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**JAPAN'S VALUE-BASED RELATIONSHIP IN ACTION:
THE CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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ABSTRACT

In light of continuing geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations in Eurasia, regional and international players are revising their foreign policies toward Central Asia. Japan, which has been developing stable and value-oriented cooperation with the region, has also been affected by the current transformations that impact the relationship with Central Asia. The paper attempts to reintroduce Japan's vision of Central Asia by unpacking Japan's larger matrix of foreign policy and scrutinising its humanitarian and development assistance efforts in Central Asia. The paper first focuses on the retrospective developments of Japan's engagement with the region. Then it discloses the economic underpinnings of cooperation. Further, discuss development assistance mechanisms in Central Asia. In conclusion, the paper summarises Japan's engagement with Central Asia in connection to previous and ongoing political and economic developments in the region. By doing so, another perspective on Japan-Central Asia affairs will be provided that enables scientific discussions on Japan's transforming foreign policy.

Keywords: Japan, Central Asia, Value-based diplomacy, Development assistance, Central Asian foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

In light of continuing geopolitical and socioeconomic transformations in Eurasia, regional and international players are revising their foreign policies toward Central Asia. By following multivector policies, Central Asian states are adapting to ongoing processes and diversifying their external partnership priorities. Japan, which has been developing stable and value-oriented cooperation with the region, has also been affected by the current transformations that impact the relationship with Central Asia. The paper attempts to reintroduce Japan's vision of Central Asia by unpacking Japan's larger matrix of foreign policy and scrutinising its humanitarian and development assistance efforts in Central Asia.

Japan is an active and strategic partner in the region. It contributes to the prosperity of the region through its development assistance schemes, potential for investment, and support for the socio-economic development of the region. Known for modest but significant collaboration with Central Asian nations, Japan adheres to its "mission-oriented" policy towards Central Asia, which is bolstered by Japan's desire to create a stable international order (Insebayeva, 2019). It demonstrates itself as a peaceful economic power (Len et al., 2008), which, in comparison with other countries, does not have an image of Japanese imperialism or neo-colonialism in the Central Asian countries (Dadabaev, 2016). Its policy in the region is based on value-based diplomacy, which is motivated by factors other than geopolitical rivalries. Since its relative economic decline in comparison to the dynamic 1970s and 1980s, Japan has found attractive the concept of smart power, which combines the values and cultural tools of soft power diplomacy with hard power interests such as security that are instrumentalized in foreign policy with Central Asia (Fukushima, 2018). It came from Nye's (2004) concept of smart power, which is "an ability to blend hard power and soft power resources into effective strategies depending on the circumstances". Japan's strategy in the region is also featured as being stimulated by primarily normative (Barber, 2018) or economic interests (Mangi, 2011).

Japan had provided significant assistance in developing infrastructure projects in the Central Asian states long before the Chinese initiative. Japan's infrastructure projects are of high importance for bilateral and intra-regional cooperation (Murashkin, 2018; Takeshi, 2007). Being among the top donors in the world and the Central Asia region, Japan supports the social and economic development of the Central Asian states through its ODA mechanisms. The Central Asian states' abundant energy and raw material resources determined their high potential for cooperation.

It was among the first to institutionalise negotiations by establishing the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue in 2004. The creation of dialogue was expected as a new stage of Japan's engagement with the region, which today becomes an essential complement to the Japanese strategy in the region, compensating for the limits of bilateral interaction (Dissyukov, 2019).

However, numerous studies agree that the Central Asian region is on the periphery of Japan's foreign policy strategy when compared to other regions (Murashkin, 2019; Dadabaev, 2013; Len et al., 2008; Rakhimov, 2014). The foreign policy toward the region is described as "on and off" (Kawato, 2008) or "colorless" (Iwashita, 2008; Murashkin, 2018). The lack of a coherent vision towards Central Asia is also seen in Japan's establishment, which categorises the region differently: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers the region to

be in Europe; the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) puts the region in Asia; and the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry views in the same category as Russia (Murashkin, 2019). The modest promotion of Japanese initiatives in the region and the insufficient media coverage in Japan also impact public knowledge of bilateral and multilateral programmes.

