

CENTRAL ASIA PLUS JAPAN DIALOGUE: ITS ROLE IN JAPAN'S STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. The article researches the Central Asia and Japan Dialogue (CAJ) which was established in 2004 with the aim of fostering intraregional integration and increasing Japan's role in the region. It analyses the role it plays in Japan's strategy in Central Asia, in the way it contributes to the realisation of Japan's foreign policy goals towards the region. In almost 20 years CAJ has become a permanent framework for discussions which combines official dialogue and informal track and covers wide spectrum of issues, from political agenda to development assistance. CAJ has become instrumental in outlining the areas of practical cooperation although it did not lead to full scale economic integration of the countries of the region. CAJ is an important venue for discussing security agenda as well as maintaining Japan's engagement in the issues of Afghanistan. Political agenda of CAJ has been restrained as it reflects Japan's awareness of the close relationship of the Central Asian states with China and Russia, however, in times when Japan's relations with China and Russia are characterized by a certain level of tensions, Tokyo tends to use CAJ to gain CA supports vis-à-vis these states. . Global issues are less controversial and are usually discussed multilaterally.

Keywords: Japan, Central Asia, cooperation, strategy

INTRODUCTION

Japan has become an active player in Central Asia since the Soviet Union collapsed and the new republics gained independence. Japan's presence mainly focused on the Official Development Aid (ODA) and efforts aimed at establishing good relations with the local elites. Since that time the relationship has evolved greatly, covering all spheres of cooperation and combining bilateral dialogue with multilateral forum "Central Asia and Japan" (CAJ). The purpose of this article is to research what role does this multilateral forum play in Japan's strategy in Central Asia, in what way does it contribute to the realisation of Japan's foreign policy goals towards this region. By Central Asia the author means five republics of the former USSR: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The article first outlines Japan's interests in the region which are mainly political and economic in nature. Then it highlights the main characteristics of Japan's strategy in Central Asia by analysing sources of foreign policy and historical facts. The next part of the paper is dedicated to the multilateral approach towards Central Asia and analyses the reasons of introducing the multilateral forum and its goals and principles. It then proceeds to the research of the work of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue, its structure, participants and agenda. The article ends with discussion of the results and conclusion.

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ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The research of Japan's policy approach to Central Asia in 1990-2000s suggests that both realist and liberal lens as well as constructivism, are instrumental in explaining the rationale behind Japan's activity in the region. D.Walton suggests applying a liberal "adaptive state" model to explain Japan's strategy in the region. He underlines that Japan considers initiatives in Central Asia as a part of a larger strategy to establish political and security norms in the region and to showcase Japan's leadership at the global level with a view to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.² Liberal approach was manifested in Japan's efforts directed at denuclearization and humanitarian and economic assistance to the former Soviet Union, as well as its desire to popularise its model of economic development in Central Asia. Japan's assistance to "fellow Asian countries" of former USSR in the 1990s, reference to the heritage of the Great Silk Road, accent on the cultural affinity with the region demonstrate that the factor of common identity, historical and cultural links also shaped Japan's foreign policy in the region in the 1990s.³

Research of Japan's foreign policy in the region through the realist lens is instrumental in outlining Japan's interests in the region. Some researches characterise Japan's foreign policy as "mercantile realism"⁴ which places economic interests in the centre of foreign policy initiatives. The term "reluctant realism" is also used to characterise Japan's post Cold-war strategic thinking.⁵ Ch.Hughes argues that Japan's international strategy post-Cold War, and from the 1990s into the early 2000s, can be said to have corresponded to a form of 'circumscribed balancing', 'Liberal Deterrence', or 'Reluctant Realism', as it edged towards some balancing against a rising China but without overcommitting to this strategy or the USA.⁶ Japan's strategy combines engaging China in cooperation in East Asia and soft containment elsewhere.⁷ Realists see Japan's expansion to Central Asia as a reflection of its goals towards Russia and China, it strengthened Japan's diplomatic standing towards Moscow and Beijing by making Japan an active economic player in their "backyard".⁸

The study of academic approaches to international relations in Central Asia outlines the coexistence of two main directions - alarmist, which focuses on the rivalry of major powers in the region, and cooperativist, with an emphasis on cooperation stemming from the logic of co-development. The alarmist approach is based on realist approach, and proceeds from the fact that a new Great Game is unfolding in the region, which is being played not only for influence, but also for access to the rich natural resources of the region.⁹ Cooperativist approach, on the contrary, highlights opportunities for great powers to coordinate their Central Asian policies on the basis of common strategic interests. Among them are the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia, the elimination of drug trafficking from the region of Central and South

² Walton, D. Japan and Central Asia. E.Kavalski ed. The New Central Asia. The regional impact of international actors. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010. P.277.

³ Dobrinskaya, O. Dobrinskaya O. The Characteristic Features of Japan's Soft Power in Central Asia. *Yearbook Japan*. 2015. P. 40 44:36-56. (In Russ.) p.40.

