new topic has gained a lot of attention, which is to some extent cross-cutting and seems to develop into an arena of external economic policy and business relations in its own right, namely connectivity (Khanna 2016). How is Japan positioning itself in this emerging and contested field?

Trying to provide an answer to this question, the paper is organised as follows: It starts with a survey of the emergence of the connectivity topic in recent years, paying due attention to the rise of an interest in and demand for infrastructure investment in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasian regions. In the following part, four basic, non-exclusive strategies are distinguished to handle international infrastructure issues, (1) a focus on unilateral schemes, (2) a web of evolving bilateral partnerships with other countries, (3) a focus on strategic alliances with a limited set of preferred partners, and (4) an emphasis on multilateral cooperation. Japan's engagement with respect to infrastructure cooperation

will then be surveyed with those distinctions in mind.

It is found that although the current public debate on connectivity is dominated by an attention on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, Japan has actually been seriously interested in international infrastructure schemes at least since the 1980s. This does not only hold for the Japanese state, but also for major multinational corporations of Japan. Quite a few of the initiatives did not lead very far, but when Japan commenced on a major response to BRI, it could count on important preparatory work and its engagement became much more serious and effective. Still, these successes seem much less visible than China's high-profile approach, so one is tempted to speak of a Japanese "silk subway" instead of a "new silk road", which is frequently associated with China's engagement. It will be argued that the recent upturn of Japan's engagement is to some extent due to a shift of strategy: Whereas the country followed a rather unilateral approach in recent decades, the focus has shifted to strategic alliances embedded in a multilateral framework. Policy has become much more effective that way, while the role of Japan for international infrastructure connectivity still seems considerably underrated.

THE RISE OF CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity (and also infrastructure) involve sets of goods and services that create different types of networks, ranging from the physical domain like transport – roads, railways, sea, air – or energy to digital and other information flows, financial and even people-to-people networks (GICA 2018). While speaking of infrastructure rather puts the emphasis on the input side, connectivity rather focusses on the output. For the purpose of this paper, both can be treated al-

most synonymously: Investing in infrastructure eventually creates connectivity in terms of networks and linkages.

A major infrastructure project abroad like the construction of a high-speed railway line could basically be seen as an amalgamation of at least three rather conventional international economic activities: It will probably involve some export business, like providing new rail carriages,

moreover there could be some FDI, like setting up a joint venture with a local partner to build or operate the new rail line, and some technology transfer is likely, like licensing some technologies for high-speed equipment; the costly project will probably also involve some capital transfer. Still, there are some reasons to treat infrastructure as a separate arena (for a more detailed discussion, see Pascha 2020): First, because of the complex relationships of the various activities involved. Moreover, this will often involve a combination of public and private actors from home and host country. To smoothen such a complex interplay of public and private business issues, public actors, either on a national or on a supra-national level, will often get involved to install an organisational scheme to ease and reduce the transaction costs of the projects. Such schemes are referred to as infrastructure initiatives, often involving supportive mechanisms like standard-setting, new financing organisations or else. As a consequence, features of a new regime come into being that are quite distinct from the regular institutions and organisational forms of trade, FDI or international finance, thus deserving specific attention from policy makers, business interests and also from academics.

Infrastructure, connectivity or what some authors refer to as infrastructure connectivity has become ever more important in recent decades. One factor behind this is economic globalisation, which could only prosper through ever widening and deepening networks of exchange. While the ratio of global exports to GDP was still below 20 percent in the 1980s, it had risen to about 30 percent around 2010. Infrastructure became particularly important for the Asian region, whose economic dynamics depended – even more than elsewhere – on its open economies, realising their ambitious economic growth through international trade, FDI and their participation in international supply chains (Yu 2017). An important study in this respect is a 2009 joint publication of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and its ADB Institute, which concluded that the infrastructure needs of the region until

2020 summed up to a total of about eight trillion US Dollars (USD) (ADB/ADBI 2009). Based on an update of 2017 for the year 2030, an even more stunning amount of 22.5 trillion USD is foreseen (ADB 2017).

While there is a significant need for infrastructure investment on the one hand, on the other a major and persistent global savings glut has also been noticed (Bernanke 2005), based on the mounting current-account surpluses of some countries. Howsoever one evaluates the macro-economic implications of the savings glut hypothesis, accumulated current account surpluses have indeed increased to some three percent of global GDP in the mid 2000s and stayed at the two percent level later on. Some surplus funds were deposited in foreign exchange reserves, but increasingly also in other asset classes (Keohane 2017) and not necessarily in a way that would be optimal for the global economy.

Whereas at first glance this may seem as an almost perfect match of needs and available funds, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008/09 led to a serious shift towards risk aversion among global financial investors. Infrastructure investment with its long durations, complexities and thus high-risk profiles was hit hard. Long-term syndicated bank lending for infrastructure investments for instance declined from a level of about 50 billion USD in 2007 to about ten billion USD in 2012 (Bhattacharya and Romani 2013).

Eventually, this led to a strong demand for innovative ways of shifting surplus savings, in combination with appropriate technological and organisational capacities, into meaningful infrastructure projects in emerging Asia and elsewhere. In this context, a group of IMF economists around Joseph Stiglitz speak of an “Advent of Investment Platforms” to accomplish this (Arezki et al. 2016), which should learn from the not always successful history of public-private partnerships in order to identify suitable combinations of public and private involvement in infrastructure investment.

