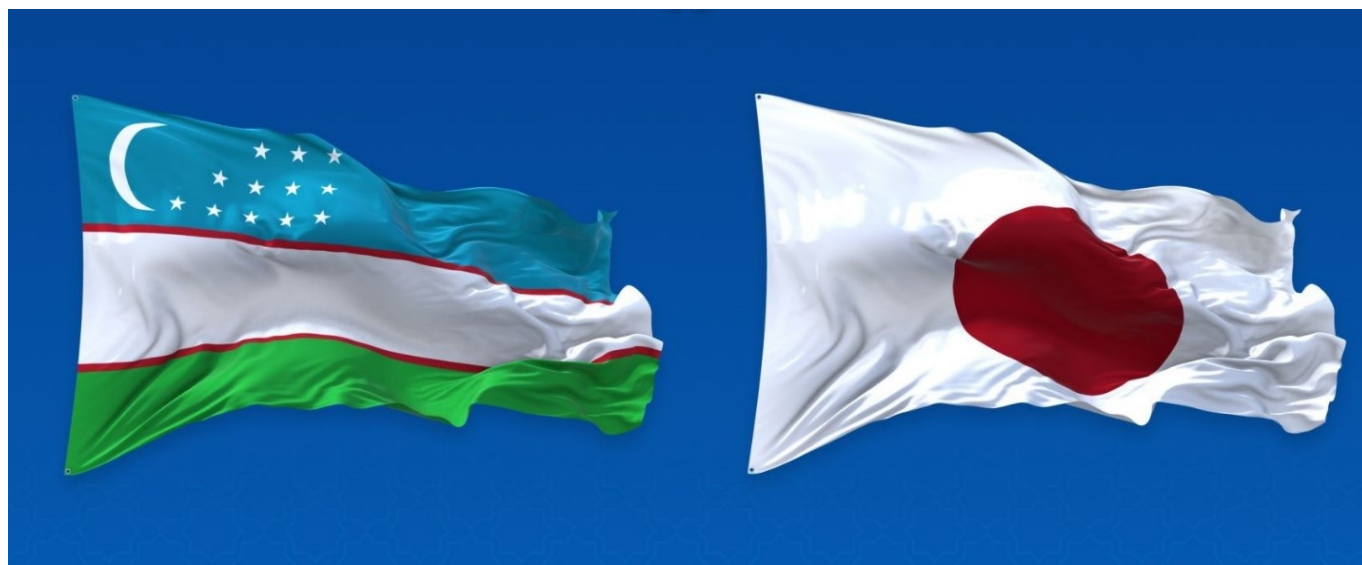


# Strategic Partnership between Central Asia and Japan in New Conditions



On December 18-20, 2025, a landmark event in the history of relations between Central Asia and Japan will take place in Tokyo – the first summit of heads of state in the "Central Asia + Japan" format. This meeting will constitute a significant milestone that will open a new chapter in the strategic partnership and provide a powerful impetus to multifaceted cooperation between the region and one of the world's leading economies. It should be noted that the upcoming summit coincides with the 20th anniversary of the "Central Asia + Japan" dialogue, established in 2004.

Today, the Land of the Rising Sun prioritizes the comprehensive and mutually beneficial development of relations with CA states. The recognition of the region's strategic significance is also reflected in Japan's "Diplomatic Bluebook" for 2023, where Central Asia is designated as one of the most important foreign policy directions.

This development is driven by the constructive foreign policy course of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which initiated a qualitatively new stage of consolidation in Central Asia. This pragmatic political line has not only strengthened the region's role as an independent actor on the international stage but also created favorable conditions for systemic collective work to neutralize regional threats.

Contemporary Central Asia is a space for the implementation of major interstate projects (trade, transport, energy) characterized by a dynamic influx of foreign investment and active interaction with global institutions. Consequently, we are witnessing a manifold increase in the region's geopolitical significance, attracting close attention from world powers.