The paper aims to examine the applicability of both positive and pessimistic approaches to Japan's Central Asian policy. Given the ongoing transformations in Eurasian affairs, the paper also attempts to gauge the implications of such transformations for Japan's Central Asia policy. By doing so, another perspective on Japan-Central Asia affairs will be provided that enables scientific discussions on Japan's transforming foreign policy. The paper utilises comparative analysis and content analysis to test it, adhering to constructivist methodology while employing government reports and documents as well as expert materials. The paper first focuses on the retrospective developments of Japan's engagement with the region. Then it discloses the economic underpinnings of cooperation. Further, discuss development assistance mechanisms in Central Asia. In conclusion, the paper summarises Japan's engagement with Central Asia in connection to previous and ongoing political and economic developments in the region.

EVOLUTION OF JAPAN'S RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

In retrospect, the Central Asian region was considered as a "backward" of the Soviet Union. Interest in the area was initially welcomed with only a modicum of enthusiasm. Japan itself was struggling to define the boundaries of Asia after the end of the Cold War, and during the early 1990s, the Japanese government was conceptualising its strategy to incorporate the newly independent Central Asian states into its larger foreign policy matrix. As a result, Japan's presence in the region remained elusive despite its significant financial support.

By the mid-1990s, Japanese authorities reassessed the emerging importance of the Central Asian region in the context of the rise of China and the need to develop relations with Russia (Len, 2008). In 1997, the Japanese government reconsidered the role of Eurasia when Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro introduced the concept of Eurasian diplomacy. His vision for the first time mentioned the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus as part of the Silk Road region, while he was pioneering in using the Silk Road roots as a layer for connectivity. The Eurasian diplomacy aimed to foster a relationship based on political and economic cooperation, cooperation in peacebuilding through non-proliferation, and democratisation of society (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 1997). Acknowledging the potential of the Silk Road networks, Japan announced a new approach that aims to assist the Silk Road countries in developing intra-regional integration in the areas of communication, transportation, and energy networks.

Following PM Hashimoto's speech, in the summer of 1997, the first high-level delegation of the Japanese Diet visited Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, which later became known as the "Obuchi Mission." The mission with 61 members, after travelling to Russia, headed to the Central Asian states, where they met with the academic and business communities in order to

develop and enhance cooperation. As a result of the visit, the Obuchi mission developed a report, most of the recommendations of which were realised later (Takeshi, 2007). Further, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi launched the Silk Road Action Plan in 1998, which became the first attempt to conceptualise Japan's policy in the Central Asian region. In line with these developments, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) that became the first regional connectivity programme predating the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Besides, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) opened offices in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, respectively. These developments led Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to become Japan's top donors of official development aid (Kawato, 2008). Yet due to the brief tenures of the Hashimoto (1996–1998), Obuchi (1998–2000), and Yoshiro (2000–2001) governments, the direction of Japanese foreign policy toward Central Asia remained ambiguous (Dadabaev, 2013).

The early 2000s brought new developments to the region. The creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) stimulated Japanese officials to think about joining the organisation since it served as a platform for dialogue with Russia and China. Both neighbours revised their strategy in the region and started active involvement through various bilateral arrangements in the fields of economics, trade, energy, and natural resources. In addition, the observers – Iran, India, Pakistan, and Mongolia - and the establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group all spoke about the potential of the SCO as a new non-liberal regional bloc in Eurasia. At the same time, the post-9/11 world boosted the significance of security, and the issue of Afghanistan became a decisive factor in dealing with the Central Asian region. Japan acknowledged that the stability and security of Eurasia depend on the stability of the Central Asian region and Afghanistan. With Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's active stance in "sharing the burden" with the US in anti-terrorist activities, Japan's approach to the region was followed by a revision of strategic interests in the Central Asian region (Murashkin, 2019).

As a result, during August 2004, Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi visited four Central Asian states, where she was promoting Japan's new approach towards the region and initiating the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue, the inaugural foreign ministers meeting in which she participated. In essence, the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue aimed to work in five directions: policy dialogue, intra-regional cooperation, business promotion, intellectual dialogue, and people-to-people contacts (Takeshi, 2008). The foreign ministerial meeting is the highest level within the dialogue, and even though it has no set schedule, past meetings show a biannual frequency of gatherings. In addition to the Foreign Ministers Meetings, there are Senior Officials Meetings that are instrumental in the preparation of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting and their "follow-ups." The dialogue remains a central platform for interaction with the Central Asian states.