⁴ Heginbotham, E., Samuels, R. "Mercantile realism and Japan's foreign policy." *International Security*. Vol.22, No.4 (Spring, 1998): p.171.

⁵ Green, M. *Japan's reluctant realism. Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power*. Palgrave MacMillan. 2001. 368 p.

⁶ Hughes, Ch. "Japan's 'Resentful Realism' and Balancing China's Rise." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2016, Vol. 9, No. 2. P.125.

⁷ Christopher W.Hughes. Japan's response to China's rise: regional engagement, global containment, dangers of collision //International affairs, №4, 2009. P.855.

⁸ M.Green.Japan's reluctant realism. Palgrave MacMillan. 2003. P.163.

⁹ Thornton, A. China in Central Asia: Is China winning the "new great game"? P.3. Brookings Institution - https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_china_central_asia_thornton.pdf

Asia, the eradication of religious extremism and international terrorism, the limitation of the conventional arms race in the region, and the prevention of environmental disasters.¹⁰

However, with the international situation dramatically changing the alarmist approach seems to be more wide-spread and relevant to the explanation of international relations in the region today. Central Asia has always been the sphere of vital interests to Russia and since the 1990s China has become a key player in the region and counter-terror operation in Afghanistan marked the US presence in Central Asia. Although the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan led to diminished US interest in the region, the confrontation between Russia and the West over the Ukraine placed new emphasis on diplomacy towards the Central Asian republics. The Belt and Road initiative mark new era of China's economic and infrastructural expansion in the region.

Japan's presence in Central Asia is often viewed from the standpoint of the alarmist approach. Its policy is studied through the prism of allied relations with the United States, and its regional initiatives are considered a challenge to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization operating in the region. E.Usabaliev draws attention to the fact that when we talk about Japan's policy in Central Asia, we must inevitably remember the special allied relations of this country with the United States.¹¹ Russian researcher L.Vasiliev also notes that Tokyo's policy should be assessed as one of the elements of financial support for Washington's presence in Central Asia.¹² At the same time, one of its goals is to reduce the influence of Russia and China in the region, especially in the economic sphere. Ch.Hughes sees Japan's activity in recent years as an attempt to demonstrate a presence in Central Asia that precludes China's monopolization of the region through its own Silk Road Initiatives.¹³

Proponents of the cooperative approach, on the contrary, see the potential for cooperation between Japan and other regional players or structures, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹⁴ Russian scientist V. Shlyndov also notes the possibility of establishing constructive cooperation in certain areas, for example, in the fight against terrorism.¹⁵

There are many factors that influence Japan's foreign policy in Central Asia, as well as its foreign policy in general. The first is military alliance with the United States which has a profound impact on Japan's foreign policy choices. Japan's strategy towards China is also a crucial element to consider when researching its foreign policy, especially in Central Asia, which directly borders China. Japan's relations with Russia have been an important factor beyond its diplomatic initiatives in the region. It is fair to say that Japan has been acting in Central Asia with restraint, careful not to damage its relations with Russia and China. Global perspective should also be taken into account when researching Japan's strategy because the support of the five countries of Central Asia is valuable in terms of Japan's UN diplomacy and its global initiatives. The "mercantile realism" approach is instrumental in understanding the

¹⁰ Tolipov, F. "Strategic dilemma of Central Asia". *Russia in global politics* (in Russ.) . 21.08.2006. – <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/strategicheskaya-dilemma-czentralnoj-azii/>

¹¹ Usabaliev, E. "Japan's role in Central Asia – is a new security organisation in the region possible?" *Prudent Solutions*. (in Russ.) - <https://prudentolutions-analitika.org/2017/04/30/роль-японии-в-центральной-азии-возможен/> (accessed 15.07.2020)

¹² Vasiliev, L. "Politics of the world powers in Central Asia and its influence on the SCO development prospects." *World powers in Central Asia*. Moscow, 2011.

¹³ Hughes, Ch. "Japan's 'Resentful Realism' and Balancing China's Rise." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2016, Vol. 9, No. 2. P.141.

¹⁴ Iwashita, A. *The SCO and Japan: moving together to reshape the Eurasian community*-<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-and-japan-moving-together-to-reshape-the-eurasian-community/> (accessed 10.05.2020)

¹⁵ Shlyndov, A. "SCO and issues of Russia-Japan relations". *Problems of the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia*. Moscow, 2005. (in Russ.)

driving force of its involvement in the region, which is rich in natural resources, plays a significant role as a commercial transit route and is a perspective market for Japanese goods.

The analytical framework of research is based on the content analysis of the official sources - Diplomatic Bluebooks, speeches of prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs of Japan, articles and interviews by Japanese officials, as well as event analysis of its regional initiatives. Academic papers including the ones by former diplomats in charge of Central Asia also provide valuable insight into the country's regional policy.

