

Article

## “Central Asia Plus Japan” Dialogue: From Idea to Implementation

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To date, the issue of multilateral cooperation between Japan and Central Asian countries has not been widely covered by the international academic community. Indeed, the absence of this particular research casts doubt on the existence of initial publications about the presence of a full-fledged Japanese foreign policy strategy in Central Asia. Nowadays, in a narrow sense, the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue is the only dialogue platform between Japan and Central Asia. The dialogue is also a unique example of how Japan and the Central Asian republics cooperate on critical issues of the regional and international agenda.

The present article is aimed at evaluating the current role of the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue from the Japanese perspective. The goal is to examine the activities of the dialogue from 2004 to 2018, starting with key stages in the formation of Japanese strategy towards Central Asia (1991–2018), including those that led to the creation of the dialogue.

Constructivism is the primary theoretical framework used in this thesis, drawing on the sub-theory of “conference diplomacy” for a more in-depth analysis of the dialogue as a communication mechanism. The research questions were answered by the author using discourse analysis and desk research of relevant documents belonging to the dialogue, including speeches, presentations and outcome documents. In addition, the author conducted several interviews with former officials and scholars who directly participated in the dialogue’s formation.

The uniqueness of the present work lies in the fact that the case of the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue has not been considered before in such detail. This study helps reveal the essence of the dialogue, including its principles and *modus operandi*. The author also could trace the process of the transformation of the dialogue and its perception from the Japanese perspective. Through this, the author found specific “norms” which guide the multilateral nature of Central Asia–Japan cooperation.

**Keywords:** “Central Asia+Japan” Dialogue, Central Asia, Japanese Diplomacy, Japanese Foreign Policy, Conference Diplomacy

### Introduction.

Currently, Japan’s foreign policy is undergoing a noticeable upsurge. After 2012, the incumbent Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe has primarily revived the political and academic debate on the further role of the Japanese foreign strategy. Even though Abe mainly focused on Japan’s closest allies and neighbors, including the United States (US), China (PRC), Russia, North and South Korea, and Southeast Asia, his efforts led to the expansion of Japanese diplomacy in other essential directions. Central Asia, which is located between Russia and the PRC, is not the last in this process. In October 2015, Abe became the first Prime Minister in the modern history of Japan, who visited all five countries of the region. During his speech at the Nazarbayev University,

in Kazakhstan, Abe proclaimed new messages that aimed at further development of Central Asia–Japan cooperation, i.e.: (1) “drastic” strengthening of relations; (2) Japan’s active involvement in efforts to address universal for the region challenges; (3) deepening partnership in the global arena (2015). At the same time, speaking about the role of Japanese initiative—the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue (after this–dialogue)—Abe pointed out that Tokyo would continue to play the role of a catalyst in this process. However, it must be admitted that the assessment and forecasts regarding the further role of Japan in the region are impossible without a comprehensive analysis of the current volume of multilateral cooperation.

The first official strategy of Japan on Central Asia appeared in 1997 under the administration of Ryutaro Hashimoto, who initiated the launch of so-called Eurasian diplomacy. Moreover, Hashimoto (1997) also dubbed the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus as the “Silk Road region” and identified three key pillars of Japan’s cooperation with the region, namely: (1) development of a political dialogue; (2) economic cooperation; (3) interaction for peace. Despite the serious differences in assessing the goals and objectives of the strategy, this step helped to consolidate the importance of the Central Asian effect in Japan’s foreign policy.

The new strategic direction was further developed under the administration of Junichiro Koizumi, mainly thanks to the efforts of his Foreign Ministers, Yoriko Kawaguchi and Taro Aso; the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Akira Amari; and other politicians. During her visit to Central Asia in the summer of 2004, Kawaguchi initiated the creation of the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue, which is still viewed by many experts as an important element of Japanese engagement into regional affairs. In August 2019, this initiative will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary, which demonstrates its important role and longevity in the process of building Central Asia–Japan partnership. Moreover, a number of experts (Tanaka, 2018; Kawato, 2018; Starr 2017) believe that the dialogue had played a unique historical role for Central Asia as a prototype for posterior dialogue platforms with the Republic of Korea (ROK), the European Union (EU), and other international partners. Accordingly, the dialogue acts as “knowledge,” which Central Asian countries use today in their diplomatic craft.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that many of the works devoted to the dialogue are related to its initial stage. There were significant changes in Japanese domestic politics, namely the change of the ruling parties in 2009 and 2012, which to some extent affected Japan’s foreign policy. Despite such peripeteia, the dialogue continued to function and produce informative documents that have not been completely studied until now. From time to time, independent authors have used fragments of the dialogue-related activities in their publications, which, by-turn, only lead to a limited and sometimes subjective evaluation of the process.

