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## Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia: Successes and failures (1997–2017)

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## ABSTRACT

Eurasia has never been one of major directions of Japan's foreign policy, but its importance for Tokyo is growing. This article analyzes its increasing significance to foreign policy of Japan, causes and consequences of this policy's duality and inconsistency. It also studies the reasons for the limited success of Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia and discusses possible prospects for growing Japanese involvement in the region. It concludes that Japan's Eurasian policy is inconsistent and is likely to remain so since the cause behind it remains unchanged – that is, the contradiction between Japan's actual economic interests and its willingness to follow in the ideological and geopolitical footsteps of the U.S. The path Japan takes in the future will largely depend on the economic results of the implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt, its linkage with the plans of the Eurasian Economic Union, the progress of Russian–Chinese cooperation, and the project of Greater Eurasian partnership put forward by Russia and supported by China. If the economic projects of Eurasia's non-Western players prove effective, Tokyo will be more tempted to cooperate with them despite its close ties with the U.S. However, if Eurasia's non-Western states, and particularly China, are overly active with their foreign policy and militaries in the Asia Pacific, it will push Tokyo to create a variety of structures that would curb and serve as a political counterbalance to Chinese and Russian influence.

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Eurasia has never been one of the major directions of Japan's foreign policy, but its importance for Tokyo is growing. In the end of the 20th – beginning on the 21st century, the Japanese government put forward several programs of cooperation with Eurasian region by which it

usually understands the Asian part of the former Soviet Union. However, the effectiveness of these programs was rather limited. The key “big account” on Tokyo's diplomatic agenda in Central Asia, for example, has been Official Development Assistance (ODA) and infrastructure building (Murashkin, 2015a, 2015b). But, according to Timur Dadabaev, “despite the substantial amount of economic aid Japan has poured into the region, Japanese influence remains limited, with several avenues of involvement that are yet to be explored” (Dadabaev, 2016, p. 1).

At the same time there exists a significant interest in Central Asia in intensifying cooperation with Japan as economically prosperous, generous and politically relatively independent player. This interest is growing against the

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background of China's promoting its Belt and Road initiative and Russia and China cooperating in creating the greater Eurasian partnership. This article analyzes the growing importance of Eurasia to Japanese foreign policy, the causes and consequences of that policy's duality and inconsistency. It also studies the reasons for the limited success of Tokyo's diplomacy in Eurasia and discusses possible prospects for growing Japanese involvement in the region.

Japanese foreign policy is determined by two main factors – its military and political alliance with the United States and the fact that Japan is the most important player in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition to the U.S., Tokyo also places a high priority on its relations with China, the situation on the Korean peninsula, its difficult interactions with Russia, and its ties with ASEAN countries. However, Japanese foreign policy in Eurasia has been gaining importance in recent years as well. This stems from a number of new developments in Eurasia. First is the sharp growth in China's economic and political role as a result of its ambitious Silk Road Economic Belt initiative aimed at creating a new trade route to Europe through its own northwest regions, Russia, and the states of Central Asian – and simultaneously developing the infrastructure of each. Second are Russia's early steps toward implementing news plans for the development of its Asian regions. Third are the infrastructure development initiatives put forward by several regional players, projects such as Kazakhstan's Bright Road, Mongolia's Steppe Road, and others.

Tokyo reacts to these plans by its partners and competitors with a mix of envy and apprehension, and with a desire to gain some benefit from the new projects. Its alliance with the United States pushes it toward some sort of alternative plan to arrest the growing influence of "authoritarian" Russia and China, toward isolating them and pulling the Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India out of their orbit and into the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (essentially, a pro-U.S. coalition). However, the reality of a still stagnant economy dictates that Japan exploit the trade and investment opportunities resulting from the development of Eurasian states to avoid losing out to its more active neighbors, primarily China and South Korea.

Speaking in Tokyo on June 5, 2017, at the 23rd Future of Asia international forum, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that Tokyo was "prepared to expand cooperation" on the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project. He said such cooperation would be conditional upon "harmony with a free and fair Trans-Pacific economic zone" and project infrastructure that all can use and that would be developed through open and fair tenders (Pollmann, 2017). The Japanese media also reported that Tokyo was considering joining another regional structure that China established in 2014 – the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) ("Japan and 'One Belt, One Road'," 2017). News that Shinzo Abe was changing his attitude toward Chinese infrastructure projects in Eurasia stood in sharp contrast to the tensions in Japanese–Chinese relations caused by the conflict in 2012 over sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands.