Setting up such platforms, initiatives or establishing a new asset class involves aspects of creating a public good, with the usual difficulties of finding an actor to take over such a task (for this view, see Pascha 2019 and Öztürk 2019). Namely, it is difficult to exclude potential users, and additional users do not diminish the utility of the scheme for other users, while large externalities also imply that the incentives for creating (and paying) for the public good are lacking. If not for someone to take the lead and who can profit from additional merits in setting up the public good, the advantages of creating the potential public good will largely remain unrealised.

This creates a window of opportunity for national players that aspire for an increased international role, because providing an international public good increases their political influence and gives them a chance to influence the multilateral agenda. Before turning to Japan, this argumentation can be exemplified with respect to the Archimedean point of recent international infrastructure initiatives, namely China's BRI that was announced in 2013. For China, setting up such a scheme had substantial advantages in

various dimensions: Politically, it could support its claim of an international, at least regional, leadership role; moreover, together with other institutional activities like the creation of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), BRI provided a strategic response to the unwillingness of the incumbent international leader, the US, to reform multilateral mechanisms like IMF and World Bank. In financial terms, the initiative provided a vent for surplus financial reserves. Finally, and not the least, in domestic economic terms BRI promised to open up significant new international markets for Chinese infrastructure and other goods, particularly welcome because of the accrued overcapacities of Chinese industry and in consideration of the backward western Chinese regions, which could profit from opening up the Eurasian landmass to them.

Against this background, we can now turn to Japan and see how the country has positioned itself over the years. For this purpose, it will be helpful to turn to the potential strategies that Japan might have chosen or could choose in the future first.

STRATEGIES OF ENGAGING IN INTERNATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE INITIATIVES

When it comes to evaluating a national strategy of engaging in an international context, an appropriate analytical framework is helpful. Studying "leadership" is an established topos in international relations (for a start, see the seminal contribution by Young 1991). An important aspect are the relationships with other players, for instance by distinguishing follower and leader. In an interesting contribution with a specific interest on Japan, Hamanaka (2018) has done this from the perspective of how countries with different power bases try to assemble or join congenial groups; for a strong potential leader, exclusion of a competitor is often a first-best option in leadership rivalry, but joining may some-

times be second-best, if one's own power is not strong enough.

For infrastructure initiatives with its limited number of propagators of such schemes, we suggest that the dichotomist distinction between being part of and not being part of a group is somewhat too simple and not helpful enough to cover the idiosyncrasies of searching for appropriate partners. We therefore apply the following typology in this paper, based on how many and which partners, if at all, a potential lead country like Japan engages in infrastructure initiatives. We propose that there are four basic options, which need not be exclusive:

- 1 a focus on unilateral schemes,
- 2 a web of evolving bilateral partnerships with other countries,
- 3 a focus on minilateralism, understood as strategic alliances with a limited set of preferred partners, and
- 4 an emphasis on multilateral cooperation.

Ad (1): In a *unilateralist* approach, a country sets its strategy without much regard to role models, contestants or the specific needs of partners. This does not imply that no contracts are concluded with other countries or that the unilateralist stays apart from the multilateral framework. Still, it defines its policy in line with its own preferences and circumstances, not in dialogue with others. There are two circumstances under which a unilateralist approach is likely. First, when the country is a clear leader or hegemon, or second, in case of an idiosyncratic strategy, in which the country is not pressured to fulfil the expectations of others.

Ad (2): The key feature of *bilateralism* is that the strategy evolves step-by-step in relation with potential partner countries. While there may be preferences about which countries are the most suitable partners, either in terms of importance or in terms of ease of reaching an agreement, the focus is rather on extending the web of relationships in an iterative way.

Ad (3): A third option, *minilateralism*, is about pursuing a strategy with a limited set of major partners. This does not exclude engaging in bilateral cooperation agreements with other partners, but in terms of designing a strategy, laying out major courses of action, pursuing them and reacting to new developments, a number of strategic partners are privileged.

Ad (4): A final approach for a strategy of establishing and providing an international public good is to rely on an engagement in *multilateral* mechanisms like G20, OECD or the World Bank. Such mechanisms may be newly created or already established, and their scope may be global, regional, or based on other criteria (like, in G20's case, size). A country would thus be acting as only one member country among several, possibly with a privileged position as a major shareholder like in some regional mechanisms like ADB or the newly created Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank. The impact of a country's strategy would thus be somewhat diluted, less visible, and the effectiveness of the desired strategy could possibly even be somewhat compromised. Still, a multilateralist approach can also have some advantages. For instance, it is frequently argued that if a powerful country embeds itself in a multilateral scheme, this can be understood as a self-binding effort. It lowers the risk for others of being exploited or deceived by a dominant partner, thus making fruitful cooperation between strong and weak countries less risky and more likely.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAPAN'S POLICY APPROACH

In international policy discourses, infrastructure was not a particularly prominent term until quite recently. This holds for Japan, but, until the decade of the 2000s, for the wider international context and multilateral schemes like G7 or APEC as well (Murashkin 2018: 460). Still, within its broader range of international economic cooperation, Japan developed and implemented important approaches related to infrastructure early on

that should not be overlooked. Four phases of the post-World-War-2 period can be distinguished and will be discussed in due course:

