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The Evolution of Japanese Diplomacy towards Central Asia since the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Central Asian states' relations with Japan have always had a great deal of potential. Even during the era of the Soviet Union, a majority of the population in Central Asian republics had highly positive views of Japan, rooted in factors such as their sympathy towards Japan as the first victim of nuclear bombs, respect for its modernization and technological innovations, and interest in its indigenous culture. After the Second World War, moreover, a number of Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) were brought to several republics in the region such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and were involved in the process of reconstructing those republics. The quality of the POWs' work on the construction sites left a very good impression on the populations of those republics. When the Central Asian republics achieved independence, expectations of further development for these relationships were high on the part of Central Asian governments and Japan alike. What are the key features of relations between Japan and Central Asia? What were Japan's strategies for approaching this complicated region? How did these policies evolve over the time, and what were the changes in the course of their implementation? These questions will be raised in this contribution.

This contribution begins by outlining general problems in the conceptualization of Central Asia in Japan's foreign policy. Secondly, it details the evolution of Japan's foreign policy and the initiatives the country has undertaken over the years in respect of Central Asia. And thirdly, it provides insights into security-related, political, and economic aspects of co-operation between Central Asian states and Japan and the factors which characterize these relations.

Placing Central Asia within Japanese Foreign Policy as a Whole

The interest shown towards Central Asia by the public in Japan has historically been fuelled by a range of other factors, among which the notion of the Silk Road has played a prominent part. In the years prior to and immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people with a practical interest in the region, scholars, and the general public in Japan shared an interest in the notion of the ancient Silk Road and the historical sites and cultures that still exist today. Central Asia used to comprise one section of the Silk Road, symbolized by cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, which flourished because of the traffic in goods and people. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japanese archaeologists and historians displayed an interest in

the history of this area, and they have produced excellent studies on the subject. After the demise of the USSR, such studies by the Japanese academic community became much easier to conduct because many restricted sources of information became more open and access to sites was more readily available than before. Such public interest was generally also reflected in the Japanese foreign-policy emphasis on the historical connections between Japan and Central Asia through the Silk Road, which expressed the desire to revitalize these links through constructive co-operation.

In the area of politics, however, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eventual independence of the Central Asian republics was an unexpected event for Japan that left its policy-makers puzzled as to how to approach these countries. The available options at that time included treating them in line with Japanese policy towards a larger Eurasia that included all other post-Soviet states, approaching them individually, or formulating regional policy towards Central Asia on the assumption that it was a region of its own. At the initial stage of relations between Japan and the independent states of Central Asia, the first two approaches were naturally favoured, with Japan establishing diplomatic missions in several of those countries as well as approaching them in line with overall Japanese policy towards the newly-independent post-Soviet states. Due to the historical connections between the Central Asian states and Russia, and to their general policy of co-ordinating their foreign policies in the years following their independence, they were considered to be Russian satellite states – and Japanese policy developed accordingly. At the same time, little information on those countries' foreign and domestic policy priorities and preferences was available, a fact which led Japan to focus on collecting information during the first few years of those countries' independence.

In addition to the lack of information on Central Asia, the conceptualization of partnerships with countries in the region was a rather complicated issue for Japan for two reasons. Firstly, Japanese foreign policy does a poor job of defining "Asia" and its boundaries and, in many cases, limits Japan's Asian foreign policy outreach to the ASEAN countries. While Japan has always generally emphasized the role and importance of "Asia" in its economic and political policies, it has defined this connection poorly in practical terms. The same problem arose in its policy towards Central Asia.¹ As Japan does not share borders with any Central Asian countries and is relatively far away from them, it was difficult to conceptualize the importance of this region for Japan in practical terms. Discourse on the subject was mostly limited to cumbersome notions of promoting development and "open regional co-operation"

1 For instance, in 2002, the Japanese Prime Minister's office called for a clearer formulation of Japanese foreign policy priorities, defining Central Asia policy together with Middle East policy, and emphasizing energy projects as its main priority. For details, see the Task Force on Foreign Relations for the Prime Minister, *Basic Strategies for Japan's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century. New Era, New Vision, New Diplomacy*, 28 November 2002, at: http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/2002/1128tf_e.html.

across Asia, of which Central Asia was a part. While the Japanese policy-makers' initial interest was based on the assumptions that the (then) second-ranking global economic power Japan should be present in Central Asia and that Japan should take an active part in helping those post-Soviet states to rebuild, thus making them friendly and co-operative with Japan in its foreign-policy objectives, the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrated that Japan could not yet define the merits and goals of its engagement in Central Asia in clearly defined terms.²

In the years since then, the Japanese government and its various institutions have contributed greatly to much-needed developmental projects in Central Asia and cemented Japan's image as a reliable and highly constructive partner for the Central Asian states. It has also provided much-needed expertise at both bilateral and multilateral levels in environmental relief, in studies on how to improve agricultural production cycles, on the problem of the Aral Sea, on water issues, and in the construction of legal frameworks by providing support for studies of specific legal systems. Financial disbursements and grants also helped these states to sustain themselves in the early years of their independence, serving as a pillar of support for their emerging agricultural, industrial, and financial systems. Yet it was unclear what Japan was gaining in real terms by pursuing such an aggressive grant-disbursing policy in this region and whether it really had a cohesive Central Asia policy. While the Central Asian states' engagement and strategic partnerships with Japan can be accounted for by the desire of these newly independent states to achieve stability and prosperity, this goal (even considered together with the motivation arising from Japan's responsibility as the second largest economy in the world) can hardly explain why Japan was so active as a financial contributor – a provider of loans and grants – in this part of the world.