The Chinese OBOR initiative to create a global transport and investment infrastructure is a combination of two projects, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt. Chinese President Xi

Jinping announced his intention to create a "big family of harmonious coexistence" ("[Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum,](#)" 2017), although skeptics see this as a thinly disguised attempt by China to position itself as a great power by investing in strategically important infrastructure projects which, in many cases, are very difficult to implement. For example, construction of a high-speed railway from Jakarta to Bandung in Indonesia would strengthen China's influence in the South China Sea (Azuma & Walker, 2016).

Shinzo Abe made similar proposals following his decision to send Japanese Liberal Democratic Party General Secretary Toshihiro Nikai – who advocates improved relations with China – to a major international conference in Beijing promoting the OBOR project. During his visit with Xi Jinping, Nikai presented the Chinese leader with a message proposing an exchange of visits between the leaderships of the two countries. Xi Jinping, in turn, expressed his desire to improve bilateral ties and noted that the OBOR initiative would serve as "a new platform" for cooperation between China and Japan ("[Japan and 'One Belt, One Road','](#)" 2017).

However, in an October 25, 2017, interview with the Nikkei news agency, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono announced that, during a meeting in Tokyo on November 6, 2017, between U.S. President Donald Trump and S. Abe, the Japanese president planned to offer his U.S. counterpart the creation of a permanent strategic dialogue between the leaders of their countries, plus those of India and Australia, with the aim of establishing a zone of security and safe and free navigation stretching from Asia to Africa. The Foreign Minister said, "We are in an era when Japan has to exert itself diplomatically by drawing a big strategic picture" and that "free and open seas will benefit all countries, including China and its Belt and Road initiative" (Onchi & Hayashi, 2017). Kono also explained that he had discussed the idea of establishing such a format for cooperation with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on the sidelines of a summit in Manila in August of this year. Later, in responding to a Nikkei journalist's question as to whether the group of four countries would be aligned against China, T. Kono avoided denying this outright, noting only the importance of India's participation (Press Conference by Foreign Minister Taro Kono, 2017).

On the whole, the statements by Kono reflected the nature of the Japanese–Chinese rivalry, as did the tour of Central Asian states that the Japanese prime minister made in October 2015 – and that the expert community viewed as an attempt to create a counterbalance to the Chinese OBOR project and the AIIB. As a result of that trip – the first in nine years by a head of the Japanese cabinet to post-Soviet Central Asia – Abe brought back contracts and agreements worth more than \$27 billion. The largest of the public deals was an \$18 billion agreement with Turkmenistan to build plants for natural gas processing and gas and chemicals. The next largest, at \$8.5 billion, was a package of agreements with Tajikistan that includes a contract for the construction of a fertilizer plant, as well as a number of projects related to logistics, telecommunications, and the chemical and extractive industries. The Japanese leader also signed contracts worth up to \$100

million each with other states in the region. It was also announced that Japan would send approximately \$25 billion in assistance to the countries of the region over the next five years. Japan emerged as one of largest donors to the region during the post-Soviet period, and Abe made considerable effort during his tour to reaffirm that status (“*Yaponiya pytaetsya potesnit’ Kitay v Tsentral’noy Azii,*” 2015). On October 31, 2017, former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry began a five-day tour of the region that will be discussed in more detail below.

It is no accident that Abe takes particular interest in this region. The Prime Minister pointed out the importance of cooperation with Central Asia in his book “Towards a Beautiful Country” (Abe, 2006, p. 161). That volume was published during his first Cabinet and essentially serves as his political manifesto. Taro Aso was one of the main “ideologues” of the Central Asian component of Japanese policy. Serving first as Foreign Minister in that Cabinet and later as Prime Minister, he authored the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” concept, the most recent to date that touches on the subject of Central Asia in Japanese diplomacy. In a book of the same name, Aso devotes a full chapter to that region where he claims it to be on the way to “the Corridor of Peace and Stability” (Aso, 2007, pp. 220–34) The “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” calls for the creation of a belt of states adhering to universal human values. That belt would stretch from Northern Europe through the Baltic states, Central and Southern Europe and, bending around Russia and China, would include the Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Dobrinskaya, 2011, p. 47). Russia and China responded to this concept by accusing Tokyo and Washington of attempting to encircle and surround their countries. However, the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” never went beyond the conceptual stage and was consigned to oblivion after the change of government in Japan in 2009 (Murashkin, 2015a, 2015b).

Japan would prefer preserving the regional status quo that existed during the active phase of the counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. At that time, the U.S. played a strongly influential role due to its concerns regarding the Chinese project. Tokyo is closely monitoring the political uncertainty resulting from the election of Donald Trump, the most dramatic example of which has been the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Japan is also concerned that the convergence of U.S. and Chinese interests concerning North Korea might lead the two powers to establish closer relations. Washington sent a representative to participate in the “One Belt, One Road” forum and the U.S. Embassy in China has created a working group devoted to the project (“*V otnoshenii Yaponii k Kitayu proiskhodyat tonkie izmeneniya,*” 2017). Japan’s strained relations with China and South Korea, stemming from protracted territorial disputes and opposing interpretations of a number of historical events, have gradually driven a “long-standing wedge” between itself and those countries. Given the unpredictability of the North Korean regime, it is not in Japan’s interest to have confrontational relations with all of its neighboring countries.

