

# Japan's Policy towards the Countries of Central Asia

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**Abstract**—This article analyses the peculiarities of Japan's policy toward the countries of Central Asia. The increasing role of Central Asia in the system of international relations engendered an objective need for understanding of the policy of leading states, including Japan, in the region in the twenty-first century.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the peculiarities of the formation and development of Japan's policy in Central Asia and to identify the problems and prospects of Japan's policy toward the countries of the region on the basis of experts' opinions.

In this article, the method of analysis of the situation and a systematic method were used. Prognostic methods, the collective expert assessment and scenarios were used in the study to determine the prospects of Japan's policy toward the countries of Central Asia.

**Keywords**—Japan, Central Asia, the Eurasian concept, 'Central Asia plus Japan' Dialogue.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING to NHK television broadcaster, Japan has decided to allocate \$ 700 million to the five Central Asian countries to support them in the development of natural gas and rare-earth minerals deposits. On November 10, 2012 in Tokyo, the then Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba met with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and promised them Financial Support. Thus Japan aimed to reduce resource dependence on China due to the recent aggravation of relations with this country over the disputed islands. Pursuing the same goal, Japan started to support Kazakhstan in the field of production of rare-earth metals. This resulted in constructing a works in Stepnogorsk. Furthermore, Japan took a special interest in the above countries, which are rich in essential energy resources, after an accident had occurred at the 'Fukushima-1' plant. All the reasons led to the activation of Japan's policy toward the countries of Central Asia.

In general, there are no contradictions and problems on a matter of principle that could prevent the active growth of mutual cooperation between Japan and the countries of Central Asia at this stage. In comparison with other countries, Japan enjoys quite high authority with the political establishment and the common people of Central Asia. Japan's activities, covered in the media, also find favorable response among the population and give an idea of Japan as 'a good, friendly country that is genuinely committed to helping needy

countries'. Thus, Japan is the only country in the world for which Central Asia is open to such an extent.

## II. THE MAIN PART

Japan began to show a political interest in the countries of Central Asia in 1991, when they had acquired their independence. With the formation of 'a new world order' Japan, as well as many other global economic players, had to change its foreign policy. A threat of communism existed no longer for Japan, which was the main military and political ally of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region. New states were created on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and it was necessary to support them.

The activity in the Central Asian region after the end of the 'Cold War' is a completely new direction in the foreign policy of Japan. Yet, Japan's policy in Central Asia has already become one of the most important components of its global foreign policy as, in addition to the undisputed presence of economic-strategic interest in the region, it is directly linked to the problem of qualitative change in its role and status in international relations [1].

According to Russian analysts, in retrospect, Japan's relations with the countries of Central Asia had quite clearly defined stages, the change of which led to a significant change in the priorities of the policy pursued by Japanese leaders and business community in relation to these countries.

In the *first phase*, which is attributable to the period that came immediately after the new states of Central Asia acquired independence, Japan, claiming to be the universally recognized leader of the Asia-Pacific region, was primarily concerned about the problems of peace and stabilization in this potentially conflict-ridden region of Asia. In this regard, Japan was building its relations with the Central Asian countries on the standard model of relations between developed and developing states. On January 1, 1993, largely due to the lobbying activities of Japan, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reckoned all the five Central Asian republics of the former USSR among developing countries, so they were afforded an opportunity to get outside help. The transition to the *second phase* of development of Japan's relations with Central Asian countries was largely due to aggravation of the economic crisis, which engulfed these countries and resulted in a sharp decline in their exports to Japan. In this regard, the Japanese government found it possible to introduce a system of preferential tariffs to encourage import of goods from the countries of the region, hoping to intensify their foreign trade and economic reform in

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general; as in this case, they were given the opportunity to receive at least the minimum foreign exchange resources. In *the third phase* of development of relations with the countries of Central Asia, the political and economic elite of Japan realized the necessity of making a new strategy for their development. This strategy was launched under the name Eurasian diplomacy by the then Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in July 1997 [2].

Eurasian diplomacy is Japan's foreign-policy strategy in relation to the countries of Central Asia, Russia, China, and the Transcaucasia. The initiator of the concept is the chairman of the Inter-Parliamentary League, a member of the House of Representatives of Japan's parliament M.Suzuki. It was officially announced by Ryutaro Hashimoto, who was the then Prime Minister of Japan, to the representatives of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) in July 1997 [3].

In developing this strategy, the Japanese specialists emphasized that the rich oil and gas resources of the Caspian region were becoming an important factor on the world market of the energy resources that were of interest to Japan; the countries of the region could serve as a bridge linking Eurasian states by their communications; the active support rendered to the republics of Central Asia and the Transcaucasia in the process of nation-building would be of great importance for the development of Japan's relations not only with those new independent states, but also with their neighbors - Russia, China and Islamic states, and that would eventually allow Japan to expand its political influence in the Eurasian region in the twenty-first century [4].

In accordance with the Eurasian concept, Japan's relations with the countries of the Central Asian region should be based on three key areas:

Political dialogue, contributing to the deepening of trust and mutual understanding;

- Economic cooperation, including development of natural resources;
- Achieving peace in the region through non-proliferation of nuclear weapon, democratization and stabilization.

It was also noted that the support from Japan should become an important factor in enhancing intra-regional cooperation in the establishment of transport, communication and energy supply systems, as well as in the development of energy resources in Central Asia [5].

The Eurasian doctrine of Japan in relation to the countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, has become an important impetus to the development of bilateral relations. The ideas of the concept of 'Eurasian diplomacy' were also implemented during the subsequent visits and speeches of prominent public figures. To fill its new foreign policy with specific content, the Japanese government adopted a plan, known as the 'Program of Action for the diplomacy of the Silk Road.' It involves the development of broad political connections, comprehensive economic cooperation, and support in the transition to the market economy [6].