It is true that active engagement on the part of Japanese diplomacy in Central Asia won it many hearts and minds among Central Asian politicians and the public at large. The majority of Central Asian states can be regarded as friendly to Japan and supportive of its economic and political interests in the international arena. It can therefore be argued that Japanese policy contributed to the build-up of Japan's soft power in the region. It also led to benefits from energy deals and contracts between the Central Asian governments and their Japanese counterparts. Yet there is a sense among policy-makers on both sides that there is much untapped potential in relations between Japan and Central Asia. In addition, many Central Asian researchers and government officials often find themselves puzzled by the question of

2 This problem has been raised frequently over a number of years, but it remains one of the main issues on the way to improving the effectiveness of the Japanese engagement in Central Asia. For instance, see Tomohiko Uyama, Japanese Policies in Relation to Kazakhstan: Is There a "Strategy"? in: Robert Legvold (ed.), *Thinking Strategically*, Cambridge, MA, 2003, pp. 165-186. For a call to reform Japanese foreign policy, see Kitaoka Shin'ichi, Reform in Japanese Foreign Affairs: Policy Review Long Overdue, in: *Gaiko Forum* 3/2002, pp. 3-12.

whether Japan has any coherent and well-planned long-term strategy towards this region or whether diplomatic initiatives are aimed mainly at short-term political objectives, defined by each prime minister rather than constituting a long-term diplomatic policy implemented by successive administrations. Concerns about the inconsistency or poor definition of Japanese involvement in Central Asia were fuelled by several diplomatic initiatives launched by a number of Japanese prime ministers, which seemingly built on the previous initiatives but conceptualized Central Asia and its importance for Japan in very different terms. The evolution of Japanese foreign policy concepts from Eurasian to Silk Road diplomacy, and beyond that to the notion of the Central Asia plus Japan initiative and the concept of crafting an arc of freedom and prosperity across Eurasia is a clear example of how the Japanese have searched for the right way to approach the Central Asian region effectively.

The Evolution of Japanese Foreign Policy in Central Asia

Initial Contacts and Hashimoto's Eurasian/Silk Road Diplomacy

Japan kicked off its initial engagement in the region by setting up several missions consisting of high-ranking officials in the region and then by re-discovering the potential for Japanese engagement. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Central Asia was unknown terrain for Japanese foreign policy and that these missions were designed to determine what Japan could both contribute to and expect from these countries. Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto announced the first initiative to engage in Central Asia in 1996 by placing Central Asia within the broader Eurasian post-Soviet context. This largely reflected the assessment of Central Asia during the early years of those states' independence as a part of Russian-dominated post-Soviet space. Japan's goals in engaging with the Central Asian region included to ensure that Japanese economic and geopolitical interests were properly represented in this region and to contribute to stability, peace, and development.³ As many argue, such policy accommodates and is consistent with the centuries-old Japanese strategy of defining "technological and economic priorities" as central to its security and foreign policy objectives.⁴ Central Asia was to be a resource supply link in the list of these priorities.

Hashimoto's initiative has largely developed into the Silk Road Action Plan, which was drafted jointly by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance of Japan, and published in 1998. It defined three main pillars of engagement in Central Asia,

3 For details of both approaches see Masahiro Kawai/Shinji Takagi, Japan's Official Development Assistance: Recent Issues and Future Directions, in: *Journal of International Development*, 16/2004, pp. 255-280.

4 Eric Heginbotham/Richard J. Samuels, *Mercantile and Realism and Japanese Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, MA; 1996, pp. 2-3.

namely strengthening political dialogue, providing assistance with economic and natural resource development, and co-operation in facilitating democratization and stabilization in this region. In real terms, this implied the maintenance of bilateral ties with Central Asian countries but, more importantly, dealing with Central Asia in a broader Eurasian context. In following up his concept, Prime Minister Hashimoto attempted to encourage Japanese businesses to participate more actively in the oil and gas resource-rich economies of Central Asia. This call remained largely ignored, however, and penetration by Japanese business turned out to be a very slow mission to accomplish for various reasons, which include, but are not limited to, the lack of information about the region, the lack of a legal infrastructure guaranteeing investment safety, the over-cautious attitude of Japanese businesses under the influence of the issues mentioned above, and the rather cautious and slow Japanese corporate mentality and practice.