Faced with these dilemmas, Japan is forced to consider alternatives for improving its situation, including limited cooperation with China.

At the same time, China and Japan are directly competing in Southeast Asia for the right to reconstruct the ports of Sihanoukville, Cambodia, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Thilawa, Myanmar – all of which will form part of the OBOR distribution network. It also remains unclear whether the Japanese business community is willing to follow the government’s agenda. Japanese companies see far greater opportunities in a Japan–U.S. free trade agreement, in the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (even after the U.S. withdrawal), and in economic cooperation with Russia (Pollmann, 2017).

There are a number of arguments in favor of Japan’s participation in the OBOR initiative. First, although Japan and China continue to compete with each other, if Japan were to join the Chinese project, it could lead to deeper cooperation on infrastructure projects. The development of regional infrastructure is not a zero-sum game. OBOR and other similar projects could lead to mutually beneficial results, provide much-needed infrastructure, spur foreign trade, and boost economic growth.

Today, Japan provides assistance to other states for the development of infrastructure within the framework of its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure concept for which Tokyo has allocated \$110 billion over five years. In December 2016, Tokyo also announced its Japan Infrastructure Initiative that allocates \$100 billion for the development of infrastructure projects in the private sector. These projects involve the construction of power plants and railways in Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Shinzo Abe’s plans also call for connecting Africa and Asia through the implementation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (Chotani, 2017).

Some of the infrastructure projects of this type that the Japanese government finances are implemented through the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Public–private partnerships are also supported by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, the Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation for Transport and Urban Development, and Nippon Export and Investment Insurance. For example, \$8.76 billion and \$4.38 billion have already been allocated for the construction in Turkmenistan of a natural gas refinery and chemical plant, respectively, and funding has been provided for the construction of a fertilizer plant in Uzbekistan, three major railway projects in the Philippines, and a large number of economic zones in Cambodia. The ADB is implementing such projects as the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project in India, a diesel power station to supply electricity to South Andaman Island, and a high-speed railway line between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The Japanese government has also announced its readiness to invest \$5 billion in 2018–2022 in India’s East Coast Economic Corridor infrastructure development project.

Donald Trump’s preference for bilateral forms of economic cooperation might cause the U.S. to lose interest in maintaining its leading position in the ADB, thereby exposing that bank – in which Japan is one of the main shareholders – to serious risk. At a conference marking the 50th anniversary of the ADB, bank president Takehiko Nakao pointed out that it is not a very good situation when a major shareholder such as the U.S. – whose share in the bank equals that of Japan – does not have a single executive

director on the board of the bank (Flores, 2017). The ADB calculated that Asia requires \$26 trillion of investment in its infrastructure between 2016 and 2030. At present, multilateral lenders provide only 2.5 percent of Asia's infrastructure investment (Chotani, 2017). However, Nakao noted that: "[T]he financing needs are so large...we don't need to regard AIIB as a kind of rival because there is a very large need for finance, so we can cooperate" (Gutierrez, 2017).

Given the wide variety of initiatives and mechanisms in place in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan and China are clearly part of a larger Eurasian space, even as competitors. It therefore stands to reason that China can be considered a "competitive partner" to Japan. The competition between the two countries in Asia is already more than obvious (Chotani, 2017).

In fact, Japan provided support for infrastructure projects in Central and wider Eurasia even before projects in Southeast Asia became its calling card. Japan provided concessional loans and grants to the countries of the region almost immediately after they gained independence. Japan used its influence in international financial institutions to lobby for the parallel participation of the Central Asian republics in the two leading regional development banks, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, and the Asian Development Bank – an unprecedented situation. Tokyo also reckoned that the countries of the region preferred the U.S. "shock therapy" strategy of gradual reforms – an approach that coincided with the Japanese foreign policy theory of a "development state." Twin city relationships established during the Soviet period, such as that between Uzbekistan and the Fukushima Prefecture, further facilitated this process (Murashkin, 2012, p. 34, 2015a, 2015b).

According to Nikolay Murashkin, the large-scale Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program for the reconstruction of Central Asian transport that Japan began in 1996 represents a significant contribution to infrastructure cooperation in the region. Not only are the former Soviet states involved in CAREC, but also Mongolia, Pakistan, and China – including its Xinjiang autonomous region (Murashkin, 2012, p. 34, 2015a, 2015b).

