



A region of increased attention. Why is Japan interested in Central Asia?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the increasingly changing geopolitical landscape of the Central Asian region. In particular, it examines Japan's strategy in the region, its policy achievements, and its future challenges. Japan's Central Asian policy is analyzed in the context of Russian-Japanese and Japanese-Western relations.

Tokyo's activity in the region has not been characterized so much by high-profile initiatives but by the gradual development of practical projects of primarily economic interest.

Japan represents an alternative for Central Asian countries compared to countries such as China and Russia. Japan's aid is provided through official development assistance channels and is aimed at modernizing Soviet-era infrastructure. ODA reflects the complex nature of Japan's foreign policy, which combines a strategy based on national interests, a desire to implement liberal values, and an emphasis on a common Asian identity with the countries of the region.

Keywords:

Official Development Assistance (ODA), Democratic Path, Central Asia Plus, C5+1, Eurasian Diplomacy, Values-Based Diplomacy, Silk Road Diplomacy (SRD), investment climate.

Over the past 10 years, the Central Asia Plus or C5+1 meeting format has become quite popular in political and business circles around the world. **The United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany, India, Italy, China, Russia, the United States, the Persian Gulf countries, South Korea, and Japan** are trying to conduct dialogue with all the countries of the Central Asian region at different levels.

Over the two and a half years of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the countries of the region have developed an effective strategy for communicating with foreign partners.

Japan's interest in Central Asia has grown for many reasons: the renewal of local

leadership in recent years, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the growing problems in relations with China. Central Asian leaders are well aware that they have become important to Japan primarily due to their proximity to Russia and China. And this understanding helps them strengthen their negotiating positions¹.

ODA in the Context of Japanese Strategy in Central Asia.

When analyzing Japanese diplomacy in Central Asia, one should take into account the fact that consensus on its goals and motives has not yet been reached. According to researcher Reinhard Drifte, one of the main motives for

¹ Общая территория государств региона составляет 3 882 000 кв. км, население – более 80 млн человек, совокупный внутренний валовый продукт достигает 450 млрд долларов. В регионе сосредоточено порядка

20% мировых запасов урана, 17,2% – нефти, 7% – природного газа. По производству угля и выпадотке электроэнергии Центральная Азия в мире занимает 10 и 19 место соответственно.

Japan's entry into Central Asia in the early 1990s was its fear of isolation resulting from the rapprochement between the countries of the former socialist bloc and Western security structures².

The adoption of the Japanese model of political and socio-economic development of the 1950s-1970s implied greater independence for the Central Asian republics from Europe and the United States, which strictly approached the implementation of reforms in accordance with Western models.

Japan's policy and strategy in Central Asia were formed within the framework of **official development assistance (ODA)**. Since the early 1990s, ODA has become **the main instrument** for Japan's penetration into the region. At Tokyo's initiative, in early December 1992, all five republics were included in the list of developing countries, which made it possible to formalize the aid allocated to them as ODA.

Japan's policy goals were to prevent the destabilization of the region and to help countries move toward democratic development.

The 1993 Blue Book on Diplomacy emphasized a commitment to assisting market-oriented countries that followed an open-door policy³. At the same time, aid to Central Asia allowed Japan to fulfill its commitment to assist the former USSR through the G7 by taking on the "Asian bloc". According to former Ambassador to Russia K. Watanabe, for Japan, as an industrialized democracy that sought to play a constructive role after the Cold War, there was no choice but to respond to requests for assistance from leaders of distant Asian states (Watanabe 1995: 40).

In the 1990s, Japan, as a financial sponsor of the region's development, had an important advantage - it was less demanding in allocating funds to Central Asian countries than Western European and North American countries.

ODA Results in Central Asia (over the last 5 years) (based on total expenditures, \$ million)

Year	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
2016	2,96	12,81	31,04	0,50	195,10
2017	1,63	28,95	24,09	1,93	272,74
2018	1,15	26,34	37,89	0,55	217,55
2019	1,40	27,91	22,35	1,52	412,69
2020	1,46	22,72	26,66	0,27	312,83

Despite its significant presence as a donor, Japan is **not among the main trading partners of Central Asia**. The indicator of Japanese capital investments in the region's economy also remains quite modest. The Japanese side explains this by **the lack of the necessary investment climate in the region** that would attract Japanese business. Often, Japanese companies seek to avoid losses and invest their funds only in those investment projects that are supported by Japanese ODA.

Early Stages of Relationship Development: Hashimoto's "Eurasian Diplomacy".