For their part, Central Asian states view Japan as a strategically significant partner whose substantial participation is critically important for strengthening regional stability and ensuring sustainable economic development. This position is underpinned by several key factors:

First, since the early days of independence of Central Asian countries, Japan has supported their economic development through the implementation of infrastructure projects and effective cooperation within international organizations and financial structures such as the OECD, EBRD, ADB, and CAREC, as well as through large-scale infrastructure initiatives. Japanese participation has covered virtually all key sectors – from water supply and sewage systems to airports, thermal power stations, and railways. Assistance also extended to the reconstruction of schools, equipping hospitals with medical equipment, and training specialists in the spheres of business and agriculture.

Second, a key distinction of Japanese policy in the region is that Tokyo relies on principles of equality, mutual respect, and consideration of partners' interests, without imposing unsubstantiated political conditions. This approach has created an atmosphere of trust towards Japan as a "distant neighbor without hidden intentions," whose participation is perceived not as a striving for dominance, but as a sincere desire to facilitate the region's sovereign development.

Third, Japan's scientific and technological base, which is arguably considered one of the leading in the world, represents particular value in current realities. Given the reforms underway in Central Asian countries to modernize the economy and transition it to an innovative track, Japanese experience and technologies acquire paramount importance. This involves not only technology transfer but also a comprehensive transfer of knowledge, including personnel training, the creation of an institutional environment, and the formation of an innovation culture. In this context, it is important to note that Japan is the largest provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in Central Asia, directing its efforts toward modernizing state institutions, developing infrastructure, and creating a favorable business environment. Over the years of cooperation, Japan has implemented numerous projects covering reforms oriented toward promoting a market economy, democratic governance, and improving education and healthcare systems. However, the most impressive aspect of the Japanese approach is the emphasis on human resources as the foundation of long-term development. Training programs in Japanese centers in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have covered everything from business fundamentals to Japanese management. Within the framework of the Young Leaders Program, as of 2024, 911 specialists have undergone training at Japanese universities. Today, these graduates contribute to deepening ties between Japan and CA countries, ensuring the continuity of the strategic course.

Fourth, Japan became the first major power to recognize Central Asia as a space requiring a comprehensive approach. Back in 2004, Tokyo launched the initiative to create the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue format, facilitating regional cooperation and the independent development of CA. The foresight of this approach lay in its intentional flexibility; each meeting was oriented toward solving specific issues – from border management and water resources to ensuring economic diversification and regional security. All this took place without cumbersome obligations or rigid treaty structures. This model proved so effective that it was subsequently adopted by other global players, including the European Union, South Korea, the USA, China, and Russia. The success of the Japanese initiative confirms the correctness of the chosen strategy, which is aimed at the practical solution of specific tasks while respecting the sovereignty of the region's states.

Based on the foregoing, prospective directions for the further development of interaction between Central Asian countries and Japan may include:

First, the advancement of common interests and initiatives within international organizations. Over the years of cooperation, a solid practice of mutual support within the UN has been established. Specifically, Uzbekistan has supported Japan's candidacy for membership in various UN structures more than 40 times. In turn, Tokyo supported Uzbekistan's candidacy for election to the UN Human Rights Council for 2021-2023, as well as Samarkand as the venue for the 25th session of the UNWTO General Assembly in 2023. Moreover, the Japanese side joined as a co-sponsor of 5 UN General Assembly resolutions initiated by Uzbekistan regarding regional issues ("Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia," "Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region," "Declaring the Aral Sea region a zone of ecological innovations and technologies," "Strengthening the role of parliaments in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals"). Japan also provides assistance in implementing regional initiatives of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. In particular, projects on cross-border cooperation aimed at combating drug trafficking and transnational organized crime and strengthening cooperation in the field of border control have been implemented with its participation. Attracting Japan's advanced knowledge, technical potential, and financial resources to the activities of the UN Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea

region is also of interest. Incidentally, Japan took an active part in the development of this initiative.