Researchers of the Japanese strategy in Central Asia emphasize the importance of the Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue in the context of evolution of the Japanese strategy in Central Asia from different angles. T. Yuasa notes the continuity of the multilateral approach, which was first manifested in Japan's policy towards the region in 1997 with the appearance of R. Hashimoto's strategy of Eurasian diplomacy.¹⁶ T. Uyama sees the Central Asia Plus Japan Dialogue as a manifestation of Japan's independent diplomacy, where Japan will work as an independent player, without either depending on or confronting other great powers, while consulting with them when required.¹⁷ They agree that the emergence of the Dialogue was an important milestone in the transformation of the Japanese foreign policy in the region. However, its further development is sometimes characterized as the Dialogue becoming more of an umbrella framework and a formal event than a diplomatic institution with an independent agenda¹⁸ thus questioning its efficiency and role in the realization of Japan's foreign policy strategy in the region.

JAPAN'S STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Although Japan has been active in Central Asia since the early 1990s it did not have a distinguished strategy towards Central Asia, which was then seen as part of the Newly Independent States¹⁹ of the former USSR. Japan's foreign policy goals towards NIS included ensuring their transition to market economy, stabilising social situation and denuclearisation. Japan showed interest in mineral resources of the region, but Central Asia's geographical isolation, local methods of conducting business prevented full scale economic projects. At the same time Japan seemed to be paying more attention to fellow Asian states of former Soviet Union, which was manifested by intense political contacts and large amount of development assistance Japan directed to the region. Japan aimed at enhancing its international role and popularising its economic development model in the post-Soviet Central Asia. Japan also considered friendship with Central Asian states as a means of gaining leverage over Russia in the territorial issue, but soon gave up the attempts to influence Moscow.

It was only in 1997 that the prime minister R.Hashimoto mentioned Central Asia as a part of the Silk Road region, which also included Caucasus, in his speech announcing the start of the Eurasian Diplomacy. This was the first time Japan's strategy towards the region was officially manifested, although in many ways it was a continuation of what Japan had been doing in the region since the early 1990s. The main pillars of Japan's cooperation with the states

¹⁶ Yuasa, T. "Japan's multilateral approach toward Central Asia." P.65-84.- http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/04_yuasa.pdf (accessed: 10.07.2020)

¹⁷ Uyama, T. Japan's diplomacy towards Central Asia in the context of Japan's Asian diplomacy and Japan-US relations. *Silk Road diplomacy: paving the road ahead*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. Singapore. 2008. P. 113.

¹⁸ Murashkin, N. "Evolution of the "Russian factor" in Japanese foreign policy in Central Asia." *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. International relations*. Vol. 11. 2018. Issue 4. pp. 362-375.(in Russ.)

¹⁹ Hirose, T. "Japan's diplomacy in Central Asia: the perspective of a working- level policymaker." *Silk Road diplomacy: paving the road ahead*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. Singapore. 2008. P. 206.

of the Great Silk included political dialogue, economic cooperation and cooperation in the development of natural resources; achieving peace in the region through nuclear non-proliferation, democratization and stabilization.²⁰ This approach put more emphasis on the geopolitical vision of the region and its significance to Japan in terms of economic potential, and Japan's interest in the Silk Road region's energy resources became more clearly defined. It coincided with Japanese companies "Inpex" and "Itochu" acquiring shares in the consortium developing Kashagan oil field, the largest oil deposit in Kazakhstan, as well as Japan taking part in the development of Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in Azerbaijan and in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. While Japan's attention to the energy projects in the region in fact contributed to decreasing their dependence on Russia, the Eurasian diplomacy saw Silk Road region as a sphere of cooperation rather than competition, as it aimed at enhancing Japan's relations with Russia and China at that time.

Central Asia as a separate foreign policy track consolidated only in the beginning of the 2000s as a result of geopolitical changes in the region, which included US military presence after the beginning of the operation in Afghanistan. Japan's involvement in the operation, although limited in scope, highlighted the importance of Central Asia in helping the US and its allies stabilize Afghanistan. The 2004 Diplomatic Bluebook stated that the stability in the countries of the region had a direct influence on East Asia.²¹ The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the 2001 was another factor that contributed to the update of Japan's strategy. The emergence of the new centre of power in the region also prompted Japan to take actions to increase its political presence to counterbalance this trend. At the same time, against the background of US presence in the region, Japan's interest towards energy cooperation became more pronounced. Prime minister Koizumi mentioned the importance of the energy cooperation with Central Asia in his speech at the Boao Forum for Asia²², and soon Japan's Silk Road energy mission was sent to Central Asia in 2002, followed by Koizumi's visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2006. Japan's interest in the resources of the region was now directed not only towards oil and gas, but also uranium and rare earth that the countries of the region are rich in.

Japan's answer to the changing strategic landscape of Central Asia was manifested in the new approach based on the support for intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia which was put forward by the foreign minister Y.Kawaguchi. While cooperation and open regionalism were stated as key points of the new Japan's strategy, it soon acquired a more realistic hint. In 2006 in a speech "Central Asia as a corridor of peace and stability" foreign minister T.Aso underlined that Japan's goal in helping Central Asia aimed at preventing them from being pawns in the new Great Game, referring to the new rivalry of great powers in the region, although not naming them directly. The concept of Central Asia as a corridor of peace and stability logically fitted into the broader concept of the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity", which was put forward at that time as one of the pillars of the foreign policy of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and was seen as an attempt to contain China. The concept envisaged the creation of a belt of states adhering to universal values (democracy, human rights, market economy), and Central Asia was among them.