In the policy of assistance to the region, it is connected with the emergence of the concept of **Eurasian diplomacy**, put forward in July 1997 by Prime Minister R. Hashimoto. The part of the concept concerning relations with Central Asia and Transcaucasia was called **Silk Road Diplomacy (SRD)**. Through SRD, Japan sought to give a geopolitical character to its strategy in relation to the Central Asian region. In

² Akiner, Shirin, ed. The Caspian: politics, energy and security, School of Oriental and African Studies Central Asia research forum. London, 2004, p. 279.

³ Diplomatic bluebook 1993. Ministry of foreign affairs of Japan [Электронный ресурс] URL:

https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/1993/c2_2_2.html#3 (accessed 20.05.2025).

particular, it will try to use the Central Asian card **in solving mutual territorial problems with Russia**.

According to the Japanese researcher T. Uyama, in the 1990s, individual politicians in Tokyo believed - based on somewhat unrealistic expectations - in promises, for example, from Bishkek during the presidency of A. Akayev to use its ties with Moscow as a mediator in resolving the Kuril problem in exchange for Japan's economic cooperation with the Kyrgyz Republic⁴.

The new Japanese approach to the region placed greater emphasis on Japan's geopolitical and energy interests, which was reflected in the development assistance policy, both in quantitative terms and in country distribution. If in 1993, ODA to Central Asia was \$2.57 million, then in 1997 it increased to \$145.38, and in 1998 it increased to \$228.15 million. Before 1998, the share of Central Asia in the total volume of Japanese ODA was about 0.5%, and in 1998 this figure increased to 2.7%⁵.

The Eurasian diplomacy envisaged developing the "Great Silk Road diplomacy", i.e. increasing the dialogue with Russia, China, Central Asia and the Caucasus countries. Japan began to intensify its economic policy towards Central Asia back in 1992, but until 1997 there was no solid conceptual basis for this activity. "Great Silk Road diplomacy" envisaged:

- 1) deepening the political dialogue between Japan and the countries of the Great Silk Road;
- 2) cooperation in the economic sphere and development of natural resources;
- 3) assistance in maintaining nuclear safety, democratization and stability.

This plan was not only a diplomatic concept, but also an integration model, which aimed to strengthen Japan's ties with the Eurasian region in the post-Soviet space. Eurasian diplomacy was an invitation to Russia to cooperate on new grounds in the former

Asian republics of the USSR, where ties with Russia dominated, where Russian remains the language of diplomatic communication and education, where, in one way or another, Japanese entrepreneurs conduct their business with an eye on Moscow.

Japan's development of ideas for Eurasian diplomacy has attracted interest in the Kremlin. Moreover, in the second half of the 1990s, Russia paid closer attention to the possibilities of developing relations with its East Asian neighbors, especially China, Japan, and South Korea, and in 1995 applied to join APEC.

Observers believe that Japan's involvement in Central Asian affairs often indicates the prevalence of promoting economic development rather than geopolitical interests. According to this point of view, Japan is not competing with either China or Russia in any "New Great Game" between the great powers in Central Asia.

However, the main emphasis of this diplomacy during the rule of Hashimoto and his successors Obuchi Keizo (1998–2000) and Mori Yoshiro (2000–2001) was primarily on normalizing relations with Russia, as can be seen from the works of Togo Kazuhiko, one of the diplomats of the so-called Russian school of the Japanese Foreign Ministry at that time, who was directly involved in developing this course. No direct link was made between Japan's development of ties with post-Soviet Central Asia and Russian-Japanese relations⁶.

Japan's Central Asian Policy as a US Ally (2000s).

The geopolitical situation in Central Asia changed dramatically following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent launch of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force military operation in Afghanistan.

During this period, power in Japan came under the leadership of Junichiro Koizumi, who

⁴ Uyama T. Japanese Policies in Relation to Kazakhstan: Is There a 'Strategy'? Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus. Ed. by R. Legvold. Cambridge, MA, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, MIT Press, 2003, pp. 165–186.

⁵ Changes in ODA disbursements by the region. Ministry of foreign affairs of Japan [Электронный ресурс] URL:

<https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2003/image/p4c2s3chart14big.gif> (accessed 16.03.2025).

⁶ Address by Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō to the Japan Association of Corporate Executives, 24 July 1997. URL: <http://japan.kantei.go.jp/0731douyukai.html> (дата обращения: 28.03.2025).

had a long political life. Koizumi began to actively support the US in Afghanistan within the framework of bilateral security cooperation, and Japan's diplomacy in Central Asia was partially "securitized".

From this point on, the Japanese government began to change its approach to Central Asia. The question arose of systematizing relations and obtaining political benefits from them.

An important mechanism for developing bilateral relations is cooperation within the framework of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue, initiated by Tokyo in 2004 with the aim of deepening interaction with the countries of the region.