Kyrgyz expert Esen Usubaliev suggests that the stepped-up U.S. military presence in Central Asia following the events of September 11, 2001, paved the way for a number of Japanese logistics-related initiatives in the region (Usubaliev, 2007). Up until the crisis in U.S.–Japanese relations in 2009, Tokyo's policy in Central Asia generally focused on promoting its own interests and "transmitting" U.S. security interests. The U.S. realized that formally consolidating its status as a country actively involved in shaping the security environment in Central Asia would inevitably lead to opposition from the SCO. In this regard, Washington would have preferred that a country friendly to it and having a relationship with the Asian region as a whole were involved in discussion and resolution of regional security issues (Usubaliev, 2008).

An additional motive for developing cooperation with Kazakhstan was to achieve its denuclearization. Kazakhstan had emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union as an independent full-cycle nuclear power with undocu-

mented and poorly guarded nuclear stockpiles. That cooperation led to a partnership on the production and supply of uranium – of particular importance considering Japan's reliance on nuclear power for generating electricity (Murashkin, 2012, p. 35).

Japan first developed the conceptual framework of its foreign policy for post-Soviet Central Asia in the second half of the 1990s. The Eurasian diplomacy doctrine that Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto introduced in 1997 made the first mention of Central Asia and the Caucasus – as well as Russia and China – as a focus of interest for Japan. Tokyo's policy toward the countries of the region was referred to as "Silk Road diplomacy" and its primary thrust included political dialogue, economic cooperation – including in the exploitation of natural resources – and the achievement of peace in the region by strengthening nuclear nonproliferation, democratization, and stability (Dobrinskaya, 2011, p. 45).

According to a former diplomat and one of the leading Japan's Russia experts Kazuhiko Togo, "Hashimoto's Eurasian diplomacy can be boiled down to a single strategic principle: to draw Russia into the Asia Pacific and introduce a new regional dynamic that would give Japan more room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis China and the United States" (Tōgō, 2014). In his "Eurasian diplomacy" doctrine, Hashimoto proposed basic principles for bilateral relations with Russia that served as the basis of many of the documents the two countries signed in ensuing years (Urzaeva & Kurmanov, 2016). According to Christopher Len, that the reason for Japan's new activism in Central Asia was its understanding that "with its small population, vast distances away from viable markets, and its land-locked geography, Central Asian states needed to deepen their level of cooperation with one another so as to create a local regional market economy. This would help lessen dependence on its export economy and provide more incentives for foreign companies to enter the region because of the bigger markets available for foreign investment. Such a regional blueprint would thus generate greater stability and wealth within the region" (Len, 2005, pp. 137–8).

Many researchers pointed out that the Japanese plan for developing Central Asian transport were essentially aimed at isolating Russia and reducing its role in the region. Such concerns are legitimate, according to Usubaliev, who contends that the real purpose of Japan's "Silk Road diplomacy" was to establish a long transport route from Asia to Europe independent of Russia. Such a route would enable the Central Asian republics to bypass Russia and gain direct access to potential trading partners interested in their enormous energy reserves. This would inevitably cause those republics to grow more distant from Russia and would shift the geopolitical orientation of the region (Usubaliev, 2013a, 2013b).

It makes sense here to explain the nature of the Chinese and Japanese approaches to the countries of the region. Despite its membership in the SCO, China eschews multilateral dialogue with Central Asia's five leading states, preferring the bilateral cooperation it considers more effective. Tokyo, however, has always emphasized the comprehensive character of Japanese policy there and its preference for working with the Central Asian region as a

whole (Usubaliev, 2013a, 2013b). Former Ambassador of Japan to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Akio Kawato argued: “With the announcement of the ‘Silk Road diplomacy’ in 1997 came the second wave of Japan’s involvement in Central Asia. By 1997, Japanese diplomats had realized the geopolitical importance of the Caucasus and Central Asia and that Japan should not fall behind in filling the vacuum in this region. They calculated that Japan’s clout there would benefit its diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, China, and the Middle East, though they could not specify what kind of concrete benefit would be brought about” (Kawato, 2008, p. 17).

Nevertheless, Japan’s hopes did not pan out for Central Asian integration and the establishment of relations with the region as a whole. The Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC), founded as far back as 1994, proved ineffective as a mechanism for interaction. The rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for regional leadership, unresolved border disputes, and trade and economic disagreements doomed almost all of the integration processes in the region to failure (Usubaliev, 2009). On the whole, however, Central Asia turned out to be a convenient partner for Tokyo. Central Asia held Japan in high regard, and Tokyo pursued pragmatic cooperation with the republics of the region (Murashkin, 2015a, 2015b). Although in its “home” Asia-Pacific region Japan plays a role similar to that of Israel in the Middle East – neighboring countries, while disliking it, respect it and acknowledge that Japan is a leader of the Asian community – the general populations and political elite of all Central Asian states hold a very favorable view of Japan (Usubaliev, 2017).