The Japanese presence in Central Asia has been supported through two main channels. One is Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the region which has manifested itself in grants, technical co-operation, low-interest and interest-free loans, and other forms of financial assistance, which accounted for more than 2.5 billion US dollars over the years. The declared goals of Japan's ODA disbursements were to establish a foundation for sustainable economic development, to support democratization, to effect the transition to a market economy, and to help countries in the region to deal with their social problems. While ODA disbursements have symbolized serious Japanese commitment to this region and have funded much-needed assistance programmes, their efficiency and their connection with the declared goals and with Japanese national interests have frequently been criticized both at home and abroad. The second channel was meant to be active participation by Japanese businesses in advancing Japanese economic interests in the region. In this regard, the Japanese government aimed to contribute to the development of energy-related projects in these oil-, gas-, and uranium-rich countries and to secure a proportion of these energy resources for exporting to Japan.

From Eurasian/Silk Road Diplomacy to the Central Asia plus Japan Initiative

This policy of engagement was continued by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, who had previously played a part in the formulation of Hashimoto's policy towards Central Asia with the Obuchi mission and by adhering to the Eurasian and Silk Road diplomacy.⁵ Due to their brief periods in power, Prime Ministers Obuchi and Yoshiro Mori both adhered to the previous policies of establishing diplomatic missions, strengthening ties with states in the region

5 For details of the mission, see *Roshia Chuo-Ajia Taiwa Misshon Hokoku: Yurashia Gaiko-eno Josho* [A Report of the Mission for Dialogue with Russia and Central Asia: Prelude to Eurasian Diplomacy], Tokyo 1998.

and promoting Japanese business entry into those countries. Yet the outcomes and the degree of success achieved by these administrations in promoting interests in Central Asia remain unclear. On the contrary, during this period of time, the deficiency in Japanese governments' information-gathering and crisis-management capacity in and with regard to Central Asia became obvious when, in 1999, several Japanese geologists were taken hostage in Kyrgyzstan; this put Japan in a very difficult situation with very few options.

Qualitatively different was an approach by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, which, in line with a number of internal policy reforms, also attempted to change certain patterns in Japan's international involvement, including its role in the Central Asian region.⁶ This happened largely against the background of intensified Chinese policy towards the region pursued through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Chinese efforts to dominate energy export-related projects in the region, and the growing Russian influence in the region through the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community.⁷ Under Koizumi's administration, Japan's policy of engagement with Central Asia manifested itself in the "Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue" initiative announced by Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi in 2004, the distinctive feature and competitive advantage of which was the encouragement of Central Asian regional integration and enhancement of the capacities of those countries to deal with regional problems by regional means.⁸ There were a few problems of inner-regional politics that Japanese diplomacy had to be aware of and deal with appropriately during the launch of this initiative. Japan aimed to develop its relations with CA in a balanced manner in order to emphasize its commitment to all CA countries and to the notion of open regionalism. Even when announcing the initiative, Japanese diplomacy had to take the rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional dominance into account. In doing so, the Japanese Foreign Minister first had to announce the Central Asia plus Japan initiative's launch in Tashkent and then to hold its first meeting in Astana in order to accommodate the regional leadership ambitions of both the aforementioned countries. Another problem was the hesitation on the part of Turkmenistan under the leadership of President Saparmurat Niyazov to take part in this forum even as an ob-

6 For an interesting account of Japanese diplomacy in Central Asia, see Takeshi Yuasa, *Japan's Multilateral Approach toward Central Asia*, in: Akihiro Iwashita (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia: Russia and Its Neighbors in Crisis*, Sapporo 2007, available at: www.src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/04_yuasa.pdf.

7 For some comparisons between Japanese and Chinese foreign policies, see Timur Dadabaev, *Models of Cooperation in Central Asia and Japan's Central Asian Engagements: Factors, Determinants and Trends*, in: Christopher Len/Uyama Tomohiko/Hirose Tetsuya (eds), *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead*, Washington 2008, pp. 121-140.

8 For details of Foreign Minister Kawaguchi's initiative and Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Central Asia, see Timur Dadabaev, *Japan's Central Asian Diplomacy and Its Implications*, in: *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 17/2006, pp. 3-6.

server because of Turkmenistan's self-proclaimed neutrality and non-alignment in international affairs.

Under the administration of Prime Minister Koizumi, Japan's foreign policy towards Central Asia also culminated in Koizumi's first visit to the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in August 2006 as part of Japan's efforts to shape its foreign policy towards this resource-rich and strategically important region.⁹ This visit became a continuation of the abrupt efforts by Japanese policy-makers to find the most suitable and effective track for Japanese diplomacy in Central Asia.