With this article, the author intends to demonstrate an important facet of Japan’s relations with Central Asia, i.e. to reveal the essence of Tokyo’s multilateral approach. In fact, the author scrutinizes the content of the multilateral cooperation between Japan and Central Asia and already existing outcomes. As a result, the author attempts to assess activities and transformation of the dialogue since its inception in 2004. Based on Kaufman’s “Conference diplomacy” (1996), the author has attempted to understand the structural changes in the framework of the dialogue and relate it to relevant domestic and international events, while clearly defining the principles, norms, and identities that determine and influence Japan’s multilateral stance on Central Asia. The study is built on the following research questions: 1) What lies behind the idea of creating a dialogue? 2) What is the role of the dialogue in the Japanese foreign policy? 3) What are the unique features of the dialogue? Is the dialogue a capable platform for communication between Japan and the region?

Further, after reviewing all previously published documents about the dialogue, the author analyses the formation and launch of the dialogue, based on multilateral cooperation between Japan and Central Asia. Next, comes a detailed overview of dialogue’s structure and its content. After receiving specific empirical data, the author proceeds to an analysis of the dialogue and its strengths and weaknesses.

## 1. Theoretical framework and literature review

At present, there are many academic and analytical publications devoted to political, economic, military and even ideological aspects of Japan's foreign policy. Thanks to the efforts of individual authors, Central Asia occupies its unique place in the study of Japanese diplomacy and its basic approaches and values. The main flow of these publications related to the perception of the Central Asian vector through the prism of Japan's relations with Russia, the PRC, the US and the EU. In this context, the reader can imagine the role of Central Asia in Japan's foreign policy strategy, as well as learn about further cooperation opportunities. Thanks to such authors as Dadabaev (2014, 2016), Kawato (2008), Komatsu (2004), Len (2008), Uyama (2008), Tsunozaki (2007), Yuasa (2007, 2008), and others, readers can become well informed about Japanese political and economic interests in the Central Asian region and familiarize themselves with those unique strategies and methods that Tokyo employs to achieve its goals in Central Asia.

Almost all authors stressed the role of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue, which was created three years after the 9/11 events. At the same time, the analysis of these publications shows that the detailed assessment of the dialogue's activities was carried out only at the initial stage of the forum's creation. The authors were most interested in the transformation of Japanese foreign policy in Central Asia in the early 2000s, as well as the choice of the current form of the dialogue. Such authors also make frequent comparisons between the dialogue and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which, unfortunately, do not consider such critical criteria as their legal status, membership, founding documents, and organizational structure.

Yuasa (2007) indicates in his work several unique factors that significantly contributed to the formation of the dialogue's ideas through early attempts of the Hashimoto administration to develop a multilateral approach towards Central Asia. Former Japanese Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Kawato (2008), also contributed to the description of the dialogue's creation based on his memories. In addition, he identified several important factors, e.g. the lack of support from the side of the Prime Minister's Office and the National Diet, which resulted in the dialogue's low profile. Contrariwise, the former Japanese Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Toshio Tsunozaki (2007), gives an exceptionally positive impression of his participation in the launch of the dialogue. Another author, Len (2008), identified a year of dialogue's establishment as a starting point for a new period in Central Asia-Japan relationship. At the same time, Len raises critical issues in front of readers that can indicate the dialogue's possible politicization and its deliberate inefficiency. On the other hand, Uyama (2008) highlights the importance of the dialogue and the non-confrontational efforts of the Government of Japan towards Central Asia. Dadabaev (2014) also pays considerable attention to the process of the dialogue's formation. He is one of those rare authors, who argue about the direct link between the dialogue and other multilateral dialogue mechanisms in Japanese diplomatic practice. However, he avoided detailed comparison or in-depth study of such platforms. In his other work, on the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, Dadabaev (2016) provides a detailed analysis of numerous strategies and initiatives that Japan successfully use in the region. Curiously, this time the author mentions the dialogue less frequently; briefly covering it during the comparison of China/Japan foreign policy approaches and Japanese assessments of possible water-related inter-action in Central Asia. Among young researchers, who showed great interest in this initiative, it is worth to mention the doctoral thesis of Mahmudov (2017) that covers the dialogue analysis in a broader sense, based on interviews with direct participants of the dialogue meetings. At the same time, the author takes a critical stance on the dialogue's expediency.

The use of constructivism as a theoretical framework makes it possible to reveal behavior, beliefs, practices and values of Japan and the Central Asian nations in the framework of a specific initiative with high geopolitical contour. Therefore, the academic community obtain additional data on the identities of Japan and the Central Asian countries, as well as norms that identify their behavior in the framework of a joint multilateral platform.