In hindsight, “Hashimoto’s Eurasian doctrine” did not live up to the high hopes it engendered in the world community. Never a fully developed concept, the doctrine was purely public and declarative in nature. The fact that the doctrine was only meant to gain greater substance over time might indicate that Japan was reluctant to take on overly concrete commitments.

There were also expectations that the doctrine would pave the way for new Japanese projects and concepts for Central Asia. Instead, observers expressed justifiable doubts, arguing that it was too early for initiatives to develop the transport of Central Asian energy resources given the lack of markets for the region’s oil and gas. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 put the future of those programs as a whole in doubt. The murder of a Japanese UN observer and political advisor in Tajikistan on the eve of Hashimoto’s retirement cast a pall over Eurasian diplomacy in general (Usubaliev, 2013a, 2013b).

Japan began rethinking its approach to Central Asia in the early 2000s, with the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, playing a major role in that change. Tokyo took the unprecedented step of assisting the anti-terrorist coalition and served as a leader in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. Implementing these plans required strengthening relations with the states of Central Asia, three of which border Afghanistan (Dobrinckaya, 2011, p. 45).

The above reasons, coupled with a number of domestic events, caused Japan’s cooperation with Central Asia to progress slowly. However, a staffing change occurred in the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s Central Asia department in 2003. The new management wanted to improve ties and Japa-

nese diplomats in the region began unofficially discussing the idea of a Central Asian organization along the lines of ASEAN. As a result, Japan’s cooperation with the countries of the region was institutionalized in the form of a “Central Asia + Japan” dialogue (hereafter – “the Dialogue”). This was formally established after former Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoriko Kawaguchi visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in August 2004. This format could function without requiring regular approval of the Cabinet. Tokyo also considered joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but concluded that Japan would invariably wind up “in the minority” among the key SCO members (Rakhimov, 2014, pp. 83–5).

The first Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (FMM) was held in August 2004 in Astana. It concluded with the adoption of a joint declaration pronouncing basic principles of that dialogue: respect for diversity, competition and interaction, and open cooperation. Addressing both democratic values and demonstrating respect for country-specific approaches aligned with the Japanese Silk Road diplomacy of the 1990s (“Joint Statement ‘Central Asia + Japan’ Dialogue/Foreign Ministers’ Meeting—Relations between Japan and Central Asia as They Enter a New Era,” 2004; Murashkin, 2012, p. 41).

Russian expert Olga Dobrinckaya notes that, in contrast to the doctrine of Hashimoto, this new initiative focused on the Central Asian countries to the exclusion of the South Caucasus, thereby enhancing the significance of the former as an independent entity and tacitly acknowledging that Tokyo had only limited opportunities for developing relations with the latter. At the same time, it gave Tokyo a platform for discussing not only economic but also political and security issues with the countries of the region (Dobrinckaya, 2011, p. 46).

Statements that Akio Kawato made during an academic event organized by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins University in April 2007 could shed additional light on the possible goals and objectives Japan was pursuing in establishing the Dialogue. Commenting on the format, Kawato described it as an open structure that welcomes the participation of all interested states, as opposed to the operating principles of the SCO that he criticized as a “closed structure” designed to neutralize the influence of Japan and Western countries in Central Asia. Kawato went on to suggest that Central Asia should create a pan-Asian organization operating on the same principles as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In his opinion, that would help unite the “Central Asia + Japan” dialogue, the SCO, and other regional organizations in a broader regional structure.

The second Meeting of Foreign Ministers was held in June 2006 in the spirit of the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” concept mentioned above. Representatives of Afghanistan also attended that meeting in connection with a discussion of achieving that country’s reconstruction and building the “southern route” through its territory. The main result of that summit was the adoption of an Action Plan that more clearly formulated objectives and five areas of cooperation: political dialogue and interaction between Japan and the Central Asian countries in the international arena, regional cooperation, and the development of business,

cultural, and humanitarian exchanges (Dobrinskaya, 2011, pp. 46–7).

The original plan of the Dialogue called for a Meeting of Foreign Ministers every two years. However, the third Meeting of Foreign Ministers only took place in August 2010 in Tashkent. The participants of that meeting summed up the results of the Action Plan adopted at the previous meeting, discussed the current political and economic situation in the region and set priorities for cooperation. As was noted, since the Dialogue began, a great deal has been accomplished in areas of interest to all participating countries. This includes progress toward resolving regional security and stability issues, combating drug trafficking, and integrating the economies of the region through the establishment of economic ties. A wide range of issues was discussed, including the improvement of human welfare in the region, the fight against extremism, the ecological rehabilitation of the Aral Sea region, interaction on transport and hydropower, and participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Belyalov, 2011).

The fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers was held in Tokyo in November 2012. Representatives of the participating countries confirmed their interest in deepening regional cooperation as a means of ensuring the stability and sustained development of the region. The meeting ended with the heads of the delegations signing a joint declaration establishing a new partnership between Japan and Central Asia in which the sides identified priorities for further cooperation. The Japanese side announced projects valued at \$700 million to promote regional cooperation (“4-e Soveshchanie ministrov inostrannykh del stran-uchastnits Dialoga ‘Tsentral’naya Aziya+Yaponiya’”).

However, the materials of the fifth Meeting of Foreign Ministers held in July 2014 offer little to suggest that this forum achieved anything of substance during the 10 years of its existence. At this meeting, Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida identified the basic course for cooperation for the next 10 years as using Japanese experience and technology to develop the agriculture sector of the Central Asian economy. A road map for regional cooperation on agriculture was also adopted. Particular emphasis was given to the fight against drug trafficking and the control of states’ borders in the region. The foreign ministers of Central Asia’s leading five states expressed their gratitude to Japan for providing their border authorities with inspection equipment and for establishing offices for border cooperation (Sovmestnoye zayavleniye 5-go soveshchaniya ministrov inostrannykh del Dialoga “Tsentral’naya Aziya+Yaponiya ‘Novoe desyatiletie vzaimovygodnogo sotrudnichestva mezhdru stranamy tsentral’noy Azii i Yaponiei’, 2017). The launch of the Japanese JDS Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship and the Project to Improve Road Maintenance in the Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Talas regions was announced (Alekseenkova, 2017).

The sixth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Central Asia and Japan, held on May 1, 2017, in Ashgabat, is of particular interest because it took place after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s tour of Central Asia and approximately one month prior to his official announcement that Tokyo might participate in the OBOR project. Summit participants summed up the results of Turkmenistan’s

chairmanship and identified new promising areas of regional cooperation. In this context, participants expressed their appreciation to the government of Japan for its wide-ranging support of Central Asian countries’ efforts to achieve sustainable development and address socio-economic problems. It was noted that the 2015 tour of Central Asia by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe marked the beginning of a qualitatively new stage of friendship and mutual trust between Central Asia and Japan. The meeting concluded with the signing of a Joint Declaration of the Sixth Meeting of Foreign Ministers and a Road Map for Regional Cooperation on Transport and Logistics (“Chūō Ajia purasu Nihon taiwa no wakugumi ni yoru un’yu butsurūyū bun’ya chiiki kyōryoku rōdo mappu,” 2018; “Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida Attends the Sixth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting of the ‘Central Asia plus Japan’ Dialogue, 2017).

The most important agenda items of that meeting included regional security, the fight against terrorism, and working for the normalization of the situation in Afghanistan. The diplomats noted that issues of stability, peace, and security are of paramount importance for all states. The Central Asian countries strongly and unequivocally condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, emphasized the need to take practical measures to combat extremism, drug trafficking, and arms trafficking, and stated their readiness to work together in these areas at both the bilateral and multilateral levels.

In this connection, it is worth noting that, for the past three years, Japanese experts have made a serious study of terrorist organizations, ethnic minorities, and the spread of religious extremism in Central Asia. Japan is willing to share the results of that study with interested countries and provide other forms of assistance in the fight against terrorism (Usubaliev, 2017).

In discussing the need to improve the business environment, investment in infrastructure, and the training of personnel, meeting participants spoke highly of the initiative that Shinzo Abe proposed in 2015 to “export high quality infrastructure in Asia.” Participants noted the significant potential of regional cooperation with Japanese corporations in the building of infrastructure for disaster prevention, as well as in road systems and the introduction of new technologies in social and communications-related projects. Agriculture was reaffirmed as a promising area of cooperation in addition to transport and logistics.

Meeting participants discussed issues of cultural and humanitarian cooperation. They noted that the exchange of artistic groups and scholarly/scientific ideas bring people together and that they are the most visible and effective way to deepen friendship between them. Ministers also expressed their appreciation to the government of Japan for its decision to ease visa requirements for citizens of Central Asian countries, making it possible to strengthen cultural and humanitarian contacts.

At the meeting’s close, the Ministers emphasized that during the 25 years since the Central Asian countries and Japan had established diplomatic relations, the political dialogue had strengthened significantly, and trade and economic as well as cultural and humanitarian ties had expanded. The seventh Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Dialogue will be held next year in Dushanbe (“MID TsA i

Yaponii podpisali ryad dokumentov o sotrudnichestve v raznykh sferakh," 2018).

