

Thinking Strategically “from the Outside In” on Central Asia: A Conference in Rome

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I participated in an interesting two-day conference in Rome, entitled “Energy, Environment and the Future of Security in Central Asia,” from October 15 to 16, 2009. When I was asked to participate, I was wondering why we were to be discussing about Central Asia in Rome, but I suddenly realized then that Rome is a convenient point of contact to access not only for scholars based in Europe and the North America, but also for experts stationed in Central Asian countries. Also, Italy has a long and rich tradition of political science since the days of Machiavelli. Although he was from Florence, the Department of Strategic Intelligence and Security Studies at Link Campus University, the host organization of the conference, has his portrait on display as the symbolic icon of the department. Dr. Sergio Germani, professor of the department, and his students greeted us with warm hospitality and supported the conference.

The conference was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Italian government, and 35 experts on Central Asia were invited. Most of the participants were relatively younger researchers and experts, working as policy-planning staff in their governments or as residential staff in Central Asian countries while belonging to foreign and security ministries or assistant agencies such as the USAID. Members from think-tanks, NGOs, and the business community were also present.

The conference did not follow usual proceedings where speakers deliver their presentations and discussants or other participants from the floor join the discussion. Due to “Chatham House Rule,” I cannot provide any detailed discussion or individual opinions from the conference. However, I would like to briefly introduce the method and style of discussion at the conference for reader’s reference, because it was unprecedented which brought uniqueness to the conference and the method could be applied to future conferences.

The organizers called the method “strategic conversation.” It has the following specific objectives: To develop a broader, systemic picture of Central Asian security dynamics by exploring the interactions and interdependencies between energy and environmental factors and other issues that will shape the region’s future security environment; to analyze possible positive/negative energy and environmental scenarios for security and stability in the region, and to identify indicators of such scenarios, etc. With those objectives in mind, participants were divided into groups of five or six and were asked to brainstorm within each group.

First, each group picked several “headlines” regarding new and emerging risks on regional security and stability. This step considered an array of strategic challenges, framed by the following question: “What issues are analysts and decision-makers *not* thinking about that may affect critical energy and environmental aspects of security in Central Asia as well overall security and stability in

the region?” Although similar headlines were shared by several groups, it was exciting for me to find many engaging (and some flabbergasting) ideas from other groups. Until the end of day one, each group had to shuffle the headlines in accordance with the level of threat and urgency, and pick out two or three issues for further discussion. On day two, the focus shifted to the strategic implications of interdependencies among the previously selected issues and interconnectedness among the risks.

We may find a similar forum of stacking discussions at training programs for practitioners. In this sense, this kind of conference would also be helpful for Japanese young experts specializing in Central Asia, such as staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence agencies, JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), and JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization). Moreover, Japanese electric power companies may also be interested in participating in such conference. When the next round of this conference take place somewhere around the world (possible candidates for next contact could be capitals of some Central Asian countries), I have no doubt that it will become a valuable experience for Japanese experts, not only to train their strategic thinking, but also to create global human networks among practitioners sharing a common interest in Central Asia.

The conference in Rome made me realize the importance of strategic thinking concerning Central Asian security. Even in Japan, many scholars are eager to talk about policy-oriented ideas about energy, environment, and security issue in Central Asia. However, these policy proposals from the academic society have less impact to make a breakthrough in Japan’s approach towards Central Asia, or to influence the governments of this region and international organizations. Of course, the conference in Rome did not intend to propose specific policies on these issues. However, we are faced with the mission to construct practical methods to “think from the outside in” on Central Asia, which was the prevailing motto throughout the conference. Although the two-day conference was too short to establish such methods, I believe continuous linkage and exchange among experts is essential to attain the goal.

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to the research project “An Emerging New Eurasian Order: Russia, China, and Their Interactions toward Neighbors” (Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science), led by Dr. Akihiro Iwashita, Director of the Slavic Research Center and Chief Organizer for the Global COE Program “Reshaping Japan’s Border Studies” at Hokkaido University, for the financial support received for this trip to Rome.



Vincenzo Scotti, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy (center), addressed the participants in the opening session of the conference. Dr. Sergio Germani is second from right.