In line with the activation of Japan's policy in Central Asia, in August 2006, PM Koizumi made his maiden visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the first prime minister to do so. During the visit, he outlined Japan's interests in the energy sector while promoting the strengthening of bilateral relations and regional cooperation.

Further, PM Shinzo Abe, during his first term (2006–2007), together with Foreign Minister Aso Taro, launched a new initiative, “The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” which covered the Eurasian continent. The concept was projected as a new pillar of Japan’s foreign policy that attempts to broaden the diplomatic reach of Japan, while it was also interpreted as a response to the growing aspirations of China and Russia. Central Asia, meanwhile, was emphasised in line with its resource value and was called one of the important regions (MOFA, 2007). Nonetheless, the Arc moved into the background soon but showed the extending horizons of Japan’s foreign strategy, while its established interests in the Central Asian region were strengthened further. Overall, since six prime ministers held the position for a short time between 2005 and 2012, the implementation of policies was again slowed down (Barber, 2018). Meanwhile, strategy toward the Central Asian region remained focused on resource diplomacy and deepening business interaction.

With the beginning of the second term of PM Shinzo Abe in 2012, along with implementing Abenomics – the economic policies for reviving the Japanese economy and promoting Japanese exports worldwide – Abe’s administration continued to enlarge political and economic ties with Central Asian states. In October 2015, PM Abe made a historical tour to all Central Asian states, the first stay in the region since PM Koizumi’s visit in 2006, while being the first head of the Japanese government to visit Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. As it is seen from the signed contracts, energy was the primary focus of the visit. Besides, for the Japanese high-tech companies, the rare earth metals are essential for supply; therefore, accompanied by businessmen, Abe’s tour was intended to deepen Japan’s resource diplomacy in the Central Asian region. The visit affirmed that the Central Asian region is among the important destinations for resource procurement and infrastructure exports. Shinzo Abe demonstrated pragmatism and mercantilism during the trip to the region in comparison to the previous value-oriented diplomacy. Moreover, Abe’s visit to Central Asia was a logical continuation of Tokyo’s active diplomacy because, during 2012–2015, Japanese officials visited the region with a high frequency in comparison to the previous decade (Murashkin, 2018).

The post-Abe period has not brought significant changes to Japan’s bonds in Central Asia. If PM Abe’s seven-year tenure allowed him to enhance Japan-Central Asia ties, one year under PM Yoshihide Suga’s leadership and more than a year under PM Fumio Kishida’s leadership coincided with larger geopolitical changes in Eurasia, and as a result, Japan’s involvement with Central Asia did not lead to significant progress. It is assumed that despite the strong institutionalisation of power in Japan, personal factors still matter with regard to regional cooperation (Carnegie Moscow Center, 2022). If the Central Asian leaders are known for their attempts to keep the leadership as long as possible, thus ensuring the continuity of their aspirations, Japan’s frequent changes of leadership at some point impact the development of its external priorities.

With the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, some have linked Japan’s strategy in Central Asia to the Russian invasion and its consequences. Prime Minister Kishida advocates a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and highlights Japan’s support for the G7 and the collective denunciations of the West (FULCRUM, 2023). However, despite the high degree of integration of Russia’s

influence in Central Asia, it is wrong to assume that the states of Central Asia as sovereign entities are considered only through the Russian axis. Similarly, others connect Japan's efforts in the region with the comprehensive penetration of China in Central Asia, which does not require drawing parallels with Japan's strategy in Central Asia.

It is also redundant to claim that without a special document on Central Asia, relations with that region have elusive potential. It is assumed that this is a quality of Japan's "otherness," which, in contrast to other regional players, means that it is not necessary to identify the modalities of cooperation in an established way. By following its humanitarian and assistance-based relationship, Japan follows its own path with the region, gradually deepening existing ties with Central Asia and not comparing its efforts with those of other regional players.

Institutionally, Japan-Central Asia cooperation is continuing within the framed "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue format at the level of foreign ministers. The past 9th Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the "Central Asia plus Japan" Dialogue in December 2022, had discussed relations amid changing international circumstances and issues related to risks of instability. Participating foreign ministers reiterated their interest in enhancing cooperation, while issues related to the capacity of human resources for the economic development of Central Asia, cooperation in the field of decarbonization, and diversification of transportation routes through the "Trans-Caspian International Transport Route" were on the agenda (MOFA, 2022).