While in Kazakhstan, Prime Minister Koizumi conducted negotiations with President Nursultan Nazarbaev, who described the visit by the Japanese Prime Minister as historic. During Koizumi's stay in Kazakhstan, memorandums were signed on co-operation in the peaceful exploitation of nuclear energy and on uranium mine development. This not only symbolizes Japan's desire to secure a stable supply of energy resources, but also reflects the desire of the privately-owned Japanese corporations to have governmental commitments on both the Japanese and Central Asian sides for securing access to energy resources. These memorandums were followed by the signing of the long-awaited agreement on joint exploitation and processing of uranium and other mineral resources and their possible export to Japan in 2010.¹⁰

The second leg of the Prime Minister's visit to Central Asia consisted of his visit to Uzbekistan. Even before this visit, the Uzbek President spoke very highly of the potential for Japanese involvement in Uzbekistan and Central Asia in an interview with the Kyodo News agency. He suggested that Uzbekistan regarded Japan as a long-term partner with an important role in the dynamic development of political, economic, and cultural co-operation between the two states. In turn, President Islam Karimov expressed Uzbekistan's continuous and consistent support for the Japanese bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council and shared Japanese concerns about the situation on the Korean peninsula.

In Uzbekistan, in addition to energy-related talks and the commitment of both sides to launch a framework for working-level talks on various issues, Prime Minister Koizumi emphasized two main themes: The first was Japanese aid for education projects involving an increase in the number of students from Uzbekistan attending Japanese educational institutions, while the second was connected with political reform and improving the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. The first theme is seen as an attempt to enforce the plans made when the Central Asia plus Japan forum was announced in 2004,

9 For an original periodization of the Japanese initiatives in Central Asia, see Christopher Len, Japan's Central Asian Diplomacy: Motivations, Implications and Prospects for the Region, in: *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 3/2008, pp.127-149.

10 In the aftermath of the earthquake of 11 March 2011 in Japan and subsequent damage to a nuclear plant, there are increasing calls in Japan for the country to move away from uranium and towards renewable sources of energy; this might affect Japan's priorities in Central Asia.

which envisaged the provision of education to 1,000 students and professionals from Central Asia in Japanese educational institutions. This step is also connected with the overall task of encouraging democratization, human development, and various reforms in Uzbekistan by providing education and involving the younger generations of policy-makers.

Another significant point concerning the Japanese leader's visit to Uzbekistan is that he was the first head of state from the industrialized world to visit Uzbekistan after the Andijan riots of 2005, one year previously, in the course of which the USA and other Western countries strongly criticized the Uzbek government for excessive use of force in dealing with the riots.

Interestingly as has been mentioned above, Prime Minister Koizumi's visit also took place at a time when Chinese and Russian policies in this region were being intensified. Therefore, attempts by Japan to assert a more active style of Central Asia diplomacy, accompanied by rhetoric about strengthening the capacities of the region's states for dealing with their own problems, were seen by many as part of Japanese efforts to hinder Russian and Chinese attempts to subvert the Central Asian countries. Japan attempted, however, to use its Central Asia diplomacy to send a message to its Chinese and Russian neighbours that its policy towards the Central Asian region was motivated not by a competitive drive (for natural resources or geopolitical influence) but rather by Japan's desire to put its relations with the region's countries on a mutually beneficial footing. While Japanese intentions of this kind are well-understood and welcomed by countries in the region, it remains to be seen whether China and Russia share the same perceptions.

Crafting "The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" and Beyond

This kind of pro-active Japanese foreign policy initiative was further supported by Kawaguchi's successor, Foreign Minister Taro Aso, who, in a speech given in 2006, stressed a holistic regional approach to Central Asia, support for regionalism, and the promotion of democracy and a market economy in the region.¹¹ In addition to his policy speech entitled "The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons" which he made in 2006, Aso conceptualized this new policy engagement in 2007 further by emphasizing universal values such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, and the market economy. Aso's idea was for Japan to play an instrumental role in constructing an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" stretching from northern Europe to the Middle East, Central Asia, and on to southeast Asia. The reason given by Aso for such an approach was that these values of freedom, democracy, and liberal economics had been what helped Japan to develop. This meant that they offered the right pointers for other emerging countries in their development. Japan defined its role as

11 See Taro Aso, Central Asia as a corridor of peace and stability, in: *Asia-Europe Journal* 4/2006, pp. 491-497.

assisting these countries by offering both its experience and its economic assistance along this path. In a major departure from other Western approaches to building human rights, democracy, and liberal market economics, however, Japan emphasized that it would pursue this goal by striving to maintain a balance between political stability and economic prosperity in a manner suited to each country's specificity of culture, history, and level of development. In this way, Japan distinguished its policy from those of the USA and other Western countries and emphasized that pursuit of human rights and democratic values is a goal, but not a condition, of its economic assistance and engagement policies.

The areas of co-operation specifically defined by this policy outline were trade and investment; helping to satisfy human needs such as healthcare and education; infrastructural development; and the legal framework for reforms.