- Post-war period until the 1980s
- Late 1980s to late 2000s
- Late 2000s to 2013
- Since 2013

Post-war period until the 1980s

During the post-Second World War period, Japan emerged, at first rather inconspicuously, as a major international aid donor. From the mid-1970s and facing the shock of the First Oil Crisis, the country could not take it for granted any more that under the US umbrella the international economic environment would remain safe and open. In the late 1970s, Prime Minister Fukuda's official development aid (ODA) doubling plan is a witness of Japan's invigorated interest in international cooperation. Infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia played a considerable role in the ideas of the Fukuda-led government. A report of 1980, commissioned by Prime Minister Ohira, focused on the concept of "comprehensive security" and gave ODA a firm place within the foreign policy instruments of Japan, arguing that Japan's security in a narrow sense, under the changing global situation, needed to be accompanied by broader means, including economic cooperation. In terms of its operational objectives and how they were related to instruments of choice, the early phase of Japan's overseas aid focussed on rather narrow economic interests in a pragmatic and piecemeal way, particularly for the benefit of the country's business interests in Southeast Asia and employing instruments like tied aid that prioritised Japanese firms (for the early decades and details, see Rix 1980).

It is frequently pointed out that Japan did not follow a coherent and particularly effective aid strategy during its early decades, but with the benefit of hindsight, several persistent features stand out. Looking at the 1980s, Dennis Yasutomo points out three main tenets of what the Ministry of Finance (MoF) would consider its development strategy:

- 1 "ODA and Other Official Flows (OOF) are ... not enough",
- 2 "The private sector is important", and
- 3 "Multilateral organisations are important" (Yasutomo 1993: 311–312).

At least three more features of Japanese policy can be made out, namely

- 4 A demand-led approach, responding to the needs of the developing countries designated for receiving support,
- 5 a preference for self-help measures, and, last not least,
- 6 a priority for hard core infrastructure measures.

To some extent these features are a reflection of topical challenges facing the Japanese aid giving authorities, to some extent they are based on long-standing convictions that follow from a reflection of Japanese experiences at home and abroad. As for the *first* factor, it seems almost a truism that any finance ministry will have an inbuilt bias to keep a check on public expenses, including the ODA budget, and that it would encourage a policy of seeking support elsewhere. For Japan, this tendency is strengthened due to the particularly conservative tradition of the Ministry of Finance and because the MoF is one of the two principal ministries in charge of development cooperation matters, next to, in those days, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), later reconfigured as the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry or METI. As for an external factor, the international debt crisis convinced Japanese decision makers that public ODA allocations would not be enough to make a meaningful contribution to mitigate the crisis. Japan announced several support programmes as part of its capital recycling efforts during the 1980s, many of them to multilateral development banks like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, and usually involving significant private funds from industry. For instance, the ODA component of a 20 billion USD programme announced in 1987 was only one-sixth of the total (Yasutomo 1993: 313).

Factor *two* thus refers to the strong involvement of the private sector, which is also related to Japan's early ODA approach of backing its domes-

tic industry through tied ODA, and factor *three* concerns the frequent involvement of multilateral organisations. The latter is not only due to being able to tap more funding, but it is also a reflection of Japan's historical legacy of the Great Pacific War: Multilateral support with an indirect contribution from Japan would be much more acceptable than direct aid intervention from the former aggressor.

Circumventing historically-informed reservations against Japanese influences is also one of the factors behind the *fourth* tenet of Japan's strategy mentioned above, namely the demand-led approach, focussing on the needs put forward by the recipient countries. Such an approach avoids an overbearing attitude and to intervene in domestic affairs; it was thus much more acceptable. As a consequence, Japan followed a country-by-country approach, serving somewhat different needs according to the assessment of the recipient country and in consideration of the capabilities as well as intentions of Japan and its industry. Japan's support to the huge landmass of China was, for instance, "fundamentally geared to economic infrastructure programmes" (Rix 1993: 169, see also Zhao 1993), and one is at least tempted to suspect that China's later interest in supporting infrastructure programmes elsewhere, culminating in BRI, is to some extent informed by its earlier experiences with Japan's assistance.

The country-by-country approach is related to another (*fifth*) basic attitude of Japanese aid giving, namely to believe in "self-help" efforts of potential recipient countries (Rix 1993, Sawamura 2004). This posture draws lessons from Japan's own development experience and the remarkable success of a mid-19th century book in the modernising country, namely Samuel Smiles' "Self-Help", published in 1859.

Finally (*sixth*), the preference towards infrastructure support is related to Japan's own development experience as well. In the narratives of Japan's own economic history since the Meiji

era modernisation, the support of infrastructure through the government is typically mentioned as one of the key success factors (e.g. Ohno 2006; Kimura 2009). Japan's famous Ten-Year Plan of 1884, the *Kogyo Iken*, which had a major impact on Japan's successful development path, already put considerable stress on transport infrastructure like roads, railroads, etc. (Inukai and Tussing 1967).

The six factors mentioned are characterised by major complementarity. In particular, the main function of infrastructure investment in economic development can be understood as enabling actors to engage in meaningful work ("self-help"). Such infrastructure projects are usually large, possibly cross-border, so it is sensible to engage MDBs; they will also usually and for good reasons involve public and private actors.