²⁰ Address by Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to the Japan Association of Corporate executives. 24 July 1997. - Prime Minister of Japan and his cabinet - www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/0731douyukai.html (accessed: 20.07.2020)

²¹Diplomatic Bluebook 2004. P.103.

²² Asia in a new century: change and opportunity. Speech by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi at the Boao Forum for Asia. - Prime minister of Japan and his cabinet - <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/boao0204/speech.html> (accessed 20.07.2020)

T.Aso envisaged a broad-based approach to the region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the creation of the corridor, the main role was to be played by infrastructure (the so-called transportation "southern route" linking Central Asia with the sea by means of a road stretching across Afghanistan, as well as the pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan). This approach was in line with the US concept of "Greater Central Asia", based on an expanded interpretation of the region, with the inclusion of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although the concept of corridor of peace and stability soon disappeared from foreign policy documents, the view of the states of Central Asia and Afghanistan as closely interconnected continued to dominate Japan's foreign policy in the region. In 2009, Japan announced its intention to the Self Defence Forces support mission in the Indian ocean. Instead, it focused on economic reconstruction of Afghanistan which it saw possible not only be means of financial support but also by assisting its economic integration with the Central Asia. The new strategy announced in November 2009 pledged that Japan will aim to stabilize Afghanistan by promoting the development of neighbouring Central Asia region which it considers as one theatre.²³

Thus, the significance of Central Asia since the beginning of the 21st century acquired new dimensions, which were based on the assessment of its geographical position as a bridge connecting Asia, Europe, Russia and the Middle East, its natural resources – oil, gas, uranium, and its role is addressing security issues of the neighbouring countries, such as situation in Afghanistan, spread of terrorism, illicit drugs and illegal armaments.²⁴ After 2006, there have been no attempts to emphasise geopolitical competition with other countries, and Japan's approach was largely based on its economic interests. Its new wave of interest towards the region can be attributed to the appearance of the Belt and Road initiative. Japan's counter initiative is partnership for quality infrastructure, where emphasis is put on sustainability, financial transparency and human resource training. However, given the incomparable level of economic presence of China and of Japan in Central Asia, new Japan's initiatives can be seen as directed at securing its economic interests in the region rather than countering China's economic expansion.

The first ever visit by prime minister S.Abe to all the states of Central Asia took place in 2015. In a speech in Kazakhstan, S.Abe voiced three pillars of policy towards the region: 1) Japan will significantly increase its presence in Central Asia. Its main tools will be assistance in the development of high-tech industries and in the training of high-class professionals; 2) Japan will continue to actively participate in solving the common problems of the region. Through the CAJ, the implementation of the most important programs for the development of the region will continue, first of all, the modernization of agriculture, the development of transport and cargo transportation. Public-private partnership for the implementation of plans for the development of the region. 3) Deepening partnership in the international arena, primarily in the field of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Abe's speech reflected focus on practical cooperation and did not include ideological constructs to underpin his vision of the region. His visit resulted in economic and assistance agreements amounting for about 30 bln dollars. However, after his vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific was announced in 2016, the wording used in Japan's rhetoric regarding Central Asia also seemed to acquire elements of this new approach, against the background of Japan's relations with China and Russia. According to the foreign minister T.Kono, an "open, stable and

²³ Japan's new strategy to counter the threat of terrorism. Japan's new assistance package to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. - <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/terrorism/strategy0911.pdf>

²⁴ Diplomatic Bluebook 2013. P.19. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. - <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000019037.pdf>

independent development” of this region and working together with all states as "a catalyst for regional cooperation".²⁵

Speaking at the 14th meeting in 2022, Japanese Foreign Minister Y. Hayashi used the expression "free and open Central Asia". References to the rule of law, respect for a free and open world order can be found in joint statements of the CAJ. The Diplomatic Bluebook also says that Japan will further strengthen relations with these countries as a partner for maintaining and reinforcing the rules-based international order.²⁶

EMERGENCE OF THE CENTRAL ASIA PLUS JAPAN DIALOGUE: EVOLUTION OF MULTILATERAL APPROACH

The emergence of multilateral approach towards Central Asia can be dated back to 1997 when Silk Road diplomacy was announced. However, it was only in 2004 when the CAJ was proclaimed. The reasons for Japan's transition to a multilateral format are related to the desire to recalibrate its policy in Central Asia in light of the regional changes in the first half of the 2000s and not just increase its presence in the region but also propose a qualitatively new approach. According to Y. Kawaguchi, “A dialogue or cooperative initiative with Japan, taking the form of "Central Asia plus Japan," would have its basis in three principles, namely, respecting diversity, competition and coordination, and open cooperation.”²⁷

Considering the concrete forms of the multilateral approach Japan weighed an option of joining the Central Asia Cooperation Organization (CACO) which united the five states. At the meeting of CACO Ambassador of Japan to Kazakhstan T. Tsunozaki proposed Japan's assistance in numerous projects implemented by the CACO and mentioned the possibility of participation of Japan's foreign minister in an extraordinary meeting of the CAC Council of Foreign Ministers.²⁸ However, the CACO option was dropped when Russia became member of the CACO in 2004. The only choice for Japan was to create its own new forum under its leadership - Central Asia plus Japan.

