

Why Japan matters for Central Asia!

Japan is an economic giant, yet its international presence has long been less significant compared to other world powers. Although Japan increased its diplomatic efforts as a global actor after a period of post-war apathy, “Japan has often been seen to lack a readily identifiable or forceful political and international ideology”.¹ In recent years however, especially since the second term of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government, Japan’s ambition to consolidate its role as a major global actor has intensified. The Abe government built its vision on the formulas “Japan as a proactive contributor to global peace” and “diplomacy that takes a panoramic view of the world map”. This vision goes beyond Japan’s traditional reliance on the United States in security matters and is also justified, in part, by instability in America’s position in the global arena.

Unsurprisingly, Japan’s international activity is most noticeable in Asia, East Asia in particular. However, Japan’s international policy and official documents acknowledge the strategic importance of Central Asia. Japan has gradually transformed itself from a donor to a business partner in this region. From the earliest years of the independence of the countries of Central Asia, Japan has been one of the most significant providers of Official Development Assistance (ODA). Asia, especially East Asia, receive the largest share of Japanese ODA, with the far east of Asia receiving more than half of this aid; nevertheless, South and Central Asia received nearly one-fifth of the total.

By the early 2000s this situation had started to change, for a number of reasons. Japan began to reduce its ODA from the late 1990s, a process that accelerated as an economic recession hit several countries, including Japan. At the same time the Central Asian countries significantly improved their economic situation compared to the economic and political instability of the 1990s. In 2004 Japan initiated a regional platform called “Central Asia plus Japan”. This policy dialogue aimed at promoting regional cooperation in the region and at improving relations not only between Japan and four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and

¹ De Glenn D. Hook, Julie Gilson, Hugo Dobson and Christopher W. Hughes, Jr, *Japan's International Relations: Politics, Economics and Security*, 2005, p. 11.

Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan has observer status), but also among them.

Japan's growing interest in Central Asia is perhaps best explained in terms of the underexploited economic potential, geostrategic position and natural resources of the region. Moreover, security concerns in the post-9/11 world have compelled Japan to be proactive in this area of the world. This is consistent with a tri-dimensional (economic-political-security) perspective on Japan's role as a global actor.

Japan's initiative entered a more active phase in 2015, when Prime Minister Abe visited Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, stressing the importance of the further development of the cooperation programme. To date, "Central Asia plus Japan" remains the main platform for cooperation between Japan and the Central Asian countries. The governments of these Central Asian countries have demonstrated their enthusiasm for this platform, which promises wider cooperation in various fields, ranging from political and intra-regional issues to business, infrastructure and culture. At the same time, Japan and the countries of the region are developing bilateral relations. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have already signed bilateral investment agreements with Japan, which intends to sign similar agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The Central Asian countries seem to be receptive to Japan's initiatives in the region. This can be understood in terms of Japan's lack of voracious geopolitical ambitions when compared to the other giant actors in the region, such as Russia and China. Japan does not share any state borders with the Central Asian countries and therefore does not represent any immediate threat to them. Even though Japan has one of the world's largest defence budgets and a modern military, Japan's internal political principles constrain it from being an externally-focused military power. Moreover, Japan's political elite has long placed the United Nations Development Programme's concept of "human security" at the heart of Japanese policy making. This has resulted in the more humanitarian-oriented character of Japan's external actions.

Japan maintains a compromise position in terms of democratic institutions and human rights conditionality. Even though Japan introduced a policy, “The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”, as a form of value-oriented diplomacy that aims to strengthen the country’s relationships with states that share “common values such as democracy and the protection of human rights”, it does not demonstrate a paternalistic attitude towards its international partners. This mindset means that Japan, as a partner for Central Asian countries, does not irritate Russia. Moreover, from Abe’s second term, Japan has intensified its diplomatic relations with Russia. In sum, Abe’s vision has shifted Japan’s role in the region from regional diplomacy focusing on geopolitical aspects to pragmatic business development.

Japan is making successful use of soft power, and one of its main diplomatic tools is the seductive power of the Japanese culture and the country’s development model. Japan as a country has a positive image in the world, as shown in a global poll by BBC World Service and Anholt-GfK Nation Brands Index. According to the opinion poll, conducted in the Central Asian countries in 2016, 89% of respondents consider the relationship with Japan “friendly” and 63% of them find Japan a “reliable partner”.²

Today, when winds of positive change are blowing through the countries of the region, Japan, as a strong partner whose presence will not disturb the fragile political equilibrium in the region, seems to be needed more than ever.

² https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001111.html