Summing up, even during the period up to the 1980s, before Japan became the leading global provider of ODA for a number of years, Japan put an emphasis on infrastructure in its aid policy. In terms of the four basic strategies distinguished above, doing so followed from a unilateral position. Infrastructure support reflected the experience of its own economic history. Japan was still "small enough" to follow this particular brand of aid philosophy, even though one should not think of this inclination in terms of a highly consistent, clearly paraphrased and determinedly executed strategy. It was followed without too many considerations of other aid donors, including its major political supporter, the US. To some extent, Japan's approach was even somewhat at odds with the so-called "Washington Consensus", first spelled out in 1989, that had developed ever more explicitness in Western economies and multilateral organisations. This consensus was focused on macroeconomic reforms and liberalisation, whereas Japan's aid programmes followed "a more targeted, interventionist style of aid management" (Rix 1993: 191). Being unilateral and heterodox did not have sizable negative consequences for Japan internationally in those years, which clearly helped and was favoured

by Japanese domestic interests in industry and construction business.

Whereas the unilateralist tendency of Japan's approach was the dominant one, some elements of an ad-hoc bilateralism also played a role, driven by the demand of potential recipients on a country-by-country basis.

Late 1980s to late 2000s

During the latter half of the 1980s, Japan's international role became ever more conspicuous. An important factor was the bubble economy following the Plaza Accord of 1985, which increased the country's capital strength significantly. With a sudden surge from 1986, Japan became the world's greatest net disburser of ODA in USD terms in 1989, a status it would hold until 2000. This increased the expectations for Japan to coordinate its policies with the international community more thoroughly. Of particular relevance was the relationship with the US. Trade conflicts developed during the 1980s, actually the underlying reason for the Plaza Accord that was to rectify the undervaluation of currencies like the yen. This tension was mirrored, though not as vehemently as in the trade policy arena, in the ODA field, where Japan had to find its way between the external demand for "burden-sharing" and for making its own "international contribution" (Koppel and Orr Jr. 1993, Rix 1993: 163).

Various Japanese initiatives developed during the following two decades, many of them with rather little effect. During this period more regions than before became important for Japanese policymakers, for instance Central Asia. Prime Minister Hashimoto, who was premier from 1996 to 1998, created an "Eurasian diplomacy" against the background of the democratisation and transformation of East European / Central Asian economies. In Japan's approach, genuine economic interests and the attempt to cater to global expectations of supporting the Western values after the end of the Cold War period were somehow merged. The resulting amal-

gam of policy objectives, however, was difficult to pursue in a convincing manner:

"First of all, there is political dialogue aiming to enhance trust and mutual understanding. Secondly, there is economic cooperation as well as cooperation for natural resource development aiming to foster prosperity. Thirdly, there is cooperation to build peace through nuclear non-proliferation, democratization and the fostering of stability." (Hashimoto 1997)

During the reign of another active prime minister, Koizumi, who headed the government from 2001 to 2006, a "Central Asia Plus Japan" was initiated in 2004, somewhat following up on Hashimoto's approach and trying to support policy dialogue, intra-regional cooperation, business promotion, intellectual dialogue and cultural as well as people-to-people exchanges. After Koizumi, a somewhat short-lived "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" was proposed in 2007 as a "value-oriented diplomacy" (Yuasa 2008). Again, the diversity of objectives, the short-livedness of cabinets and the priority of domestic (economic) affairs over diplomacy contributed to underwhelming results of the various initiatives (Yoshimatsu 2017: 503).

Not only the government, but also business became active with noteworthy initiatives. For example, already in 1977, the president of the Mitsubishi Research Institute proposed a Global Infrastructure Fund (GIF). Only in 1990, however, this gained fresh momentum with the GIF Research Foundation, started by a group of companies and with the support of Business Federation *Keidanren* and the Japanese government. An underlying idea was to use funds set free from the arms race to create new demand and support infrastructure "to promote effective utilization of resources and energy" (Seki 1993: 45). At the same time, GIF claimed somewhat unconvincingly that it "was never intended to be the means to a business upturn for the advanced nations" (*ibid.*). By 1993, the GIF Research Foundation Japan even prepared a Resolution, in cooperation

with Keidanren, but also with Europe-related entities like the Japanese-German Centre Berlin and a newly created GIF Europe, to push the concept of a surface transportation network to integrate Europe, Asia and North America. In the context of the 1993 conference in Berlin, where this Resolution was presented¹, the narratives of "Eurasian connectivity" and of the "Silk Road" were also duly recognized. Although GIF did not take off as a major infrastructure initiative for the wider region, its activism in those years can be seen as an example of the range of initiatives during that period.

As a final example, it should be noted that Japan was involved in a number of multilateral initiatives for the wider region, which encompassed a strong infrastructure component. One important programme is CAREC, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, which includes parts of China. It started in 1997 as an ADB initiative, in which Japan always played an important leadership role. It is tempting to ask whether CAREC, strongly pushed by Tadao Chino, the Japanese ADB President from 1999 to 2005, is a prototype for the Belt and Road Initiative, as Murashkin (2018: 463) pointedly frames the question. Already in the 2000s, CAREC had proposed six Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridors, which are quite reminiscent of the concept of "Belts" across Eurasia proposed by the 2013 BRI.