JAPAN'S ECONOMIC TIES WITH CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

As for bilateral ties, Japan has been intensifying its economic and business ties with the Central Asian states. Among the major bilateral agreements are the conventions for the avoidance of double taxation signed with Kazakhstan (2008) and Uzbekistan (2019); for the promotion and protection of investment with Uzbekistan (2008) and Kazakhstan (2014); and for cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy with Kazakhstan (2010) (MOFA, 2020). During the visit of PM Abe to the Central Asian states in 2015, agreements for cooperation in economy, science, and water security were signed with Tajikistan; for cooperation in financial intelligence, countering money laundering and terror financing, and infrastructure were agreed with Kyrgyzstan; and agreements on infrastructure development and natural gas plant projects were signed with Turkmenistan (SEnECA, 2018).

Japan was pioneering in promoting the development of infrastructure projects. From the early 1990s, Japanese investments and loans funded transport and communication infrastructure projects all over the region. To name but a few, Japanese money was involved in the construction of the Irtysh River bridge in eastern Kazakhstan (1995); railway modernization projects in Kazakhstan (1995), Turkmenistan (2007), and Uzbekistan (2007); road rehabilitation projects in Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek-Osh road) and Tajikistan (Kurgan Tuybe-Dusti road); reconstruction and modernization of the airports in Astana (1998) and Bishkek (1996); as well as airports in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Urgench cities in Uzbekistan (Rakhimov, 2014). As a result, Japan made significant efforts to

support the region's transportation infrastructure, develop intra-state and inter-state communication, and diversify the Northwest bound towards East and West. By encouraging regional connectivity and infrastructure development projects, including through the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan has been supporting the stability and sustainable development of the countries in the region, while at the same time supporting the nation-building process of the newly independent states.

Projects within the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, which was established in 1997 by the Japan-led ADB in order to promote development through cooperation, also significantly supported regional development and connectivity. Between 2001 and 2019, CAREC contributed \$38.6 billion in investments to establish multimodal transportation networks, increase energy trade and security, facilitate the free movement of people and freight, and lay the groundwork for economic corridor development (CAREC, 2020).

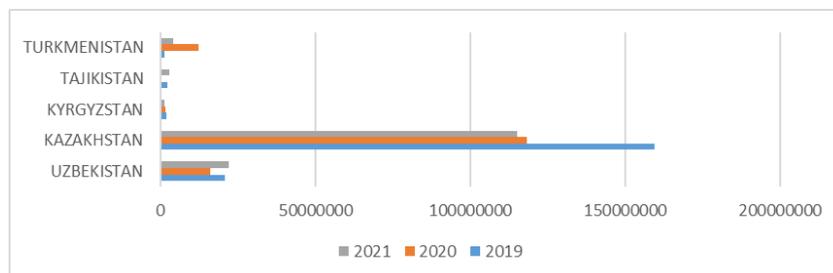
Japan, which is highly dependent on oil-producing countries, also intends to maintain its energy security through the promotion of strategic energy policy in the Central Asian region. Japan contributed to the energy-related projects in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It was also emphasised during Shinzo Abe's travel to Central Asia in 2015. In particular, the trip was marked with significant agreements worth \$27 billion, out of which \$18 billion were allocated to Turkmenistan in mostly oil and gas-related infrastructure, \$8.5 billion for oil and gas infrastructure in Uzbekistan, \$1.1 billion were distributed in agriculture, machine-building, and automotive infrastructure in Kazakhstan, \$120 million was allocated for airport and motorway infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan, and \$7.5 million was allocated for water and social issues in Tajikistan (Murashkin, 2019). Hence, if initially Japan was interested in supporting the infrastructure development of the region, during the last decade it shifted toward cooperation in the energy and natural resources sectors in the oil-rich countries and support for social development in the others. At the same time, Japan's activities in the Central Asian region were not principally motivated by the need for fuel resources (Barber, 2018). At present, Japan is working with Kyrgyzstan on the implementation of the construction project of a hydropower plant in Karakul, with Uzbekistan on the implementation of international industrial standards, and with humanitarian and social projects in all Central Asian states (Kadyrova, 2022).