The idea of a dialogue was to have a framework in which Japan was present as the only external force which was superior to the rest of the participants economically. This allowed it to build multilateral relations according to its own desirable scenario. It was supposed to replicate the idea of the "ASEAN plus three" format with Japan acting as a catalyst to intraregional cooperation. By comparing its regional roles Tokyo hoped to help form a united economic space in Asia linked to Japan by special relationship.

In contrast to the Hashimoto doctrine of Eurasian diplomacy, which was mainly a result of a top-down process, an idea created under the directives from the prime minister's cabinet, the concept of CAJ was a result of a bottom-up process, it was formulated by the expert circles and then submitted to the leadership.²⁹ This may suggest a deeper level of expertise involved and better sustainability of the framework. Moreover, the CAJ dialogue would be better than Eurasian diplomacy in respect of listing in the appendix of the statement examples of

²⁵ Foreign Minister Kono's article contributed to Kazinform (Republic of Kazakhstan). 17. 05. 2019. - <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000494314.pdf> (accessed 10.06.2023)

²⁶ Diplomatic Bluebook 2022.

²⁷ Policy Speech by Ms. Yoriko Kawaguchi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan At the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, Uzbekistan on August 26, 2004

"Adding a New Dimension: Central Asia plus Japan". - <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/uzbekistan/speech0408.html> (дата обращения 20.07.2020)

²⁸ Central Asia Cooperation Organization. <https://centrasia.org/cnt2.php?st=1083320274> (accessed 10.06.2023)

²⁹ Yuasa, T. "Japan's multilateral approach toward Central Asia." P.83.- http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/04_yuasa.pdf (accessed 10.06.2023)

cooperation, issues and other matters to be addressed in each field such as counter-terrorism, drugs, transportation, water, etc.³⁰

The formation of this framework including all the five Central Asian countries put the brakes on the competition among the “lobbies” of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and other countries for limited resources inside the Japanese government.³¹

The first meeting of the new format took place in August 2004 in Astana. In the joint communique the participants outlined the main principles of the Dialogue: respect for diversity, competition and coordination, open cooperation. Its goals were also proclaimed, which included what Japan had been doing before (strengthening peace, stability and democracy in Central Asia, consolidating the economic base, promoting reform and social development), as well as new directions (developing intra-regional ties, cooperation in solving regional and global problems).

The Dialogue was not a substitute for bilateral cooperation, but complemented it, playing a supporting role in promoting Japanese interests in the region. It also played a crucial role as a place where all the Central Asian countries could negotiate with Japan playing an auxiliary role of mediator. Central Asian intra-regional cooperation is hampered by various problems including territorial disputes, water resources distribution issue, rivalry among the states, conflict potential. Political analysts have noted that exclusively Central Asian cooperation hardly existed, and the most viable were the mixed frameworks such as SCO, EAEU, CSTO because of a foreign element present inside them, and integration in the region could be realized only with an outside pressure involved.³² In this regard Japan’s initiative played an important role in helping Central Asia develop into a more economically attractive region that would serve the interests of all international players promoting business cooperation there.

CAJ was also aimed at increasing Japan’s leverage in the region. It proved that Japan’s role in the region could be political, and now Japan could become an agenda setter in the region. It was also helpful in sustaining a favourable image of the country. As local researches put it, before that Japan has been trying hard to create a positive image of a country that wants to help the young republics being guided by altruistic thoughts, but in reality, it tried to enlist their support for the permanent UNSC seat, but now it proposed working together for the sake of common good.³³ Interestingly, Japan was the first to establish this kind of format. Later, it was followed by Korea, USA, China, Russia and other countries, and this can be regarded as proof of the success of the multilateral approach.

In contrast to the Western European powers, which focused on each country separately, Japan emphasized the importance of approaching Central Asia as a single market and, accordingly, the need to direct efforts specifically to promote the formation of this market.³⁴

EVOLUTION OF THE CENTRAL ASIA PLUS JAPAN DIALOGUE: STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPATION

³⁰ Yuasa, T. “Japan’s multilateral approach toward Central Asia.” P.81.- http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/04_yuasa.pdf (accessed 10.06.2023)

³¹ Uyama, T. Japan’s diplomacy towards Central Asia in the context of Japan’s Asian diplomacy and Japan-US relations. *Silk Road diplomacy: paving the road ahead*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. Singapore. 2008. P. 112.