It is questionable whether CAREC can be considered a major success. The ADB (2017) pointed out that between 2001 and September 2017, 30.5 billion USD was invested in CAREC-related investments in the region, approvingly noted by Murashkin (2018). However, compared to the needs of the region this figure seems not particularly overwhelming, and it may be difficult to ascribe the full nominal value to the availability of CAREC as an institutional mechanism. Writing

1 I am grateful to Dr. Wolfgang Brenn, former programme director of the Japanese-German Center Berlin, who pointed out this conference and the role of GIF to me.

in 2008, Linn and Pidufala (2008: 22) see quite a number of limitations of CAREC, owing to its informal character, to its lack of visibility and to a weak integration of national and regional plans.

In conclusion, the period from the late 1980s to the late 2000s is characterised by Japan's growing ambitions and options as an international leader. Infrastructure-related initiatives were among the policy innovations that were chosen by Japan to make its impact felt in the wider region. Basically, Japan still followed a unilateralist approach, but more regard for defining this strategy in the context of international expectations, particularly from the US (Orr Jr. 1990), played a role. To some extent, Japan tried to fulfil the expectations of burden-sharing. This can clearly be seen in stressing aspects of democracy and liberal values in its initiatives for Eurasia, up to the late 2000s ("Arc of Freedom and Prosperity"), which are quite alien to the earlier Japanese aid-giving philosophy. Objectives were somewhat blurred, oscillating between Western values and conventional economic development, and were poorly linked (Yoshimatsu 2017: 503). A certain tension developed, for instance when searching for canny ways and means to support the needs and interests of the Japanese business community. One way to follow Japan's "own way" was to promote some degree of multilateralism (e.g., GIF and CAREC discussed above), in which Japan somewhat avoided full visibility, while being an important player in the background.

In a well-entrenched line of research, Japan is interpreted as a "reactive state". As Calder succinctly puts it: "(1) the state fails to undertake major independent foreign economic policy initiatives when it has the power and national incentives to do so; and (2) it responds to outside pressures" (1988: 519), particularly from the US. This view does not seem valid for the 1990s and beyond though, at least for the field discussed here. Japan has become quite active with a combination of a unilateralist strategy with elements of regional multilateralism, that

may even be quite innovative and exemplary for later endeavours. We would rather characterise it as “leadership from behind” (see also Pascha 2002). There is some agreement with the “reactive state” school, however, with respect to the lack of effectiveness of Japan's policies. During Japan's “window of opportunity” for shaping itself a leadership role in Asia, which roughly corresponds to the time frame of the late 1980s to the late 2000s, Japan's strategy for infrastructure initiatives was too timid, inconsistent and not persevering enough. The major reasons are related to Japan's domestic policy-making arena: too many prime ministers and governments with only a short duration and a preoccupation with challenges of the domestic economy. Despite Japan's industrial and financial weight in the region and beyond, from the early 1990s the country entered its so-called “lost decades”, and economic diplomacy initiatives were only of secondary importance.

Late 2000s to 2013

It is tempting to treat the short period from the late 2000s to 2013 as a separate phase. An important change from the earlier period is the realisation that infrastructure was not a field of secondary importance any more, but that it deserved a more central place in Japan's foreign relations. The Global Financial Crisis 2008/09 had shown that new sources of growth were necessary to rekindle the economic dynamism of the region and elsewhere. Economic globalisation was reaching a high plateau, and Dani Rodrik published his famous “The Globalization Paradox” in 2011 (Rodrik 2011). At the same time, it could be argued that the infrastructure needs of the region created not only a market in itself – infrastructure accounts for some 14 percent of global GDP –, but that it was a critical and so far underrated bottleneck for the domestic and cross-border economic dynamism of the region.

The intensified interest of the government can be discerned from several decisions to upgrade capabilities and authority on infrastructure matters within the ministerial organisation. In 2010,

a Ministerial Meeting on the Deployment of Integrated Infrastructure Systems was installed, accompanied by, in the same year, a Promotion Headquarters at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a new Directorate General for International Affairs in the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. In 2013, a new government appointed a Ministerial Meeting on Strategy Relating Infrastructure Export and Economic Cooperation. Prime Minister Abe formulated a very clear mandate in his opening statement:

“Supporting the overseas business of Japanese companies and pushing forward the export of the most advanced infrastructure system are an important pillar for the growth strategy, which is one of the ‘three prongs.’ I believe that the following three points are important when considering economic cooperation and the export of infrastructure:

1. to take in the growth of emerging economies, mainly in Asia, and link it with the revitalisation of the Japanese economy,
2. to provide Japan's superior technology to the world and enrich people's living, and
3. to ensure as the government the safety of Japanese nationals working at overseas sites with top priority.

Japan must aim for achieving growth and prosperity together with the world, through these kinds of cooperation.” (Abe 2013)

It should be noted that Abe gave these instructions to the Ministerial Meeting on March 13, 2013, *before* the two famous speeches of Chinese President Xi Jinping starting the BRI on September 7, 2013, in Astana and on October 3, 2013, in Jakarta.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the newly ignited Japanese interest in infrastructure is not only a feature of the cabinets dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan and headed by Prime Minister Abe, following the sea changing December 2012 general elections, but

was also pursued by the preceding Democratic Party-led governments, which ruled the country from 2009 to 2012.