Yet, former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, in his speech during the Boao Forum of China (PRC) on April

12, 2002, said that it was necessary to develop relations with the countries of the Central Asian region that have significant energy potential, ensuring Asia's needs for energy. In July 2002, Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, S. Sugiura, headed the 'energy mission of the Silk Road', paid a visit to Kazakhstan. The members of the 'energy mission' were provided with ample opportunity to hold meetings in the President's Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Government, the Ministers of Energy and Mineral Resources, Industry and Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It's safe to say that the Eurasian doctrine of Hashimoto laid the foundation for other new projects and concepts of Japan in relation to the countries of Central Asia. The 'Central Asia plus Japan' Dialogue, launched in Astana in 2004, is an example of that. Creating this dialogue indicates the intention of Japan to play a greater role in the region. Currently, The 'Central Asia plus Japan' Dialogue has already established a reputation as an effective form of cooperation and effective mechanism for deepening political and economic ties in the vast Eurasian region. Japan has clearly defined the Central Asian region as a strategically important one. This shows the increasing role of Central Asia in Japan's foreign policy [7].

However, in the scientific community there is an active debate regarding Japan's strategy in relation to the Central Asian countries. Thus, Professor T. Uyama (Hokkaido University), for example, calls into question the idea that Japan had an articulate strategy in relation to Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Professor Uyama explains the absence of such a strategy with the aftermath of the Second World War. He notes that "strategic thinking is lacking not only in Japan's policy in Central Asia, but, as often noted, throughout its foreign policy. Before the Second World War Japan's policy was rich with "strategy" and intrigue aimed at developing the Japanese Empire's sphere of influence, but defeat in war fundamentally changed the orientation of Japanese diplomacy. Japan, to a great extent, lost its military and diplomatic independence. The major priority became maintaining its alliance with the United States, despite occasional and ongoing differences with the United States in the sphere of economics. At the same time, in order to prevent a slide back into isolationism, Japan has attempted to maintain peaceful (although not necessarily close) relations with all countries of the world and, in particular, to avoid upsetting any of the superpowers or any of its neighboring countries. As a result, Japanese foreign policy has remained largely passive. Thus, for example, military problems are considered only in the framework of the Japanese-American alliance. Nor does Japan have its own vision of security in regions far from Japan, including Central Asia" [8].

Uyasa Takeshi, another Japanese author, noted that "The process of creating Eurasian diplomacy and the Central Asian and Japan dialogue has been an important movement in Japanese foreign policy, in which the challenge of including geopolitics-oriented ideas has been met. It is also represents a unique opportunity for Japan to search for a way for regional multilateralism because, as well as most Asian countries in alliance with the United States, Japan understands the

importance of such bilateral, hub-and-spoke relations with the US, and depends on the security umbrella delivered by the US. Suffice it to say here that Japan has just started to learn how to establish its regional multilateralism, although the process may be native [9].

There is also a point of view that relations with Central Asia can be called the best example of Japan's strategy of 'soft power', which is the use of a set of nonmilitary methods to protect its interests. Tokyo's attention to the socio-economic and humanitarian issues, the willingness to use its strong financial capabilities to their solutions, as well as non-interference in the internal politics, of course, appeals to the countries of the region.

According to O. Dobrinskaya, in the eight years of the existence of Dialogue with Central Asian countries, Japan has managed to strengthen its position in the region, to give a new dimension to relations with the countries in the region. In this case, the framework of the Dialogue is not considered as a substitute for bilateral cooperation, which is still playing a significant role in the discussion of the most important issues for Tokyo, such as access to natural resources [10].

According to Professor M. Laumullin, Tokyo regards the Eurasian doctrine as the priority of Asian component. Evaluating Tokyo's policy towards the CIS, the author from Kazakhstan states that it has been easier for Japan to find a common language with the Asian republics of the former Soviet Union because of cultural mentality and historical traditions. Japan, in contrast to the West - the United States and the Europeans especially - does not attach such great importance to the issue of democracy and human rights. Its understanding of the issue differs from that of Brussels and Washington. In addition, there is no doubt that Japan, due to its geographical location, economic ties, is an Asian power. Its interests depend not only on what is happening in the other centers of economic power in the West, but also on the situation in the economy of China, in Southeast Asia, the Middle East that are an important source of energy [11].

### III. CONCLUSION

Thus, we can say that the Central Asian trend has an important place in the foreign policy of Japan. In this context, the idea of the possibility of Japan's participation in the regional organizations of Central Asia (in particular, SCO) in any capacity, voiced by some Japanese political scientists, seems to be an interesting and promising one. The Eurasian doctrine of Ryutaro Hashimoto, proposed in the 90s, has not lost its relevance at the present stage, especially in respect of the countries of Central Asia. It has laid the foundations for the development of relations with the countries of the region on the principles of economic reasonability, safeguarding of security with joint efforts, and cooperation in the humanitarian sphere. The formation of the dialogue mechanism 'Central Asia plus Japan' shows the perspective of this trend in the foreign policy of Japan.

The idea of creating a multilateral structure of interaction was aimed at making qualitative changes in the status of Japan in Central Asia, making it a full participant in the discussion

of regional issues and ways of further development of Central Asia. The Dialogue contributes to the formation of a single economic space in Central Asia that meets Tokyo's long-term interests. Japan is interested in the energy resources of Central Asian countries. On the basis of these needs, Japan will continue its policy of presence in the Central Asian region in the framework of the regional forum 'Central Asia plus Japan' and bilateral relations with the countries of the region.

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