Russian expert Elena Alekseenkova notes that of all the formats used in Central Asia, the "5 + 1" dialogue with Japan has reached the most developed and active phase. In addition to the Meeting of Foreign Ministers, that Dialogue includes several other formats such as the Meeting of Senior Officials (MSO), the Intellectual Dialogue (a.k.a. the "Tokyo Dialogue"), the Meeting of Experts, and the Exchange between Foreign Ministries.

The fact that former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry used the "5 + 1" format during his tour of Central Asia provides proof of its effectiveness. During his visit to Samarkand, he met for the first time with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, formalizing that event with the signing of the "Samarkand Declaration." It is generally held that the first meeting in the "C5+1" format marked the beginning of multilateral cooperation between the U.S. and the five leading Central Asian states and that several working groups on specific areas of cooperation will be created during subsequent meetings (Alekseenkova, 2017).

As Japan expands its presence in Central Asia, it also relies on its interactions with players outside the region. In this context it is worth noting that, in its activities in Central Asia, Japan is just beginning to cooperate with Turkey – another major player in that part of Eurasia. Although Japan does not maintain particularly active relations with Turkey, the two have traditionally been friendly owing to certain historical circumstances: in 1890, the Japanese helped rescue sailors from a Turkish warship that had been on a diplomatic mission to Japan and had become caught in a storm after leaving Yokohama; Turkish Airlines helped evacuate Japanese citizens from Tehran during the Iran–Iraq war; and Japanese rescue workers helped in the aftermath of an earthquake in Turkey in 1999. Japanese interest in Turkey also stems from Tokyo's policy toward China: Japanese ethnographers take an active interest in the issues of pan-Turkism and conduct related research in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Such studies touch on the standing of the Uyghur community, a sensitive issue for China. Japan is also home to offices of the World Uyghur Congress, a matter of some irritation to Beijing (Usubaliev, 2017).

If Ankara and Tokyo were to join forces in Central Asia, it could facilitate Japan's cooperation with the region and enable it to share some of Turkey's areas of responsibility there. Japan and Turkey have held periodic consultations since 2000 on issues concerning the stability and development of Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Examples also exist of Turkish and Japanese companies and consortiums working on joint energy and logistics projects. Thus, Tokyo would reduce its risk by cooperating with Turkey as a kind of "pilot" in the region and as one of the few countries enjoying relatively privileged relations with Turkmenistan – although the Japanese–Turkish tandem would prove useful in other countries of the region also.

The Mitsubishi Corporation and Calyk Holding have worked since October 2016 on the construction of the Turakurgan thermal power station in Uzbekistan;

the Japanese IHI company worked in 2001 with the Turkish Alsim Alarko company to put up a suspension bridge in Semey (Semipalatinsk) in East Kazakhstan; and Turkey partners with Japan in promoting its educational projects.

Thus, according to Iskander Alykbaev and Nikolay Murashkin, beyond the traditional emphasis on the export of technology, infrastructure, and capital in the development of diplomacy in Central Asia, there are signs that Central Asia is becoming a larger region that includes not only countries of Northeast Asia but also those of the southwestern subregion of Greater Eurasia (Turkey) (Alykbaev & Murashkin, 2017).

India, another key player in the Eurasian space whose interests are affected by the Chinese OBOR project, is also the strongest opponent of that infrastructure project spanning the entire continent. India's attitude to the OBOR project has changed over time and turned hostile once China revealed its intentions concerning the subcontinent and the area around the Indian Ocean. India stated that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor – the flagship project of the OBOR initiative – would pass through territory that India considers its own. However, Delhi was even more upset over Beijing's unwillingness to agree to its request to hold consultations on the objectives, nature, and funding of the initiative. The construction of ports and roads with Chinese manpower and financing has driven many countries into debt, with Sri Lanka the hardest hit. According to Indian commentators, those states suffer from exorbitant interest rates, corruption in the ranks of the political leadership, and from attempts to influence their foreign policy when their governments are bound hand and foot by debt. The plan for the land-based OBOR projects is very revealing: in almost every instance, they link the participants with China, but only rarely with each other ("India has its reasons to boycott China's Belt Road Initiative," 2017). As the only country in Southeast Asia that deliberately ignores the OBOR initiative, India risks gradually isolating itself in the region. After Shinzo Abe's declaration regarding the Chinese initiative, Delhi began viewing Japan as if it were collaborating with the enemy (Muhshi, 2017).