In terms of concrete policy announcements from around 2010 to 2013, arguably there are no prominent initiatives during that period. Rather, it is a phase of preparing policy proposals with a decidedly multilateralist touch. Not unrelated to the strong role of Japan within the ADB, the multilateral development bank, supported by the ADB/ADB I study of 2009, proposed a Pan-Asian Infrastructure Forum (PAIF) and Asian Infrastructure Fund (AIF) in 2009. In 2010, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) submitted a proposal for a Comprehensive Asia Development Plan (CADP) to the East Asia Summit. ERIA was founded in 2006 by Japan and ASEAN. CADP was meant "... as a grand spatial design for infrastructure development in East Asia. The conceptual framework ... demonstrates how the region can pursue deepening economic integration as well as narrowing development gaps." (ERIA 2012). The proposal encompassed a list of potential projects, later updated.

The policy proposal based on Abe's statement in the Ministerial Meeting, quoted above, followed a more narrow, almost entirely economic approach, and had a distinctly unilateralist touch. It is embedded in the famous "Abenomics" programme of 2013 with its "Three Arrows". While the focus of Abenomics is on the macroeconomic growth performance of Japan, it contains an "Infrastructure Export Strategy", based on a decision of May 17, 2013 – again, before BRI –, to support an order target of infrastructure systems of 30 trillion yen (about 230 billion Euros based on the 2013 exchange rate) up to 2020. This strategy is almost hidden deep inside the overall programme. It is part of the so-called "Strategic initiatives to capture global markets", which is one of three components of the "Strategy of Global Outreach", which itself is one of three elements of the "Japan Revitalization Strategy", which is, finally, the "Third Arrow" of Abenomics (Cabinet Office 2013).

Summing up, in the early 2010s Japan became interested in a more pro-active approach towards infrastructure initiatives. The country was again impeded by changing governments and by other priorities. It was also clear that Japan was now lacking the financial means to take on the huge requirements for notable initiatives for the region (or even beyond) on its own. The multilateralist approach to making proposals, almost hidden behind multilateral actors, was a meaningful response to such a situation. Only with respect to the narrower business interests of infrastructure export, the Abe-led government followed a unilateralist approach, in the format of the "Infrastructure Export Strategy", introduced in 2013 and later updated. As this strategy prioritised the self-oriented national interests of Japanese business, a rather concealed place in the hierarchy of economic policy goals was suitable.

Period since 2013

2013 is an important point in time for Japan's internationally oriented infrastructure strategy, as the new initiatives clearly reacted to the Chinese Belt and Road one way or another. The major post-2013 initiative is the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) of 2015 with an announced volume of 110 bn USD. It started as a programme for Asia, meant to mobilise financial resources and know-how to promote "infrastructure investment that the region needs, both in terms of quantity and quality" (MOFA et al. 2015). The focus on "quality" is quite peculiar, involving aspects of economic efficiency over the long life-cycle of such investments, safety, resilience against natural disaster, consideration on environmental and social impact, and contributions to the local society and economy. According to the logic of PQI, Japan is able to deliver these qualities, due to its long experience with infrastructure-related ODA and even more importantly because of the rich experiences of its capable private industry. More or less openly, this is presented as an antithesis to China's approach, which claims to spend a trillion USD or more, but – as might be argued – lacks the experience and capabilities to actually deliver high-quality infrastructure.

In its institutional set-up, PQI stresses the role of four pillars, namely assistance through Japan's main provider of technical cooperation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), collaboration with ADB, funding with consideration of the high risk profiles of infrastructure investments through the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and a newly founded Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation (JOIN), and the promotion of the quality aspect through relevant international standard-setting. The strong involvement of multilateral mechanisms is particularly noteworthy. An intensive relationship with ADB is a traditional feature of Japanese policy in this field and is also a central pillar of PQI. More interesting, the most conspicuous proposition of the initiative, the "quality" aspect, is not formulated as a unilateralist position, but earmarked for multilateral standard-setting in a global context. This follows from the challenge of establishing quality in a competitive infrastructure market, because high quality will be costlier, but difficult to verify, so it needs to be supported against cheaper, low-quality offers through standardisation and possibly even rule-setting in favour of quality. Such a "market design" for an essentially global market cannot be achieved by a single player like Japan, but needs a multilateral consensus (Pascha 2020).

In the following years, the initiative was implemented and sharpened in a number of ways. Already in 2016, the initiative was extended to deliver up to 200 bn USD within the next five years. The regional scope was extended to cover the whole world, with Russia and Africa specifically mentioned. Moreover, infrastructure was reinterpreted, now including natural resources and energy schemes. Accordingly, the group of involved entities was also widened, now to include the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) and others (METI 2016).

With respect to the multilateral embedding of the concept of quality infrastructure, Japan made good use of the 2016 G7 Ise-Shima Summit, which issued Principles for Promoting Qual-

ity Infrastructure Investment. Later in 2016, a statement on quality infrastructure was also passed by the G20 Hangzhou Summit. The most prominent placement of quality infrastructure at a multilateral summit was achieved at the 2019 Osaka G20 Summit, with six pages of text devoted to the topic (Table 1).