During the interviews with numerous participants of the dialogue's creation, including Kawaguchi, Tanaka, Kawato and others, the Japanese speakers repeatedly noted that the idea of the dialogue was built on the basis of Japan's fruitful cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a model close to ASEAN Plus Three (after this-APT) format. The author was also interested to know how Japanese experts see the Japanese role in the framework of the APT and Japan's relations with the Association.

A concept of the conference diplomacy regime for ASEAN was first proposed in 2003 by the Japanese author Sato in his book, "The ASEAN Regime: Development and Challenges of the ASEAN Foreign Policies." Other scholars of ASEAN-Japan relations also supported this approach. This new approach, based on the original idea of "conference diplomacy" (Kaufman, 1996) and its posterior applications, was applied for Central Asia-Japan studies for the first time. To avoid inaccuracies during the research process, the author relied exclusively on original Japanese documents, using English and Russian texts for comparison only. The author also used the opportunities provided by the Foreign Ministry of Japan (MOFA) to participate in the meetings of the Tokyo Intellectual Dialogue (TID) and Working Group (WGM) in 2018.

## **2. The way to the dialogue's creation**

Twenty-eight years have passed since Japan recognized the independence of the Central Asian countries. During this period, the countries of the region and Japan were able to establish close relations and create various mechanisms of bilateral cooperation. Nevertheless, the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue is the first and so far the only instrument of their multilateral cooperation in a narrow format.

The author believes that the prerequisites for the formation of this tool appeared long before its actual emergence, and that it marched in step to the development of Japan's bilateral relations with Central Asia. As it turned out, prior to 2004, Japan had initiated large-scale international conferences that were directly related to different challenges for Central Asia's sustainable development.

In October 1992, Japan organized the Tokyo Conference on Assistance to the New(ly) Independent States, which brought together representatives of 70 countries and 20 international/regional organizations (IO/ROs). This meeting was held eight months after a similar conference in the United States. As a result of these meetings, Japan began to provide technical assistance, humanitarian aid, and to promote economic relations with the countries of the former USSR on the "help for self-help" basis (Miyazawa, 1992). In September 1999, two years after the launch of the Eurasian Diplomacy, Japan organized the Tokyo International Conference on Semipalatinsk, which brought together representatives of 24 countries and 12 IOs, and was designed to help Kazakhstan in its efforts to deal with the consequences of nuclear testing on the territory of former Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site, located in eastern part of Kazakhstan. In January 2002, one of the first for Japanese conferences on Afghan issues-The International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan-was hosted by Tokyo.

In 1999, a group of well-known Japanese scholars submitted the report "Challenge 2001-Japan's Foreign Policy Toward the 21st Century" to the leadership of the Japanese Foreign Ministry. This report highlighted the importance of strengthening the mechanisms of diplomatic frameworks, including the creation of new frameworks for building a safe and prosperous world.

In 2002, the Prime Minister's Task Force on Foreign Relations recommended the Japanese Government include Central Asia and the Caspian Sea countries in the priority list of its Official Development Assistance (ODA) in order to support projects aimed at the regional integration. The task force also pointed out the importance of pursuing Japan's foreign policy in accordance with national interests based on such notions as: (1) the maintenance of the peace and security of Japan; (2) the maintenance of the free trade system; (3) protection of democratic values; (4) people-to-people exchanges and (5) the development of human resources.

Until 2004 before the dialogue was actually established, the Japanese Government initiated numerous

diplomatic frameworks for various organizations and countries, including the EU (1991), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (1993), the Central American states (1995), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) (1996), ASEAN (1997), China and the ROK (1999), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (2000), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (2000), countries of the Islamic world (2002), the Andean Community (2002), and Arab States (2003).

The presence of such a colorful set of frameworks suggests that Japan had a substantial experience of interacting with these groups in a more extended format. The choice of dialogue partners was determined by the political (e.g., NATO, OSCE) and economic interests (e.g., MERCOSUR, CARICOM) of Japan. Moreover, given the fact that Japan has observer status among a large number of IOs and ROs, these frameworks allowing Tokyo to monitor and analyze specific developments in various parts of the world. An analysis of the internal content of these mechanisms suggests that Japan does not have the "one-size-fits-all" model that Tokyo applies to its partners. It indicates that Japan is flexible in this matter, although this can also be dictated by the specific interests of Japan and possible restrictions for external partners. For example, in 1981, Japan and ASEAN established a new international organization in Tokyo—the ASEAN Promotion Center for Trade, Investment and Tourism (ASEAN–Japan Center)—in order to jointly solve different economic issues. In 2011, Japan, China, and the ROK launched the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in Seoul (South Korea).