In all of its policies in the areas mentioned above, Japan attempted to fit its Central Asia policy into its overall foreign policy. The aspects dealing with the promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights, for example, were shared by its strategic allies such as the USA, Australia, EU countries, and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The emphasis on the individuality of each country's path of development mirrored the results of policy consultations in various formats, such as the summits and meetings held between Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Japan (CLV-Japan), the Visegrad Four dialogues held by four Central European nations (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), and others, of which Central Asia plus Japan is an additional scheme.

While Prime Minister Aso's ideas built upon the foundation prepared by his predecessors, Aso's short period in office and chronic political and economic crises in Japan led to a situation in which any diplomatic initiative aimed at the Central Asian region was short-lived or did not develop into a coherent and consistent long-term plan of action. On the whole, such initiatives served merely to symbolize Japan's declared commitment to this Japan-friendly and resource-rich region, while the Japanese engagement relied mainly on the disbursement of loans and grants and strictly limited Japanese participation in business.

Areas of Co-operation Between Japan and Central Asia

The starting point for the development of the political co-operation between Japan and Central Asian states is their shared understanding of the importance of establishing a number of diplomatic tracks aimed at increasing mutual understanding and political trust through the intensification of contacts.

The most important element of the interactions between Japan and its partners in the region is conducted through the exchanges of visits by Japanese prime ministers, and foreign ministers to Central Asia and by Central Asian presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers to Japan. These are held regularly and are highly successful. In these meetings, the understanding shown by Japan towards the developmental goals of Central Asian countries and Central Asia's support for Japanese foreign policy objectives have been affirmed again and again and have cemented the partnership between the two sides. However, the intensity of these visits is not equal. While only one serving Japanese prime minister visited Central Asia in 2006, visits by Central Asian leaders to Japan are more frequent. Yet, the unequal intensity of visits by the most senior figures is compensated for by other mechanisms. For instance, the Central Asia plus Japan initiative facilitates influential meetings of senior officials at ministerial level, which, in turn, further facilitate smoother relations in particular fields of co-operation.

The various facets of co-operation between Japan and its Central Asian partners can be divided into three main areas. These are security, economic co-operation, and cultural co-operation, which are of paramount importance for Central Asian states and have some significance for Japan.

Security and Co-operation

The security co-operation agenda between Central Asian states and Japan was set by the development of the post-Soviet situation in the region. Due to its distance from the region, Japan does not share any immediate common security concerns with Central Asian countries. The goal of co-operation between Japan and its Central Asian partners is justified more along the lines of a general Japanese contribution to maintaining international peace, stability, and order.¹² It is broadly defined as helping to prevent Central Asian countries from becoming a weak link in the international chain (by contributing to the fight against terrorism and extremism and helping the countries of the region to catch up in terms of integration into the globalizing system of democratic governance and economic convergence, for instance). Japan's support for and participation in Central Asian security initiatives is also more connected with the notion of indivisibility of national, regional, and global

12 For details, see Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Security Policy and the War on Terror: Steady Incrementalism or Radical Leap?* CSGR Working Paper No. 104/02, University of Warwick, August 2002.

security challenges than it is with any immediate threats to Japanese national security. Japan also emphasizes the fight against terrorism as a security priority in its dealings with Central Asia, linking terrorism to religious fundamentalism. This is due partly to the fact that Japan was drawn into dealing with the security crisis in the Central Asian region when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an extremist militant group based in Afghanistan which aims to overthrow secular governments in Central Asia and primarily in Uzbekistan, captured several Japanese geologists working in the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan and held them as hostages in 1999. Japan was actively involved in the process of negotiating for their release and reportedly paid a ransom – a claim the Japanese government denies. This case has proven the weaknesses of the security situation in Central Asia and the deficiencies of Japanese emergency measures for dealing with threats to Japanese interests in this region. Similar situations arose when Japanese engineers, volunteers, and humanitarian workers were taken hostage in Afghanistan, and Japan was forced to negotiate with their hostage-takers without any efficient regional security or information-gathering mechanism in place to deal with these kinds of situations. Therefore, in addition to the international developments, these events also increased the motivation for Japan to prioritize participation in anti-terrorist campaigns in Afghanistan and to combat terrorism in the Central Asian region. Japan channels its security-related assistance through its commitment to pacifying the situation in Afghanistan and its contribution to the US campaign there. While Japanese engagement in the field of security in post-Soviet Central Asia is mainly in the areas of equipment supply, financial support, and short-term training, its involvement in Afghanistan has also contributed the very limited but highly necessary deployment of military and civilian personnel.

In post-Soviet Central Asia – which normally excludes Afghanistan – however, one can argue that the peculiarity of the co-operation schemes in the field of fighting terrorism lies in the fact that they are often examples of “co-operation” in which Japan is at the giving end while Central Asian states are largely “recipients” of financial and technical assistance. In many cases, these kinds of security commitments are centred upon the concept of short-term security goals achieved by military or policing means. The long-term goals of eradicating the socio-economic root causes of security threats (e.g. reducing poverty and improving the employment situation) are dealt with mainly through the economic facets of co-operation between Japan and Central Asian states and are normally not closely linked to the notion of security-related co-operation.