Peaceful exploitation of nuclear energy and the development of uranium mining gain particular interest in Japan as well. Specifically, Kazakhstan, with its rich uranium ore deposits, had developed extended partnerships with Japanese companies. Major Japanese energy companies have signed agreements with the Kazakhstani national atomic company Kazatomprom for the development of uranium resources and the extraction of rare earth metals (Barber, 2018). Based on these contracts, it is projected that Kazakhstan would provide up to 25% of the Japanese demand for uranium within the next decade (Dadabaev, 2018).

The share that Central Asian countries have in the total trade statistics of Japan does not even exceed 0.1%. The level of bilateral trade with Kazakhstan—Japan's largest trade partner in the region—remains ten times lower in comparison to China and Russia's interaction in the energy sector (Insebayeva, 2019). Given

that Japan, as the third-largest economy in the world, is number 4 in total exports and number 5 in total imports, the potential of bilateral economic engagement is being realised very modestly (OEC, 2022). The major items imported from the Central Asian states include energy resources and raw materials, while their exports include mostly machinery and vehicles, electronics, and other highly valued electronic materials.

Figure 1. *Japan's trade statistics with the Central Asian states*



Source: Statistics Bureau Japan (n.d.)

Japan intends to strengthen economic ties with Central Asian countries. In 2019, the foreign ministers of Japan and Central Asia held bilateral negotiations with the aim of signing bilateral investment agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan that would create more favourable conditions for Japanese investors, which had already been implemented with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In 2022, Tokyo held Central Asia Investment Forum 2022, organized by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Nevertheless, the participation of Japanese businesses in the Central Asian states remains largely government driven. The Japanese companies in the region are operating through their representative offices and not as full-scale branches, which is explained by a relatively modest amount of business volume (Murashkin, 2019). For the Central Asian states as well, the involvement of Japanese companies is still low in comparison to other countries. Hence, there is still a huge potential for expanding economic ties.

JAPAN'S DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE SCHEMES IN THE REGION

As one of the top providers of development aid, Japan employs official development assistance (ODA) as a significant tool for interaction with developing nations. Being an economic superpower and member of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and its DAC (Development Assistance Committee), Japan has dedicated 0.34% of its GNI to ODA activities, which is the third largest in relation to ODA/GNI share among the DAC member states in 2021 (OECD, 2022). Japan's primary mission in providing developmental assistance is based on the strategy of providing a financial stimulus and a development model by being self-sustaining and without the need for external assistance (Dadabaev, 2016). It also sets itself apart from Western approaches to assistance by emphasising its value-oriented vision.

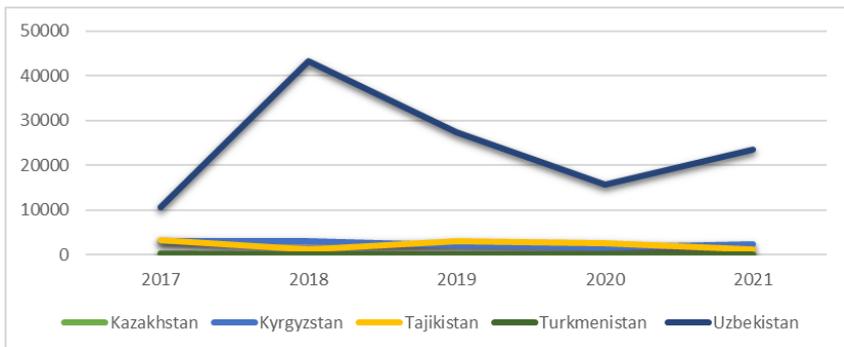
Structurally, Japan provides ODA through bilateral and multilateral frameworks. The bilateral mechanism of assistance is maintained through JICA (the Japan

International Cooperation Agency), one of the largest aid agencies in the world. JICA provides assistance through technical cooperation, finance and investment cooperation, and grants. It has over 96 offices around the world and 15 domestic offices that coordinate the whole process (JICA, 2022).