³² Malashenko, A. Central Asia: no one wanted to win. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. (in Russ.)- http://www.ng.ru/courier/2006-01-16/9_china.html (assessed 10.06.2023)

³³ Nurgaliev, M., Shaimergenov, T. “New track of Japan’s diplomacy in Central Asia: problems and perspectives.” *Central Asia and Caucasus*. №6, 2007. (in Russ.)

³⁴ Zadankai. Dokei to reiki no kosaku suru seichi, (Roundtable. Holy land where romantics and pragmatism intertwine). *Gaiko Foramu*. №12, 1998. C.18. (in Japan.)

Since 2004, the Dialogue has evolved into a regular multilayered forum, both in terms of structure and in terms of its participants. The highest level of CAJ is represented by regular Foreign Ministers Meetings (FMM) and Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs). Usually, the FMM are held once in two years (the exception was 2008 when there was no meeting) and the SOM are held in between them. As of June 2023, nine ministerial meetings were held (in 2022 two FMM took place online and in person).

The idea of upgrading CAJ to the summit level first appeared in 2006. However, in almost 20 years of existence the Dialogue has not reached the top level. Even Abe visit in 2015 did not result in holding a CAJ summit, which might be explained by the desire to attract less attention of Russia and China at the time, especially when Japan was trying to pursue new constructive dialogue with Moscow. CAJ activities continue to expand in horizontal direction by diversifying networks within the Dialogue.

The scope of SOM has enhanced and now includes not only representatives of MOFA but other agencies as well. It is common for the from the ministries of internal affairs, finance, health, labour and welfare, agriculture, tourism, etc. to take part in meetings, as was the case with the meeting held in Tokyo in 2018.

At the third meeting of senior officials, in December 2007, an attempt was made to develop rules for the chairmanship of CAJ but the decision has not been reached. At the moment, each participating country takes turns hosting meetings of the Dialogue. FMM usually result in adopting joint statements or press statements. In 2006 an Action Plan was adopted, the programme document which outlines main directions of cooperation of CAJ. They include political dialogue and international cooperation; regional cooperation on topical issues; business development; intellectual dialogue; cultural and humanitarian exchanges. As the directions of practical cooperation became more tangible it was decided to adopt Road Maps in the certain areas.

The shift to practical cooperation led to further increase of the number of discussion mechanisms within the Dialogue. In 2011, an Economic forum was held for the first time, and in 2017 and 2018, two rounds of business dialogue were organised. However, the business dialogue is not a regular mechanism and its potential is yet to be realised.

In the 2010s the cooperation framework came to include the foreign ministers exchange track as a way for promoting more informal interaction among the ministries of all six countries which should increase mutual trust and understanding.

The forum which started as an official dialogue was soon enhanced by adding an informal track – in 2006 it was decided to add the so-called Tokyo Dialogue or Intellectual Dialogue, in which prominent academics and politicians participate. By 2023, 12 meetings of the Intellectual Dialogue have been held.

Since 2014, regular narrowly focused expert meetings have become part of the CAJ. Their task is to help define directions of joint practical work in the most prospective fields. Representatives of industries meet to discuss specific cooperation projects in such areas as agriculture, drug trafficking and border security, transport and logistics, tourism.

An important feature of the Dialogue is its gradual expansion by fully engaging all the five countries of Central Asia. Initially, Turkmenistan showed little interest in this initiative, and its participation was minimal. During negotiations with the Turkmenistan leader in 2009, Japan managed to enlist his support for the CAJ, and following the talks in September 2013, Turkmenistan expressed its readiness to cooperate in the preparation of the next ministerial meeting. In May 2017, for the first time it hosted the Dialogue, where issues such as the fight against terrorism, drugs, and other security issues, trade and investment, development, etc. were discussed.

Another state directly linked to the CAJ is Afghanistan. It does not have the status of a full-fledged participant in the Dialogue, however, due to the fact that the problems of Afghanistan were and are present in the Dialogue agenda from the very beginning, its representatives are repeatedly invited to the meetings of the CAJ.

The participants declare CAJ to be a forum open to external contacts, however, there is no cooperation with other international players and associations. When the CAJ was launched, Tokyo was willing to cooperate with the OSCE by jointly supporting the efforts of the Central Asian countries aimed at democratization, respect for human rights and the development of a market economy.³⁵ The second informal meeting of the CAJ was held on the sidelines of the OSCE summit. However, this cooperation has not institutionalised further. Neither is there any cooperation between CAJ and SCO. The second meeting of the CAJ in 2006 took place a few days before the SCO summit, and the adopted CAJ Action Plan was very similar to the programs of the organization. This gave some observers a reason to call the Dialogue a frank challenge to the SCO, citing as confirmation the words of the official representative of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, who called the SCO a bloc that is contrary to Japan's allied relations with the United States.³⁶ Since that time, no signs of confrontation between the aforementioned regional formats were visible, and with Japan being invited to the Afghanistan conference in Moscow in 2010 and Russia and Japan cooperating in various projects in Afghanistan it appeared that conditions for cooperation were in place, but no cooperation has materialized.