Second, transport connectivity. The geo-strategic location of Central Asia at the "junction" of Europe and Asia makes the region attractive regarding transport and logistics capabilities. Interaction in forming an extensive transport-communication system will allow for the full realization of Central Asia's transit potential, considering that by 2050, global demand for freight transport is estimated by the UN to triple. This trend is a direct challenge for the landlocked countries of Central Asia, exacerbated by the fact that maritime logistics has remained a key element of world trade for centuries. According to statistical data, maritime transport currently accounts for over 80% of global trade volume. Moreover, the share of transport costs in Central Asian states reaches up to 50% of the final cost of goods, which is almost 5 times higher than the global average of 11%. Against this background, close interaction between CA countries and Japan in the construction and modernization of railways and highways, digitalization of customs points, and creation of logistics centers acquires special relevance, which will allow for the most complete disclosure of Central Asia's transport and transit potential.

Third, cooperation in the field of critical mineral resources. CA concentrates 39% of the world's manganese ore reserves, 31% of chromium, 20% of lead, 13% of zinc, and 9% of titanium. Close cooperation with CA countries will allow Japan to diversify sources of mineral resources and prevent supply chain disruptions. According to open sources, in 2022 alone, Japan imported rare earth metals worth 628 million dollars. Accordingly, attracting quality investments and modern Japanese technologies into the deep processing of the resource base with the creation of a full value-added chain will become an important criterion for ensuring the accelerated development of CA.

Fourth, combating climate change. Central Asia is among the regions most vulnerable to the negative consequences of climate change. Specifically, according to World Bank estimates, if the average global temperature rises by 4 degrees Celsius by the end of the 21st century while maintaining current rates, the rise in CA will amount to 7 degrees. As a result, prerequisites are created for compromising the integrity of natural dams of 300 high-mountain lakes. According to specialists' calculations, with a rise in average annual temperature of 2-4 degrees, the volume of mountain glaciers in the region could decrease by up to 78%. Given the above, the provision of Japanese technologies in the sphere of energy efficiency, water conservation, and renewable energy will contribute to strengthening CA's resilience. Japan is already actively investing in the clean and renewable energy sector, recognizing the critical role the region's natural resources play in the global supply chain for green technologies. Of particular interest is the Japanese experience in developing applications using radar satellites for disaster monitoring, as well as strict standards for earthquake-resistant construction, which is critically important for this seismically active region. These technologies can save thousands of lives and prevent colossal economic damage.

Fifth, establishing cooperation on poverty reduction. Today, Central Asia is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. According to UN data, by 2030, the region's population will reach 100 million people, which enhances its significance from the perspective of a consumer market. In this context, the issue of creating new jobs is actualized, necessitating the continuation of the "One Village, One Product" program initiated in 2017 in Central Asian countries with JICA's assistance.

As political and social stability in Central Asia strengthens, the nature of Japanese participation evolves from traditional development aid to more complex, technologically oriented projects. The role of JICA, which was the primary instrument for promoting Japanese cooperation, is gradually being complemented by the participation of institutions such as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), supporting larger-scale commercial projects. An example of this new dynamic in relations is the memorandum of understanding between JBIC and the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan, as well as the growing cooperation of companies like Sojitz Corporation in high-tech sectors. Such a transformation of aid illustrates a transition to a more advanced and mutually beneficial partnership, where Japanese companies not only assist but also become full-fledged participants in the region's economic development.

In general, the qualitatively new stage of regional cooperation observed in Central Asia has served as a powerful catalyst for activating the Central Asian vector of Japan's foreign policy. In these conditions, the region continues to demonstrate openness to equal and mutually beneficial partnership, and Japan is ready to expand its participation in its development. Central Asia today is an active subject of international relations, capable of formulating its own agenda and choosing partners based on national interests. Undoubtedly, the upcoming summit on December 19-20 of this year in Tokyo will become a platform for defining "untouched" horizons of cooperation and will create all prerequisites for opening a new page of strategic partnership between Central Asia and Japan in modern conditions.



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