

China, Japan, Mongolia: Ongoing Cooperation and Russia's Stabilizing Role

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China's growing capabilities and ambitions have alarmed all the states which border with this giant. However, among these countries, there are those with which the PRC has a particularly complicated relationship. For example, Japan is one of them. On the one hand, China and Japan, as the two most economically developed states in Asia, cannot help but cooperate. On the other hand, there is competition between the countries, territorial issues, and a heavy memory of the events of World War II, dubbed the Nanjing Massacre when the Japanese military seized part of the Chinese territory and showed incredible cruelty to the civilian population there.

Nevertheless, cooperation between the countries is ongoing and very active. For example, in 2019, before the economic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world, Sino-Japanese trade was about \$280 billion. Despite all contradictions, the PRC is currently Japan's second trading partner after its main ally, the United States.

Today's primary role in all of Beijing's economic policy is played by One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), which aims to connect China with as many countries as possible through a single transport infrastructure. This will allow Beijing to maximize its commodity flows worldwide and bring its global economic influence to unprecedented heights. That is why the PRC is now particularly eager to cooperate with other countries in the transport sector. Around the world, the Celestial Empire supports the construction of roads, ports, and the development of international routes to incorporate them into the OBOR system. China also has joint transportation projects with Japan.

For example, a new water route between the two states began operating in 2019. After reaching the east coast of China, cargo ships from Japan sail up China's largest river, the Yangtze, until they reach the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province, PRC, which is a major river port and one of the most important transport hubs in Central China. In the first five months of 2021 alone, 36 flights were made, and 2,799 containers were delivered from Japan to Wuhan.

At the end of June 2021, another cargo ship sailed from the Port of Nagoya in Japan to Wuhan. He brought a shipment of cars in his containers for onward shipment to Mongolia. At the same time, another ship was dispatched from Japan with the same cargo, also for shipment to Mongolia, but in a much larger volume.

Soon Chinese media reported on the launch of a new cargo route to connect Japan and Mongolia via PRC territory. The route with a total length of more than 5,000 km includes the above-described water route from Japan along the Yangtze to Wuhan. Wuhan will begin the overland railroad section of the route, ending in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar.

The cars from both ships are expected to arrive at their destination in the second half of July 2021. At this point, the Japan-Wuhan-Mongolia route can be considered fully operational. Thanks to it, the delivery time from Japan to Mongolia will now be only 20 days.

From a purely economic point of view, the new route seems convenient and profitable for all three countries united by it. However, it should be remembered that the underlying differences between Japan and China and general tensions throughout the region have not gone away. As mentioned above, there is a territorial dispute between the Land of the Rising Sun and the PRC. The subject of the dispute is the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Both sides believe that these eight small islands are worth fighting for because they are considered to have oil and gas reserves in their area.

While politicians in Beijing think about territory and resources, the memory of the Nanjing Massacre and its tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of innocent victims (the exact number of victims is still unknown) is still alive among ordinary Chinese. Although no serious conflict between China and Japan has yet been portended, if it does occur, the Chinese people and the Chinese army, which already rivals the US armed forces in size and equipment, may perceive such development with great enthusiasm. In turn, Japan is trying to remove references to Nanjing from its history textbooks. Japanese ruling circles are increasingly raising the question of repealing Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution, which prohibits the country from having a full-fledged army and navy, limiting its military potential to self-defense forces. In addition, Japan continues to cling to its military alliance with the United States and has not removed American military bases from its territory, despite years of discussions about this step. The USA, which is also one of China's main competitors, is also doing everything to secure Japan's place in the anti-China axis that Washington is trying to build with India and Australia.

Thus, despite the enormous mutual benefits that Japan and the PRC derive from their economic cooperation, the long-term prospects of their relationship remain unclear.

In addition, it should be noted that China's relations with Mongolia are also ambiguous. On the one hand, Mongolia is greatly influenced by China, to the extent that even many essential positions in the country are held by ethnic Chinese. On the other hand, there are also forces in Mongolia that want more independence from the PRC.

It should be recalled that Mongolia was dependent on the Chinese Empire until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Mongolian Revolution occurred in 1911, due to which Mongolia tried to become an independent state. This was only partially successful: most of the population in the southern part of the country were ethnic Chinese who wished to remain part of China. As a result, Mongolia split into two parts: southern Inner Mongolia and northern Outer Mongolia. Outer Mongolia became the independent state of Mongolia,

while Inner Mongolia remained part of the Chinese Empire, later becoming part of the PRC. In 1949, the PRC and Mongolia officially recognized each other. However, there were people on both sides of the border who were dissatisfied with the situation. Some Chinese believe that Mongolia should be part of the PRC, and some Mongolians feel that Chinese Inner Mongolia should be reunited with Mongolia. Thus, the ground for a Sino-Mongolian conflict exists. Whether it is destined to develop depends on the socio-economic situation in the two countries, politicians' interests, and the international climate.

Of course, all well-meaning forces in the region are in favor of maintaining good-neighborly relations. However, conducting mutually beneficial cooperation, states should keep in mind the differences mentioned above and be prepared for various surprises.

The Japan-China-Mongolia route is convenient and vital for these countries, but it will instantly stop working in case of discord. Mongolia, which is landlocked and sandwiched between two neighbors: China and Russia, could be particularly affected. In principle, Japan is also a somewhat isolated country, from which it is relatively easy to reach China, Korea, and Russia by water or air. At the same time, the other parts of the world are not short trips across the ocean. Both Japan and Mongolia need overland connections to Eurasia, and if they lose the ability to do so through China, then the most logical option is the Russian territory.

Japan understands this, and for several years has been gradually mastering the Russian Trans-Siberian railroad, which connects the Russian Far East to the western part of the country, where it connects to the railroads going to Europe. In May 2019, a ceremony was held in the Japanese port city of Yokohama to mark the start of shipments to Europe via Russia: having crossed the sea leg between Japan and Russia, goods from the Land of the Rising Sun are heading west along the Trans-Siberian Railway.

As for Russian-Mongolian relations, news about their development has so far rarely appeared in the media. However, due to Mongolia's geographic location and the growing power of the PRC, the conclusion can be drawn that strengthening cooperation with Russia is the only way for the country to balance China's influence.

Thus, even though China's global adversary is the United States and its regional rivals are Japan, India, and others, Russia, which has good relations with China, should play the role of mediator and maintain the balance of power in Central and East Asia.

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