Economic and Humanitarian Facets of the Japanese ODA

From the very first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan indicated a long-term commitment to assisting these newly independent states in their economic development and in the restructuring of their economies. A great deal of the Japanese economic activity in the region consists of humanitarian relief projects, which are based partly on grant allocation and partly on economic opportunity-generating principles. There are several areas in which various Japanese institutions and agencies are engaged in Central Asia. These include much-needed projects for equipping local educational institutions technically, providing educational grants, and giving technical assistance to agricultural producers, to name just a few. The achievements of the Japanese engagement in Central Asia are striking and undeniable in terms of their necessity, the associated economic figures, and the number of projects implemented.¹³ In terms of Japanese business interests, the areas of mineral resource development and exploration remain very high on the agenda. These areas of oil, gas, and uranium exploration and exports to Japan were stressed again and again during the visits of Japanese prime ministers to Central Asia and those of Central Asian presidents to Japan. Japan has also provided huge sums of money to support the infrastructural development of Central Asia. Projects range from infrastructure development in goods and services transportation to tourism-related initiatives.¹⁴

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Japan has implemented a range of projects aimed at lifting the population's level of well-being by means of community development and support programmes in the most impoverished parts of the country. The primary purpose of these programmes was to empower local communities and enhance their profit-generating capacity in areas that were historically rooted in those communities. Such programmes were based on a scheme that had been introduced in Japan itself, namely the "one village – one product" model. The main purpose of these activities is to identify the capacities of each participating community and an appropriate product that has potentially high market demand. This process is normally advanced through co-operation and co-funding schemes between the Japanese International Cooperation Agency and local authorities. As a rule, the Japanese provide short-term training, expertise in distribution techniques, and some financial assistance to facilitate production of the product in each community that has the best chance to generate profit and jobs. Since the country became

13 For an interesting analysis and outline of the achievements of Japanese policy in Central Asia, see an article by the Deputy Director-General of the European Affairs Bureau, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Takeshi Yagi, "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue and Japan's policy toward Central Asia, in: *Asia Europe Journal* 5/2007, pp.13-16.

14 Japan assisted largely in the areas of modernizing infrastructure such as airports and related facilities. The functioning of some of these transportation facilities remains inefficient and largely underused. See Tengiz Ibragimov, Samarkand – mechta o turisticheskome rae [Samarkand – a dream of a tourist heaven], in: *Nemetskaia Volna*, 27 March 2008, at: <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1206613200>.

independent, the number of Kyrgyz communities involved in grass-roots assistance programmes has reached several dozen. Examples of such projects include the facilitation of rare herb collection and marketing, honey production and distribution, local craft workshop development, and many others. The best-known schemes are those in the Issyk Kul oblast of Kyrgyzstan. While the efficiency and impact of such schemes have yet to be evaluated, the central idea of strengthening local capacity for dealing with economic problems and generating jobs and profits at local level is a very important task that is faced not only by Kyrgyzstan but by all Central Asian countries.

In all of these economic and humanitarian projects, Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) plays an instrumental role.¹⁵ The Japanese government defines the primary purposes of ODA disbursement as providing humanitarian assistance, increasing the interdependence of economic spheres, and promoting environmental conservation. The main principles guiding ODA disbursements were not using ODA for military purposes or for promoting conflicts; supporting environmentally sustainable development models; using ODA to strengthen peace and stability around the world and to control and prevent the development of weapons of mass destruction; and supporting and promoting democratization, the transition to a market economy, and respect for human rights in the recipient countries. Taking these principles into account, ODA is being disbursed in four main ways: grants and technical assistance projects (mainly on a bilateral basis aimed at meeting basic needs such as health and medical care, sanitation, agriculture, etc.), governmental loans (yen loans provided to the governments at low or no interest and with relatively long repayment periods), assistance by way of contributions to projects run by international organizations, and financial resources for human development (educational grants, etc.).¹⁶

However, there are several lessons that can be learned from the previous Japanese involvement in this region. Firstly, one can conclude from previous Japanese economic and humanitarian engagement that inadequate identification of fields of co-operation will mean that Japanese involvement is ineffective, despite the scale of the financial resources that might be pumped into such projects. In addition, Japanese engagement seems to make a larger and more significant impact in the region when it aims to help with real local capacity-building, as opposed to just emergency or short-term humanitarian assistance schemes. Capacity-building (in the forms that generate profit for individuals as well as governments), which empowers the local population to generate wealth and therefore their capacity to develop their societies, is

15 For details of the Japanese ODA and its evolution, see Marie Söderberg, *Changes in Japanese Foreign Aid Policy*, Stockholm School of Economics, Working Paper 157, October 2002. Also see, Fumitaka Furuoka, *A History of Japan's Foreign Aid Policy: From Physical Capital to Human Capital*, MPRA Paper No. 5654, November 2007, at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/5654/>.