CAJ AGENDA: POLITICS, SECURITY, ECONOMICS

The establishment of CAJ increased Japan's political presence in the region and created a permanent framework for promoting its agenda. This agenda can be roughly divided into four parts: political issues, security, economic cooperation.

In the political sphere Japan tries to ensure the support of the Central Asian countries regarding the pressing regional issues. However, generally its political agenda is quite moderate, because the Central Asian states are close partners of both Russia and China and are not interested in straining their bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing. However, there have been attempts at using CAJ in the geopolitical balancing of China. At the FMM in 2012, Japan raised the issue of the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. At the FMM in April 2022, Foreign Minister Y. Hayashi condemned the "Russian invasion of Ukraine" as a serious violation of international law, stressing the importance of a unified response from the international community. Thus, Japan attempts to exert soft pressure on the countries of the region in order to widen the scope of like-minded partners. Such attempts often do not go beyond discussions and the joint communiqués of the Dialogue include general phrases but do not mention particular countries.

While the Central Asian countries are cautious about the issues related to China and Russia, other topics, such as the North Korea's nuclear missile program and the issue of the Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean secret services, which are submitted by Japan for discussion at the Dialogue, find understanding among the participants and are included in the documents, for example in the joint statement of the CAJ in 2018.

Japan's global agenda do not create much controversy and is met with greater unanimity. In particular, Japan seeks to get the support of the countries of the region on issues such as sustainable development goals and human security, disarmament, environmental protection, as well as on Japan's candidacy for the UN Security Council.

³⁵ Speech by T. Iwaya, Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs at the Ministerial Council of the OSCE. 5.12.2006- <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/9/22976.pdf> (accessed: 10.06.2020)

³⁶ Sarkisov. K. "New bipolar confrontation." *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 08.06.2006. (in Russ.)

The security agenda is an indelible part of the discussions at the CAJ from its inception. While Self Defense Forces were taking part in the Indian ocean mission assisting the counterterror coalition, and the government was coordinating international efforts of assisting Afghanistan's reconstruction, CAJ became an important arena for discussing the situation in Afghanistan as the countries of the region directly border it. Japan helped rebuild roads connecting Afghanistan and Central Asia, it manages border security and better livelihood improvement projects on the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Japan's assistance continued after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, in 2022 Japan allocated new funds as humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and assistance to prevent violent extremism in Central Asian countries. Japan's assistance is also directed at combating terrorism, drug trafficking, well as cooperating with Russia to hold training for drug enforcement agents of Afghanistan and Central Asia Japan coordinated with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to establish border liaison offices on drugs and crime and implemented a plan to strengthen cross border cooperation in Central Asia, and explained that Japan is proactively contributing in this field, including by recently providing the UNODC with 500,000 U.S. dollars to implement a project for strengthening national and regional frameworks for preventing and countering violent extremism in the five Central Asian countries.³⁷

Economic agenda has always been an important part of CAJ as one of Japan's goal was to assist Central Asia in integration and overcoming geographical isolation. Dealing with Central Asia as a common regional market would be more beneficial to Japanese companies as well as establishing transnational routes connecting them to sea.

Japan's economic agenda, which includes infrastructure development, energy cooperation, creating favourable conditions to small and medium enterprises. Japan promotes its model of cooperation which emphasises human resources, sustainable development and transparency with the announcement of the Partnership for Quality infrastructure initiative.

Discussions within the CAJ involve both officials, academics and professionals with the aim of understanding the perspective areas of cooperation and then working out action plans in each of these spheres. In 2014, a Roadmap was adopted in the areas of promoting agricultural development with the involvement of Japanese technologies, in 2017 - a Roadmap for the development of transport and logistics, in 2019 - an Action Plan in the field of tourism. The significance of CAJ is of a working platform for discussing specific regional projects implemented with Japanese assistance.

Promotion of trade and investment relations with Central Asian countries includes organising intraregional business forums, business matching. However, lack of intraregional integration, bilateral issues and other stumbling blocks prevent full-fledged economic cooperation. There is a considerable difference in the level of economic development of the Central Asian countries, and Japan's economic ties with the region are mostly focused on bilateral projects, and there are no cross regional projects Japan is part of. Recently Japan has been promoting the idea of Trans-Caspian International Transport Route as an alternative to northern route through Russia, on the platform of CAJ. Multilateral economic cooperation is mostly represented by the economic assistance by Japan in the spheres which can contribute to further intraregional cooperation, like transportation or tourism. CAJ has become a useful platform for implementing various ODA projects, for example, combatting locust, disaster prevention.

RESULTS

³⁷ Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida Attends the Sixth Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue. May 1, 2017. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. - https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ca_c/page1e_000160.html (accessed 01.08.2023)

Analysis of the activity of the Central Asia plus Japan dialogue allows to outline the following results.