This format was initiated in 2004 by the then head of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Y. Kawaguchi, after a meeting with Japanese official Tanaka Tetsuji, who proposed applying the existing format of Japan's interaction with the countries of Southeast Asia to the countries of Central Asia. At the same time, according to Kawaguchi, the initiative had no direct relation to

R. Hashimoto's "Eurasian diplomacy" and differed from the latter in that it paid more attention to China than to Russia⁷.

Despite the innovative nature of the format, the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue has become more of an umbrella, framework, and formal event than a diplomatic institution with an independent agenda. There are several reasons for this:

1. At the time of the format's launch, the Central Asian countries were not inclined towards regional integration.
2. The format's agenda did not correspond to the geopolitical needs of the region.
3. The weakness of trade and economic ties with the region prevented the Japanese side from turning the format into a workable mechanism.

Nevertheless, Japan continued to work within the format and formed a positive image of the partner. In general, a friendly and positive attitude towards Japan has formed in the

Central Asian countries. According to public opinion polls conducted in 2015 and 2016, Japan **ranked second** (14%) as a **trustworthy country** for two years in a row, behind only Russia (63%), but ahead of China and Korea (3% each). At the same time, Japan was mentioned as the third most important partner (23% of respondents) after Russia (75%) and China (35%)⁸.

In the mid-2000s, Foreign Minister Aso Taro and senior diplomats Yachi Shotaro and Kanehara Nobukatsu put forward the ideas of the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (jiyu to hanei no ko) and the "Corridor of Peace and Stability" (heiwa to antei no kairo) within the framework of "value-oriented diplomacy".

The "Arc" and "Corridor" implied increased assistance to democratization and economic development of unstable countries in various Eurasian subregions, including Central Asia, including through strengthening cooperation with NATO.

The concept was not implemented in practice for a number of reasons, including Japanese domestic political factors.

Japan spent a lot of time developing its strategy in the region. On the one hand, the desire for Central Asia in the context of cooperation with the United States, and on the other, the weakness of the factors that form the basis of cooperation.

These include:

low trade and economic indicators;
weak regional integration;
the factor of Russia and China.

Although Japan entered the region as a member of the Western camp, it failed to become Western. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Eastern diplomacy and politeness close to the local environment gave Tokyo a vote of confidence. Whether Tokyo was able to take advantage of this remains an open question.

A specific example here is the irregularity of Tokyo's use of its position as a major financial donor to the region. Given the

⁷ Вестник СПбГУ. Международные отношения. 2018. Т. 11. Вып. 4.366 стр.

⁸ Opinion poll: image of Japan in the Central Asia region. *Ministry of foreign affairs of Japan.* [Электронный ресурс]

focus on involving the maximum number of external players in the region and the "flirting" of some against others, multi-vectorism dampens the possibility of exerting external pressure.

Understanding that without the participation of China and Russia, it is difficult to implement beneficial forms of cooperation in the Central Asian region, Tokyo pays attention to the activities of the SCO. The opinions of various experts regarding the SCO ranged from critical, for example, expressed by Saito Tsutomu, editor-in-chief of the right-wing conservative newspaper Sankei Shimbun, to calls for Japan to cooperate with the SCO up to obtaining the level of a state with observer status⁹.

According to former Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, interest in the SCO coincides with the launch of the Central Asia-Japan format. Japan's participation in this format was not supported by the permanent members of the organization, and official Tokyo did not have a clear position on this issue.

There was an attempt to attract Moscow to the negotiating table on the territorial issue by demonstrating the possibilities of political influence in Central Asia. But, ultimately, Japan realized that it was not able to balance Russian influence in Central Asia, and stopped these attempts. In general, both the Arc and Corridor concepts and the creation of its own C5+1 format were not conceived as an antithesis to the emerging Chinese-Russian tandem.

2010s: The Abe Factor in Japanese Foreign Policy.

After Abe returned to the post of Prime Minister in 2012, contacts with Central Asia became noticeable. Already in the first three years of his tenure, more Japanese officials

visited the region than in the previous ten years. In 2015, Abe made a historic tour of all five Central Asian republics, which was a unique event for Japanese prime ministers.

The change in the attitude of the Abe government towards the Central Asian region is explained by the following circumstances.

- Japanese diplomacy began to avoid directly challenging Russia's influence in the Central Asian region;
- Concerns about the integration projects developed by Moscow in Eurasia both the SCO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) - decreased;
- Concerns about the continuing growth of China's influence and the unwillingness to spoil ties with Moscow.

One of the main diplomatic initiatives of Abe's second term was an active and consistent line on finding ways to normalize relations with Russia, putting pragmatic cooperation at the forefront. For example, during a policy speech to parliament in 2018, Abe called relations with Russia "bilateral ties with the greatest potential" - none of his predecessors had made such statements; this rhetoric was also included in the main conceptual document of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs - the Blue Book on Diplomacy¹⁰.

