



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

Belt and Road Initiative & Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Are they Compatible?

Speaker: Professor Akio Takahara

Chair: Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa

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Venue: Lecture Room 2, India International Centre, New Delhi.

Professor Takahara began his lecture by referring to the general misconception of considering China and Japan as adversaries. He highlighted the role of media in general and the Western media in particular in creating such notions. He refuted any threat perception in Japan about China, though he said that there is a “China Dilemma” faced by Japan owing to the increasing pressure from the growing military might of China.

On the BRI, he enunciated many possible reasons regarding the origin and development of it. He analysed it in the context of China’s changing relations with other countries, especially during President Xi’s period. The reasons which might have influenced China’s policy to “turn to Eurasia” through the BRI were: problems in Sino-US relations, especially over the South-China Sea; crowding on Eastern side of China; same with the Pacific region where the US had been engaging actively through the TPP; and China’s domestic market being saturated with infrastructure investments, thus pressing for the need to go out. Therefore, turning to its west with infrastructure projects along Eurasia seemed like an attractive alternative to the existing economic order. So the BRI came into being.

Explaining the BRI, Professor Takahara described it through an analogy of constellations. Stars are a visible reality, but there are no tangible connections between stars, and therefore constellations as objective realities are fictitious. Similarly, while the projects (stars) under the BRI are realities, they aren’t visibly connected, and thus like a constellation it is merely a figment of one’s imagination. He also pointed out the confusion over whether the BRI is a policy, an action or infrastructural investment project. He also rejected the notion that the BRI is an aid, donation or an ODA. He proposed that focus should be on projects which are mutually beneficial to all stake-holders rather than benefitting any one of them. Japanese PM Shinzo Abe has stated 4 conditions on joining BRI: openness, transparency, economic viability, and no debt traps. Professor Takahara agreed to these conditions as he believed they are necessary to create co-operation.

He then mentioned that initially the BRI was widely welcomed within China owing to the AIIB euphoria, but later concerns over the practicality and economic viability of it started to surface within China. Outside China there have been mixed responses. While in the recipient countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, etc. the impression is positive about it, others consider this as a destructive economic order, impractical and slow, which would only benefit China as Chinese labour would be employed on the projects. Other concerns among countries, especially among the neighbouring ones, are related to China's quest for maritime expansion and its "Action first-ism". Action first-ism is a term coined by Professor Takahara to describe China's policy of acting first and leaving the consequences to be taken care of by diplomacy later. "Chinese words are soft but its deeds are tough", said Professor Takahara and this he attributed to China's behaviour of delivering great speeches about the importance of peaceful co-operation and prosperity but its actions have often proven to be contrary.

Talking about Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Professor Takahara said Japan was the first country to come up with FOIP as a 'vision' unlike the US which calls it a 'strategy'. Calling FOIP as another constellation as it fails to express a tangible reality, he argued the need to come up with concrete projects for the realisation of the vision of FOIP.

How compatible are BRI and FOIP? Professor Takahara argued that both undoubtedly have different strategic visions, but have shared economic goals. And therefore both can cooperate on developing successful stars (projects), thus co-existing and co-prospering. However, he also pointed out the difficulty of finding mutually beneficial projects. But even this difficult task can be worked upon if China changes its stand towards Japan, he reiterated.

On the question of viewing QUAD as an alternative to BRI, he argued about the possibility of co-operation between the BRI and any alternative such as QUAD. The only pre-condition he specified is of co-operative attitude of China to make it work. Specifying Japan's attitude towards Chinese growing economy, he reiterated that Japan also wants China to sustain its economic growth as it is important for growth of the world economy. Professor Takahara described China as being good at construction and Japan being good at formulating designs. Therefore, he said that there is a lot there for both to co-operate on projects of common interests.

Lastly, talking on Japan-China bilateral relations, he elaborated that both co-operate in all major sectors except security, which he called as the stumbling block in Japan-China relations. On how to move forward, Professor Takahara tabled different possible approaches such as through balancing China or through deepening of economic relations with China. But he stressed on following the constructivist approach of focusing on shared cultural linkages and public diplomacy. But he also referred to the problem of a perception gap between both countries and he expressed the need for China to change its behaviour towards Japan.

This report is prepared by Anu, Research Assistant, ICS.