As for the U.S.–Japan–Australia–India format proposed by Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Taro Kono and mentioned in the first part of this article, it is worth noting that similar attempts made earlier have shown that Delhi is not very inclined to abandon its strategy of non-alignment and would probably look for ways to coordinate its actions with Washington independently – especially because U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has made several statements indicating that the idea of the format originated with him. For example, in his speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., he stated that the United States has begun exploring alternatives to the Chinese infrastructure projects in Asia and is considering the aforementioned countries as potential partners (Brunnstrom & Landay, 2017).

As for Russia, according to Alykbaev and Murashkin, there are more advantages than disadvantages to Japan's participation in the Central Asian processes. Whereas 10 years ago in the mid-2000s, the Japanese leadership tried to use its ties with Central Asia as a counterbalance to the growing regional influence of Russia and China, today Shinzo Abe

is well-disposed toward Russia and has even proposed that Russia and Japan cooperate on the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism on the Tajik-Afghan border. These experts point out that the southern route of the OBOR project – that Russia supports – in many cases coincides with the corridor that was already proposed by the CAREC program. In addition, Ankara and Delhi are important partners not only for Japan in the region but also for Russia. The diversification of lenders, donors, and economic partners in the region reduces the risk that Central Asia will fall into the Chinese debt trap. This benefits Russia, which is concerned about the excessive growth of Chinese economic influence in the region (Alykbaev & Murashkin, 2017).

With regard to Japan's interest in working with Russia, including in Central Asia, Russian expert Dmitri Trenin argues that stronger ties with Japan could provide greater balance to Russia's "pivot to Asia" policy. Conversely, having more stable relations with Russia would enable Japan to strengthen its foreign policy. It is in Tokyo's interest to convince its U.S. ally of the need to isolate Russian-Japanese relations from the overall Russian-U.S. confrontation (Trenin, 2015).

## Conclusions

Japan's Eurasia policy is inconsistent and is likely to remain so because the cause behind it remains unchanged – that is, the contradiction between Japan's actual economic interests and its willingness to follow in the ideological and geopolitical footsteps of the U.S. It has been noted that Japan "aims to use its distance from this region to gain a competitive advantage (when compared to other countries like China and Russia): it attempts to position itself as a neutral mediator for CA states by suggesting that its distant geographic location prevents it from dominating and exploiting CA states" (Dadabaev, 2018, p. 33). This view is shared by the Japanese scholars who believe that "Japan has been conducting its diplomacy independently of the United States, and has sometimes indirectly cooperated with China in Central Asia" and even call them successful in avoiding being tossed by turbulent world politics (Uyama, 2017; Uyama, 2008, pp. 101–20). However, Japan's official use of the Western language of "universal values," "democracy," "market economy," "human rights", etc shows that it does not develop its own norms and is generally promoting US-supported policies and models, although in a more gradual and cautious way, encouraging evolutionary changes (Azizov, 2011, p. 59). This creates a view that Japan is "providing financial aid in exchange for access to raw materials and in American interests as part of burden-sharing within its alliance with the United States" or that Japanese cooperation with Central Asia "may appear as expansion of neoliberal practices to post-communist newly-independent states" (although some authors describe such views as misperceptions) (Murashkin, 2015, p. 53).

It seems that the path Japan takes in the future will largely depend on the economic results of the implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, its linkage with the plans of the Eurasian Economic Union, progress of Russian-Chinese cooperation, and the project of Greater Eurasian partnership put forward by Russia and sup-

ported by China. If the economic projects of Eurasia's non-Western players prove effective, Tokyo will be more tempted to cooperate with them despite its close ties with the U.S. An illustrative example in this regard could be the decision by many EU member states to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank created by China despite opposition from Washington. However, if Eurasia's non-Western states, and particularly China, are overly active with their foreign policy and militaries in the Asia Pacific, it will push Tokyo to create a variety of structures that would curb and serve as a political counterbalance to Chinese and Russian influence. Such moves might also prove interesting to China's Eurasian neighbors that already view cooperation with Japan as an alternative to their growing economic political dependence on Beijing – or at least as one means of diversifying their foreign policy and foreign economic ties. China remains a far closer and influential partner for most Central Asian countries, as well as for Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Japan's image in Eurasia may become stronger and its position – more proactive if Japan distances itself politically and ideologically from the US and its European allies and departs from promoting universal values (perceived as Western in this region) toward economic growth, political stability and secularism (concepts popular among Central Asian leaders and elites), thus providing a counterbalance to the growing influence of Russia and China but without being viewed as an agent of the US. However, taking into consideration Japan's current political ideology and its dependency on the security alliance with Washington, the chances of such a change are rather faint. Therefore, the potential role of Japan in this region that is relatively distant from its shores should not be exaggerated.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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