Central Asia in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

However, after the start of the special military operation, relations between Russia and Japan are at their lowest point in the entire post-war period, they have suffered such damage from which they are unlikely to fully recover. There is a refusal to accept agreements and denounce treaties that were reached over the past decades. In addition, Japan has adopted several sanctions packages over the past two years¹¹.

⁹ Iwashita A. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Japan — Moving Together to Reshape the Eurasian Community // Iwashita A. (ed.) Toward a New Dialogue on Eurasia: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Partners. Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007. P. 21–26.

¹⁰ Гайко: сэйсё [Синяя книга по дипломатии]. МИД Японии 2018 г. URL: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/index.html> (дата обращения: 01.02.2025).

¹¹ После того как Япония приняла несколько пакетов санкций против России в связи с ситуацией на Украине, МИД России 21 марта 2022 года заявил, что Москва в качестве ответной меры на недружественные шаги Токио отказывается от ведения переговоров с Японией по мирному договору, прекращает безвизовые поездки

"As a result, relations have not only been thrown back several decades, but, in fact, their very foundation, which was very strong and was created over decades by the efforts of many authoritative politicians, including in Japan itself, has been destroyed. It must be said that relations have suffered such damage from which they will not be able to fully recover even with some eventual stabilization. This is my vision of the current situation. This is the point of no return"¹².

In connection with the events in Ukraine and the complication of relations between Japan and Russia, Tokyo is paying more attention to Central Asia as a new economic partner. Uzbekistan, as the most stable and economically developed country in the region, is becoming a key ally of Japan in Central Asia.

Speaking about the further development of interaction between the countries of Central Asia and Japan, a number of promising areas of bilateral and multilateral cooperation can be identified.

First. Against the backdrop of increasing challenges and threats of religious extremism and terrorism, a joint search for effective solutions to combat these dangerous phenomena is becoming especially relevant.

In May 2024, at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan, the Regional Expert Council (REC) in Central Asia on rehabilitation and reintegration was established jointly with the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, and its first meeting was held in Tashkent.

In this context, Japan's support and participation in the implementation of projects and activities within the framework of the REC activities will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the efforts of the countries of the region on rehabilitation and reintegration.

Second. Partnership in the field of critical mineral resources is promising. Central Asia contains 39% of the world's manganese ore reserves, 31% of chromium, 20% of lead, 13% of zinc, 9% of titanium. Interaction with the Central Asian countries will allow Japan to

diversify its sources of minerals and prevent disruptions in supply chains. According to open sources, in 2022 alone, Japan imported rare earth metals worth \$628 million. "Accordingly, attracting high-quality investments and modern technologies from Japan into deep processing of the resource base with the creation of a complete chain of added value will become an important factor in ensuring the accelerated development of the region".

Third. Interaction in the formation of an extensive transport and communication system. According to UN estimates, by 2050, the demand for freight transportation in the world will increase threefold. This trend is a direct challenge for the landlocked countries of Central Asia, through which more than 80% of the total volume of world trade is carried out today.

In this regard, close cooperation between the Central Asian countries and Japan in the construction and modernization of railways and highways, as well as the digitalization of customs points with modern technologies and the creation of logistics centers, is particularly relevant, which will help to unlock the transport and transit potential of Central Asia, located at the "junction" of Europe and Asia.

Fourth. Central Asia is one of the regions most susceptible to the negative effects of climate change. In particular, according to the World Bank, if by the end of the 21st century, if the current rate is maintained, the average temperature in the world increases by **4 degrees** Celsius, then in Central Asia, the increase will be **7 degrees**.

"As a result, 300 high-mountain lakes remain at risk of breaking through. According to experts' calculations, with an increase in the average annual temperature by 2-4 degrees, the volume of mountain glaciers in Central Asia may decrease to 78%."

Taking into account the above, the provision of Japanese technology in the field of energy efficiency and water conservation will

граждан Японии на южные Курильские острова, выходит из диалога с Японией о налаживании совместной хозяйственной деятельности на Южных Курилах.

¹² Интервью посла России в Японии Николай Ноздрева. Отношения России и Японии находятся на самом низком уровне, заявил посол. <https://ria.ru/20240322/yaponiya-1934830173.html>. (дата обращения: 01.02.2025).

help strengthen the region's sustainability in the field of green energy.

Fifth. Implementation of projects in the field of poverty reduction. Today, Central Asia is one of the fastest growing regions in the world in demographic terms. From this point of view, the creation of new jobs is of great interest. According to him, it is important to continue the implementation of the "one village, one product" program with the assistance of JICA. As part of the implementation of this project in the period 2017-2022, 280 products were developed in Kyrgyzstan and 3 thousand jobs were created, 167 export contracts worth 238 million dollars were concluded.

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