16 On the debates regarding the Japanese ODA, see Saori N. Katada, Japan's Two-Track Aid Approach: The Forces behind Competing Triads, in: *Asian Survey* 2/2002, pp. 320-342, and Kawaii/Takagi, cited above (Note 3).

more efficient because it implies some kind of sustainability after the Japanese assistance comes to an end, while humanitarian assistance projects of the type provided (technical, medical, etc.) tend to duplicate those that are already being implemented by international or national organizations.¹⁷

There seems to be an understanding within the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and other assistance-related agencies of the Japanese government that projects that ideally result in establishing production or service cycles that can later be continued self-sufficiently by local actors should be given priority.¹⁸ Furthermore, the projects currently being developed in the region demonstrate that, given the scarcity of resources that Japan can provide to the countries in the region, there is an understanding in both Japan and Central Asian countries that in addition to the government-supported projects, there is a need to support initiatives which can hardly be sustained by local authorities and non-governmental institutions alone.¹⁹

Mutual Understanding, Cultural Co-operation and the Japanese Soft-power Construction

The promotion of mutual cultural contacts and interaction at the level of the general public was regarded as a step towards facilitating smoother political, economic, and social co-operation between Japan and its Central Asian partners. One tool for such mutual understanding was the establishment of cultural centres with regular events in Japan and CA for the reciprocal introduction of these societies' cultures. Parallel to certain Japanese educational institutions focusing their studies on Central Asia, the Japanese government set up Japan Centers for Human Development and supported Japanese studies

17 Author's field research findings during the "Survey on Agricultural and Rural Development based on Population Issues" undertaken in 2003 with the Asian Population and Development Association (APDA). Some of the results of the survey are available in printed form in Japanese and English (without the interviews cited in this article). For the English language version, see *Survey on Agricultural and Rural Development based on Population Issues: The Republic of Uzbekistan*, Tokyo, March 2003, and *Survey on Agricultural and Rural Development based on Population Issues: The Republic of Kazakhstan*, Tokyo, March 2002.

18 In an interview with a Japanese Embassy staff official in one Central Asian country, the author was informed that the current policy of the Japanese government in providing technical assistance was to grant contracts on a competitive basis. Local contractors are given the same privileges as Japanese ones. It was also emphasized to the author that local contractors are even preferred in certain situations because this makes the tasks of providing technical assistance easier and more sustainable in the long term. The only concern in connection with this is that in many cases, local contractors are not yet totally familiar with the documentation procedures and proper formalities for participating in tenders for contracts and are not always able to provide the necessary equipment. This puts foreign-based and Japanese companies in a better position, resulting in the situation referred to in this chapter. Author's personal communication, Embassy of Japan, March 2008.

19 One project of this kind involves supporting and training the members of the Water User Associations in Uzbekistan. Source: JICA materials on *Mizu Kanri Kaizen Projekto* [Improvement of the Water Management Project], obtained directly from Japan International Cooperation Agency. This project is still in its active phase.

departments across Central Asia, which were given the task of introducing Japanese culture and preparing the future Japan-friendly generations of policy-makers and active practitioners in this region.

A typical example of these centres that were established in many Central Asian states is the one set up in Tashkent in August 2001. The main activities of these centres include language instruction, the introduction of Japanese culture, and vocational training. The vocational training centres' activities mainly revolve around the concept of introducing courses on business management and the promotion of small- and medium-scale entrepreneurial activity. Admission to these courses is granted on a competitive basis, and the number of applications is three times higher than the number of those admitted. It is quite a significant number, especially in view of the fact that those admitted to these courses have to pay rather high tuition fees of around 800-1,000 US dollars for the five-month course. In Tashkent alone, these courses produce 140 graduates per year, and 800 people have graduated so far.²⁰ The success of such centres in the first decade of their existence was very significant, with the numbers of Central Asian students becoming fluent in Japanese, working for Japanese businesses, and attending Japanese universities growing to a level far beyond that which had prevailed in the period prior to the establishment of these centres. After the centre in Tashkent was established, its average number of visitors per month increased from 2,331 in 2001 to 5,933 in 2011. The average number of visitors per year peaked in 2007 at 74,045. This figure fell slightly to 62,395 in 2010 but still remains relatively high.²¹

In addition, the number of people in Central Asian societies who believe that Japan is contributing to the development of their countries has grown to the extent that Japan is considered to be one of the front-runners in this respect. In the survey conducted by Tokyo University's AsiaBarometer project in five Central Asian countries, Japan was placed second by the general public in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in terms of which countries contributed to their respective national development, behind only Russia, while in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan it was among the top four countries; the others were Russia, China, and South Korea.²² This again demonstrates that the commitment of Japan and its efforts to promote mutual understanding with the populations of these countries has had a positive impact, thus contributing to the build-up of Japanese "soft power" in those societies.

However, there are certain challenges that Japan faces in promoting its culture and language in the Central Asian region. These concern, firstly, the

20 Figures are based on the information provided during the author's interview with a high-ranking official of the Japan Center for Human Development in Tashkent on 26 May 2011.