The Dialogue was launched as part of Japan's efforts aimed at increasing its political and economic presence in the region. One of its main objectives was to foster intraregional cooperation. The idea behind CAJ was to implement a model of cooperation similar to ASEAN plus three. Japan saw itself acting as a catalyst to the intraregional cooperation by becoming an organizer of the multilateral discussions, an agenda setter and a country assisting economically. The countries of Central Asia eagerly accept Japan's involvement in the issues of the region. On one hand, Japan is the developed country which positions itself as member of the West, and cooperation with Japan allows them to avoid too much dependence on Russia and China. At the same time, Japan is an oriental country with a unique development model which better understands the peculiarities of the countries of the Orient, their political systems, respect to their religion and customs, attitude to human rights issues etc. Japan has never had any history issues with the Central Asian states, and there are no political or territorial disputes, so its presence has always been perceived as benign. In contrast to cautious attitude towards China Japan is seen as a country that does not threaten local economies by its expansion, but on the contrary is always ready to help.

Japan's presence in Central Asia is not as controversial as the presence of the US. At the same time, Japan's political activity is quite cautious, with China and Russia in mind, because it is closely watched by Russia and China and it in many ways depend on the level of relations with the two countries. Attempts to position CAJ as a counterweight to SCO were evident when Japan was promoting the Arc of freedom and stability under first premiership of S.Abe, but subsided with the change of leadership and Japan-China rapprochement.

CAJ has become a platform where Japan's strategy in the region in the 2000s was outlined. Its basis is support for open regionalism and their independence from the neighbouring great powers. In the mid 2000s there have been attempts to use CAJ in counterbalancing China and Russia but later Japan dropped this idea. However, growing tensions in Japan's relations with these countries may lead to changes in Japan's activity in the region. Japan is interested in building a free and open Central Asia and finding like minded countries that support the rule-based order that Japan promotes. It remains an open question whether Japan will sharpen the political agenda in order to increase its diplomatic influence and increase its resource against Russia and China, or focus on solving practical problems. It cannot be ruled out that in the face of growing contradictions and tightening of Japanese rhetoric, the Dialogue will become an instrument for carrying out Japan's pro-Western position.

Economic potential of CAJ has yet to be realized because it is facing many problems that are hampering cooperation. Japan is interested in creating a united market for its goods and a transportation network connecting Asia and Europe and bypassing Russia. However, the "ASEAN plus three" model hasn't worked out and the common market hasn't formed. Moreover, as other countries begin to develop their multilateral forms of cooperation CAJ might lose its attractiveness.

For almost twenty years CAJ has become a working platform for practical cooperation in transnational projects carried out with Japan's assistance. It is also instrumental in realising initiatives financed by government aid and thus contributes to creating positive image of the country. It also reflect the principles of equal partnership and accent on horizontal connections,

Today, the Dialogue is a multilayered structure of various forums subordinated to the task of establishing multilateral cooperation. Strengthening intra-regional interaction could enable it to deal with the region as a whole. At the same time, the presence of a large number of problems, such as territorial disputes, the distribution of water resources, interstate rivalry, and a large conflict potential, do not allow for the establishment of full-fledged regional

cooperation. In this regard, disappointment is heard in Japan itself in connection with the collapse of plans to create "ASEAN plus" in the region.

As for the further development of the Dialogue, it occurs mainly in the horizontal plane. Contrary to the goals announced back in 2006, the CAJ summit never took place. Understanding the directions of development of the Dialogue would be facilitated by Japan's adoption of a single documented strategy in relation to the region, which also affects the amorphousness of the format. It is also possible that Japan's changed stance towards Russia and its tensions with China may lead to the activation of its diplomacy in Central Asia, including holding a CAJ summit.

Involvement in the affairs of Central Asia allows Japan to increase its international status, as well as enlist the support of these states on the issue of joining the UN Security Council. As a non-military power, it focuses on solving socio-economic and humanitarian issues. The policy of cooperation with the UN influences its strategy in the region in such a way that, firstly, through the UN, Japan participates in various multilateral projects, including in the field of human security and cultural cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The article analysed the motives of Japan's multilateral approach towards Central Asia and the role of the CAJ in realising its foreign policy objectives in the region. The establishment of CAJ greatly changed Japan's presence in the region and made the country a more prominent political player in the region because Tokyo demonstrated the desire to work together with the countries of Central Asia to achieve political and economic independence. For Japan CAJ became a valuable diplomatic asset as it helped promote its agenda in Central Asia and demonstrated that Japan has influence in the region dominated by Russia and China. At the same time, Japan's activities in Central Asia reflect awareness of Russia and China. While Japan is trying to balance China and in less extent, Russia, in Central Asia economically, its political initiatives are moderate because in terms of security, politics Central Asia is connected with Russia.

It contributes to the realization of Japan's foreign policy strategy in the region in many ways. Japan has been able to get better support of its global initiatives by working together with five Central Asian countries together. CAJ is necessary in terms of discussing security issues and carrying out assistance projects, many of which are transnational. However, Japan's economic objective of creating a common market and fostering integration has yet to be attained, which hampers its economic cooperation with the region. In light of the current regional trends the countries of Central Asia are more inclined to be involved in regional cooperation projects with the presence of other great powers.

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