For Central Asia, JICA provides primarily three categories of assistance: yen-based loans and grants, no-interest grant-in-aid, and technical assistance. The yen-based loans are aimed at supporting the socio-economic development of the receiving country by financially supporting infrastructure and transport projects such as airports, electricity-generating stations, water infrastructure, and education projects. No-interest grants are intended for the least developed countries in order to provide for basic needs and eradicate poverty. Technical assistance is projected to be shared with Japanese expertise by sending various specialists to recipient countries, where Japanese specialists share their experience and train local specialists (Dadabaev, 2016).

The priority of providing assistance to Central Asia has been changing. In the early 1990s, the Japanese government suggested that a comparatively small amount of assistance might be efficient for smaller countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, therefore, initially, the majority of financial support was addressed to these two states. However, as time went on, weak administration and a lack of capacity to effectively distribute loans led to problems with implementation. As a result, Japan re-adjusted its ODA focus towards Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Dadabaev, 2018). However, Kazakhstan had switched its preferences to direct investments rather than government loans and later transformed from a recipient to a donor status. As a result, Uzbekistan ended up being the largest recipient of Japanese aid. At present, Uzbekistan remains among the top recipients of Japanese financial support and concessional loans, followed by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while oil-rich Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are working on attracting Japanese investments. Figure 2 shows the amount of ODA provided by Japan; it should be reminded that the total amount is still relatively small in comparison to the rest of the world.

Figure 2. Total value of JICA programs in Central Asia.



Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency (n.d.)

* Unit: millions of yen

Table 1. *Total value of JICA programs*

Country/Year	2017	2018	2019	2020
Kazakhstan	111*	61	113	86
Kyrgyzstan	2,901	3,007	2,042	1,522
Tajikistan	3,199	1,248	2,927	2,542
Turkmenistan	183	105	72	37
Uzbekistan	10,534	43,270	27,470	15,729

Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency (n.d.)

* Unit: millions of yen

JICA's activities in Central Asia are related to enhancing regional connectivity and industrial diversification. At present, it focuses on four main areas of cooperation: 1) governance strengthening, including legal system development; 2) industrial diversification, including the promotion of small and medium enterprises; 3) infrastructure development, including the construction of airports and power plants; and 4) human resources development (JICA, 2022).

By implementing its assistance schemes, Japan intends to contribute to the sustainable socio-economic growth of Central Asian states. Specifically, in Kyrgyzstan, JICA prioritises two directions: maintenance of transport infrastructure and reduction of regional disparities, as well as reconstruction of social infrastructure. In Tajikistan, JICA implements its assistance in three priority areas, such as the improvement of the economic and industrial sectors, the provision of basic social services, and the promotion of social stability. In Uzbekistan, JICA focuses its efforts on three fronts: economic infrastructure, vitalization of the private sector, and agricultural reform and rural development (JICA, 2022).

Besides supporting the socio-economic well-being of Central Asia through JICA, Japan is joining the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) initiatives, which in December 2022 launched a new joint initiative worth US \$4.1 million to promote resilient communities in all Central Asian countries. Within the initiative, it is expected to boost social cohesion and empower youth in all Central Asian states (Kadyrova, 2022).

Japan also strengthens its people-to-people contracts through advancing capacity-building mechanisms. Since the Japanese view that "nation-building is human resource capacity-building," capacity-building and empowering human capital are seen as the main pillars of Japan's support (Murashkin & Varpahovskis, 2022). The Japan Center for Human Development, along with the Japan Human Resource Development Scholarship programs, are important tools for the implementation of that purpose.

The Japan Centers for Human Development, projected to be a hub of capacity-building development in transition economies, were also opened in the Central Asian states. In particular, based on the bilateral intergovernmental agreements

on technical cooperation, under the JICA, the Kyrgyz Republic-Japan Center was established in 1995; the Uzbekistan-Japan Center for Human Development was created in 2000; and the Kazakhstan-Japan Center for Human Development was opened in 2002.

The centres aimed to support the socio-economic development of Central Asian states by developing the capacity needed for transitioning to a market economy and promoting a market economy. Along with learning the Japanese language, the centres provided courses in career planning, training the business community, and sharing Japanese managerial expertise. It encourages building a bridge between Japan and Central Asian states through various target groups, which becomes a platform for sharing the Japanese vision of life. The centres support local entrepreneurs with Japanese expertise, such as by practising Kaizen philosophy, visiting Japanese companies as part of the “Practical Business Course in Japan,” supporting women entrepreneurs and agricultural businesses, etc. Japanese centres also have Japanese art courses, including Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation) courses that are popular cultural cards among youth. Japanese centers’ activities support in advancing human capacity and promote intra-regional cooperation in the region.

The Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship by Japanese Grant Aid (JDS) is another initiative of Japan to empower the youth through providing scholarships for master’s and doctoral programmes. In Kyrgyzstan, the project started in 2006 and has so far provided 270 scholarships. In Tajikistan, where it has operated since 2008, the project has supported 106 fellows for their graduate studies, while the fellowships in Uzbekistan, which were launched in 1999, have been obtained by 391 graduate students (JICE, 2023).

The Japanese government also provides mobility programmes for Central Asian universities that allow students to travel to Japan both for study and business purposes, as well as full grants within its international scholarships. Central Asian universities increased their collaboration with Japanese universities and established connections with Japanese programmes. Overall interest in Japan among youth is growing, while the popularity of popular manga and anime encourages youth to become acquainted with Japan and its heritage.

CONCLUSION

Japan has a positive image in the Central Asian states. Dadabaev (2016) suggests that “Asian [cultural] roots and Western norms determine the duality of the national identity of Japan, which in turn shapes “ambiguously“ defined interests in the region.“ The duality of the Japanese approach, combined with the closeness of Japanese tradition and culture, makes Japan a close friend of Central Asians. Tokyo’s support of essential infrastructure and transport objects, along with comprehensive support of socio-economic development, served as the foundation of a relationship with the region. Moreover, regardless of the different geopolitical scenarios of the Eurasian players, Japan is always active in cooperation with regional states.

The Japanese strategy may appear modest in comparison to other countries’ massive and well-presented initiatives; however, Japan has been developing its own path of engagement with the region based on providing assistance and

technological investment, in turn benefiting from Central Asia's energy-rich markets. Tokyo's support for the necessary infrastructure and transportation facilities, along with comprehensive support for socio-economic development, is the core of relations with the region. Through the construction of high-quality infrastructure projects and the development of regional cooperation, Japan has expanded the possibilities of intra-regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, with additional efforts, Japan's engagement with the Central Asian region might be expanded to a new level. More attention might be needed to enhance people-to-people contacts. Given that the Japanese provide a positive example of nurturing management leaders and demonstrating an exemplary corporate culture, the extension of capacity building projects and programmes might lead to increasing business ties between partners. The Japan Centers of Human Resources could be a good platform, but in comparison to the present agenda of the centers, more attention might be given to the real sectors of the economy through the real engagement of business partners on both sides, including private and governmental.

Furthermore, given the region's small number of Japanese courses in comparison to other languages, more support for opening mass courses for learning the Japanese language may increase interest in and awareness of Japan.

An important tool of Japan's soft power, its global cultural influence through authentic products such as postmodern music, animation, films, fashion, or brands like Hello Kitty, Sony, Nintendo, and others, can widen Japan's presence in the region by stimulating interest in Japan's cultural products (Douglas, 2009).

Because of the lack of knowledge of Japanese business culture and language, Central Asian alumni of Japanese universities could also help connect business and entrepreneurial people on both sides. In addition, their knowledge of the Japanese market might expand exports of products from the Central Asian region. Despite the current efforts of Japanese programmes, the number of students is relatively small, with the majority remaining in academia rather than entering the business world.

Engagement of the private sector in developing businesses with Japan is also impeded by long and expensive logistics for transporting goods from Japan to Central Asia. Due to the high costs of logistics, in addition to the high prices of Japanese goods, purchasing Japanese goods is not widespread in the region. In comparison, South Korea, which also lacks direct connections with the region, is very popular in terms of purchasing cosmetics, foods, materials, clothing, and so on. Japanese products, although interesting, are limited due to the difficulties of ordering them from Japan, as it takes around 2–3 months for delivery. As a result, in order to expand contacts between medium and small businesses, it is necessary to reconsider the options for sustainable and efficient transportation. Long distances and high customs costs lead to inappropriate prices that make Japanese products affordable for a very limited group of the population.

Japan's engagement with the Central Asian region is among the prospective areas of development. Japan and Central Asia are interested in deepening bilateral and multilateral contacts, whereas infrastructure development and socioeconomic well-being are at the core of the partnership.

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