Quality infrastructure was also promoted through other mechanisms. Already in 2013, i.e. well before the announcement of PQI, the Economic Leaders' Declaration of APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, recognized the importance of quality infrastructure, and for 2014, the Japanese METI prepared an "APEC Guidebook on Quality of Infrastructure and Investment". It was revised in 2018 again, again with editorial preparation by METI (APEC 2014, 2018).

Table 1: G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment as of 2019

Principle 1:	Maximizing the Positive Impact of Infrastructure to Achieve Sustainable Growth and Development
Principle 2:	Raising Economic Efficiency in View of Life-Cycle Cost
Principle 3:	Integrating Environmental Considerations in Infrastructure Investments
Principle 4:	Building Resilience against Natural Disasters and Other Risks
Principle 5:	Integrating Social Considerations in Infrastructure Investment
Principle 6:	Strengthening Infrastructure Governance

Source: G20 2019

Another dimension of increased activism is related to seeking out strategic alliances with other major countries.² Japan and India have intensified their cooperation in recent years, involving India's „Act East“ and Japan's PQI. An important step was the signing of a "special strategic and global partnership" in 2015. During an October

² For a discussion of the evolving strategic partnership with the EU, which also includes infrastructure cooperation and which has built up considerable momentum since 2018, see Pascha 2020.

2018 Summit, it was decided that seven major infrastructure projects were to be supported. The partnership goes beyond the bilateral level and extends to East Africa through the idea of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, based on an economic cooperation agreement of May 2017.

This move towards "the South", together with Japan's strong interest in the ASEAN countries and Australia, can be interpreted as a "strategic 'dual hedge' between China and the United States" (Wallace 2018), which does not only concern economic policy, but also diplomacy and security affairs in a wider sense. Although less visible than China's outreach to the world, it is a very pro-active approach and provides ample evidence that the "reactionary state" paradigm arguing Japan's passivity and ineffectiveness in foreign policy does not carry much explanatory power any more. While Japanese efforts have intensified after China's BRI, they clearly precede it, also with respect to the "strategic pivot south" discussed here (see Wallace 2013 on the earlier years).

Beyond the Japan-India connection, a more extended framework for cooperation has been pursued since 2016, when the Abe-led government announced its vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which is to combine two continents, Asia and Africa, and two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. In 2017 US President Trump endorsed the idea of FOIP, and it materialised as a cooperation scheme for the four ("quad") countries Australia, India, Japan, and the US. Compared to PQI, FOIP has a stronger interest in political and security-related cooperation, for instance in securing the openness of international sea lanes. From a Japanese perspective, there are three pillars that are important for FOIP cooperation: the promotion of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc., the pursuit of economic prosperity, and the commitment for peace and stability (Government of Japan 2019). Economic issues, with quality infrastructure specifically mentioned, are thus a part – but only one part – of the broader concept. Some observers would argue that FOIP

is but a barely camouflaged concept to curtail the rising influence of China. Because of that, the interest of other players to become associated with FOIP may be limited. Whether the US is truly and persistently interested in the economic cooperation aspect is also still open. The most recent progress report from the US government of November 2019 still lacks a clear strategic outlook, and it has also been criticised for the context in which it was released (Parameswaran 2019). Some progress is notable, for instance the launch of the Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network to address connectivity and infrastructure issues in the region, but the "Pacific Pledge" announced by the US in September 2019, to top up US aid to the region by 100 mill USD per year, does not, because of its limited size, point to a strong engagement (Department of State 2019: 11).

Beyond FOIP in a narrow sense, the US has also announced a so-called "Blue Dot Network" in late 2019, in which, at least from the start, agencies from the Australia, Japan and the US will "certify projects to promote market-driven, transparent, and financially sustainable infrastructure development in Asia and around the world" (Reed 2019). The US-led initiative basically picks up the earlier Japanese approach towards "quality infrastructure" and moves it to the next level, namely certification. The Japanese influence on these developments is remarkable. Incidentally, with respect to the US-led FOIP, the idea of a "Quad" was *also* first raised by Abe, who called it a "Diamond", in a speech to the Indian parliament in 2007 during his first stint as premier (Abe 2007).

Summing up the developments since 2013, Japan's activities have been significantly influenced by the decision of China to start BRI. At the same time, Japan's policies are an extension of earlier interests and visions, for instance with respect to the concept of "quality infrastructure". From a unilateralist position, Japan forcefully turned towards (a) multilateralism, getting its "quality infrastructure" concept adopted by the

international community and thus securing itself an advantageous position in the international infrastructure market as a capable provider of such quality, and (b) towards unilateralism,

through lining up with strong partners to provide a credible alternative to the huge, but controversial engagement of China's BRI in the region and beyond.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper set out to study Japan's position in international infrastructure connectivity, which is emerging as an important field of international economic policy making. As an analytical framework, the study distinguished four major strategies for engagement: a unilateral, a bilateral, a unilateral, and a multilateral approach. These strategies are not necessarily exclusive, but can be combined.

Already in the period up to the 1980s, Japan put an emphasis on infrastructure in its aid policy. In this respect, it was a vanguard for the current popularity of infrastructure in international policy debates. Japan's interest followed from a unilateral position, as infrastructure support reflected the experience of its own economic history. Japan was still "small enough" to follow this particular brand of aid, in those days, heterodox aid philosophy, and this approach certainly helped and was supported by Japanese domestic interests in industry and construction business.