21 Figures are based on the information provided during the author's interview with a high-ranking official of the Japan Center for Human Development in Tashkent on 26 May 2011.

22 For the details, see Takashi Inoguchi (ed.), *Human Beliefs and Values in Incredible Asia: South and Central Asia in Focus*, Tokyo 2008.

impact of the Japan Centers for Human Development, for which public interest has been showing signs of decline in recent years. While the Japanese actively established and promoted Japan Centers for Human Development and similar institutions for a lengthy period of time, the applicability and relevance of the knowledge received at those centres is increasingly being questioned. This has to do with the fact that Japanese companies and institutions representing Japanese economic interests in the Central Asian region are not yet as numerous as those representing the economic interests of other countries (e.g. China, South Korea). This means that the opportunities arising for graduates of Japan Centers and Japanese language departments and business courses to apply their knowledge while working with the Japanese business community are rather limited. As mentioned in the previous sections, Japanese foreign policy defines its goals in Central Asia and this region's significance to Japan poorly, thereby constituting another factor which slows down Japanese economic and political penetration in this region. As a result, many graduates of Japanese language departments and courses at Japan Centers ended up either in the local tourism industry, which benefited from the increase in Japanese tourism in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, or going to Japan for education and then finding some kind of employment in Japan, or being forced to look for opportunities unconnected with their Japan-related education. Those educated in Japan often found themselves to be over-qualified for local conditions, as exemplified by the medical doctors who were trained in Japanese conditions but later had to work in Central Asian clinics with little or none of the equipment on which they were trained in Japan.

Other factors behind the low level of Japanese economic penetration of this region are hesitation on the part of Japanese businesses, the rather slow decision-making process within the Japanese corporate culture and government-related agencies, and the Central Asian countries' lack of the kind of information and infrastructure which Japanese companies normally expect from a country where they aim to commit themselves commercially. This resulted in a surplus of people with Japanese language skills and very few employment opportunities, a fact which called into question the necessity for such education and led to a decline in interest. This creates a vicious circle for programmes like this, because such a low level of effectiveness and falling numbers of students enrolling and graduating discourage the Japanese authorities from opening new programmes and often undermine the case for such programmes focused on or initiated by Japan in the Central Asian region.²³

23 On the occasion of the evaluation hearing for the Special Program for Central Asian countries at the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Technology, the question of the necessity of such programmes was raised by members of the committee, who questioned their efficiency and the need for such a policy in light of the increasing Chinese educational presence. September 2011.

These training centres and language courses were initially established to support Japanese initiatives by fostering locally-grown leaders to strengthen political dialogue (in Senior Officials' Meetings, SOMs), intellectuals' dialogue, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. The significance of the Japanese schemes also resided in their promotion of intra-regional co-operation, with Japan aiming to serve as an impartial third party promoting confidence-building in Central Asia. These goals were always supported by Central Asian governments, as most of them consider Japan to be a strategic partner in their policies. However, the lack of economic links between Japan and these states, as well as hesitation on the Japanese side (in both business and government circles) in taking a more active role in the region, renders political and cultural initiatives incomplete. Very often, Japanese readiness to invest in political and cultural aspects of co-operation without any clearly defined economic goals and strategy in this region leaves Central Asian countries puzzled.

Conclusion

Japan has been searching actively for modes of co-operation with Central Asian countries ever since they became independent. This has resulted in an evolution of its foreign policy in the region from the initial mode of Eurasian/Silk Road diplomacy to the notions of "Central Asia plus Japan" and of crafting an "Arc Freedom and Prosperity". In the years since 1991, such attempts have produced various Japan-related activities in Central Asia, with Japan being regarded as a strategic partner for many of these newly independent states and providing assistance instrumental to their economic and social development. This created a good basis for larger-scale co-operation between the region's countries and Japan. So far, however, only a small fraction of this potential has manifested itself, and much remains to be done. Ever since the Central Asian countries gained their independence, Japan's diplomacy towards them, while seen as important, has lacked concrete policy objectives, political will, and dynamism as far as plans of action were concerned. At the same time, Japan has always been regarded as a strategic partner for most Central Asian states, but co-operation in many cases was limited to financial aid and technical grants and assistance programmes.

To some extent, this limited success on the part of Japanese foreign policy results from the fact that the position of Central Asia is not yet sufficiently clear in Japanese foreign-policy and business circles. In certain cases, Central Asia is classified as part of the Middle East, and in others as Western Asia or Europe. This suggests that Central Asia still has to be conceptualized as a region in its own right. It now seems that while Central Asian states have appeared on the political map of the world, these countries have yet to fit in and be conceptualized in terms of their economic and social placement on the

map of Japanese diplomacy. Therefore, defining what Central Asia means to Japan and what the benefits and goals of Japanese involvement in this region are will help to improve the effectiveness of its involvement in this region.