In the period from the late 1980s to the late 2000s, Japan's ambitions and options as an international leader grew substantially. Infrastructure-related initiatives were among the policy innovations chosen to make Japan's impact felt in the wider region. Basically, Japan still followed a unilateralist approach, but it had to give more regard to international expectations, particularly from the US. Because of this tension, because of the primacy of domestic economic concerns and due to the short duration of frequently unstable cabinets, policies often turned out rather ineffective. Although an important provider of aid and with a unilateral ambition, Japan could not use

its "window of opportunity" to achieve a well-entrenched leadership role in the field of international infrastructure initiatives and beyond.

In the early 2010s, Japan became even more interested in a more pro-active approach towards infrastructure initiatives in order to overcome a faltering of economic dynamism at home and elsewhere. The country was again impeded by changing governments and by other priorities. The approach became more multilateral, laying the conceptual groundwork for later activities, as Japan was lacking the financial and political resources to shoulder the formidable tasks ahead.

After 2013, Japan's activities have been significantly influenced by the decision of China to start BRI. At the same time, Japan's policies are an extension of earlier interests and visions, for instance with respect to the concept of "quality infrastructure". Japan now forcefully turned towards multilateralism and unilateralism to increase the leverage for its preferred concepts. So far, this approach proved quite successful, and some recent US policy proposals basically reflect earlier Japanese considerations.

In the past, the "reactionary state" paradigm (e.g., Calder 1988) may have been helpful to interpret Japanese international policies. Today, Japan no longer lacks pro-activism, and its policy cannot be considered ineffective either, at least not in the field discussed here. For infrastructure connectivity, even Japan's earlier policies were rather pointed and noteworthy. More recently, Japan has become one of the principal shapers and movers in this field.

Why is Japan's contribution so underestimated? For several reasons, some of them changing over the years, Japan has stayed out of the limelight of international debates. During the earlier post-war period and under the security umbrella of the US, it was not opportune for Japan to announce its unilateral, heterodox aid policy in a resolute way. Even during the 1990s, there was a domestic debate whether Japan should focus on burden-sharing with the Western world, led by the US, or focus on its own philosophy of contributing to international development. Keeping a rather low profile was a natural consequence of this discomfiting situation.

As for a second factor, for the whole period Japanese policymakers had to be concerned about unfavourable comparisons between contemporary plans for promoting infrastructure connectivity in the region and the notorious concept of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere", pursued by Imperial Japan during the Second World War. Some of the war-time technocrats promoting a "new order" for the region did indeed play a role in early post-war Japan as well. One of the leading figures, Nobusuke Kishi, was prime minister from 1957 to 1960, the first post-war premier to visit Southeast Asia, and stood for a concept of an "Asian development", which almost invited comparisons with the 1940s thinking (Mimura 2011). At least on the level of public perceptions, which can often have a remarkable influence on national policy-making, such factors cannot be taken lightly. Here, it may suffice to think of the anti-Japanese demonstrations against the growing Japanese influence in Southeast Asia during the 1970s, which eventually led to the so-called "Fukuda Doctrine of 1977", which stressed the establishment of a harmonious and trustful relationship with Southeast Asia and with Japan supporting the development of the region. This concept still has relevance today (e.g., Koga 2017), and it is understandable that Japan pursues any policies that could be (mis-)understood as domineering in a very guarded way, whether they concern Southeast Asia in a narrow sense or are relevant

beyond. The multilateralist tendencies of Japanese approaches to infrastructure initiatives can also be related to this factor.

Third, peculiarities of the Japanese government organisation may have played a role as well. Infrastructure issues are cross-cutting traditional branches of policy-making and bureaucracy, with many actors involved, so it is difficult to pursue a high-key agenda. For example, the infrastructure export initiative of the post-2012 Abe government is only a sub-point of the overarching "Three Arrows" strategy, spread over eight ministries plus business involvement.

Finally, at least for current policies Japanese policymakers realise that a unilateralist approach is not feasible any more. Following various multilateral and minilateral trajectories, however, implies that Japan should better remain open towards emerging developments. For instance, given the political situation of the Trump-led USA, it is unclear whether FOIP will be a particularly successful endeavour. Also, it is open whether cooperating with China or treating China as a competitor will be the better strategic choice. Given this ambiguity and against the background of limited national resources, it is preferable to keep a rather low profile, without raising too many expectations and concerns about the future direction (similar, Johnson 2018).

The end result is a "silk subway": Japan has always been a very important, but not very visible player in international infrastructure connectivity. At least since the 1970s and 1980s, Japan has become very active, drawing on its own development experience. Later, many important concepts have been influenced or even shaped by Japanese proposals. The year 2013 with China's announcement of BRI as the "new silk road", is a less decisive turning point for Japan than frequently perceived. Several ideas of the new silk road borrow Japanese ideas that it has pursued in multilateral contexts before, and Japan's major post-2013 initiative, based on the idea of "quality infrastructure", in its origins also pre-

dates 2013. The current scramble for reshaping and invigorating the international economic system through infrastructure initiatives is more

open than usually perceived, it is primarily *not* shaped by the West, but by the two strongest economies of East Asia, China *and* Japan.

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