According to Kawato (2008; 2018), the dialogue's idea was first presented during a joint meeting of Japanese Ambassadors accredited in Central Asia and the leadership of the MOFA's European Bureau in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in September 2003. Tsunozaki, the Japanese Ambassador to Kazakhstan, and Kenji Shinoda, then Deputy Director General of the European Bureau, presented this idea together. At that time, Japanese Foreign Ministry officials considered several options that included the possible participation of Japan in the activities of the SCO or the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (CACO). The first option was unlikely due to the absence of other Western powers in the SCO. In 2004, during the CACO business forum in the city of Almaty, in Kazakhstan, Tsunozaki announced Japanese interest in establishing direct contact and cooperation programs with the CACO, i.e. in water, energy and transport sectors. However, this option lost its attractiveness after Russia's accession to the CACO in the same year. Finally, the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue on the APT model turned out to be the most acceptable solution for Japan. Apparently, the launch of a new initiative could not take place at all, which again indicates the uniqueness of the decision made by Japan.

Yuasa (2008) indicates that the process of the dialogue's formation was connected with numerous messages from the so-called "epistemic community," especially academic circles, as well as representatives of the Central Asian countries to create an interactive platform for Central Asia–Japan communication. In March 2003, the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) published a report, "Development of New State of Affairs in Central Asia." In the document, Japanese scholars mentioned the necessity in a new strategy for Central Asia, e.g. during a possible visit of the Prime Minister of Japan to Central Asia. According to Sudo (1998), who is a prominent scholar on ASEAN–Japan relations, the Fukuda doctrine, which was indicated in the aforementioned report as a model concept, in fact, was "the first Japanese policy initiative that identified ASEAN as the most important direction (of its foreign policy)."

Yuasa also notes that the Foreign Ministry officials played the central role in this process. However, the chief author of the dialogue idea, former Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi (2017) pointed out that the original idea was born after her meeting with Tetsuji Tanaka in the summer of 2003. As a result of their meeting, the question arose about the appropriate form of new Central Asia–Japan cooperation dialogue. As a result, the MOFA staff was responsible for the practical implementation of the new task.

Kawaguchi's choice in favour of Tanaka as a main interlocutor for discussing the Central Asian theme was surprising. However, this step could be related to Tanaka's professional background, i.e. his former affiliation to the Bank of Japan and his personal contacts with the Central Asian government officials as their personal advisor. Before taking up the post of the foreign minister, Kawaguchi had extensive working experience in the

Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), the World Bank, and the private sector. During the interviews, Kawaguchi and Tanaka focused mostly on economic issues that led to the dialogue's creation. Tanaka (2018) also designated Kawaguchi's work history as an essential element in the dialogue's success at the initial stage. Kawaguchi also noted that the dialogue's formation was lean on two notions, i.e. regional cooperation and economic development. Such emphasis was related to the desire to promote the development of projects that would advance intra-regional cooperation and economic prosperity of the region. In this connection, the author is convinced that the "economic" factor was one of the main pillars behind the dialogue's creation.

According to Kawato (2008; 2018), the final idea was first presented to the Uzbek Foreign Minister Sodik Safoyev during his visit to Japan in December 2003. After that, Japanese plans was also discussed with representatives of other Central Asian countries. In March 2004, the MOFA hosted a symposium, "The Current State and Future of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia." During the event, Parliamentary Vice Minister Isao Matsumiya stressed the importance of reviewing the Japanese strategy in Central Asia. He also hinted about the formation of a new strategic approach towards Central Asia.

According to Kawaguchi, the timing of the meeting was chosen as a result of her informal conversation with the then Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Asian Cooperation Dialogue's (ACD) meeting in China in 2004. Tokayev proposed to organize the meeting around the time of the CACO Foreign Ministers' gathering in Astana in August 2004. Tokayev also promised Kawaguchi to discuss the date with his Central Asian colleagues. Dadabaev notes (2016:22) that Japan has decided to present the initiative in Uzbekistan before the first official meeting in Astana, taking into account the competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional dominance. These facts also indicate that the Japanese side treats their reputation and attitude towards the Central Asian countries very carefully.

During her visit to Uzbekistan in 2004, Kawaguchi issued a statement on the Japanese strategy in Central Asia at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. She highlighted the importance of the Central Asian region for global security, as well as lack of "selfish goals" in Japanese attitude to Central Asia. Since the adoption of Eurasian diplomacy, Japan and the Central Asian countries have been able to demonstrate significant changes in the nature and scope of their cooperation and in their level of cultural understanding. As was mentioned by Mme. Kawaguchi, Japan is a "natural partner" for Central Asia.

In addition, Kawaguchi noted significant prospects for collaboration in the field of social and economic cooperation, including in the area of human resources development, energy, environment, etc. As a result, Kawaguchi proposed the creation of a dialogue as a "new dimension" and an "option for cooperation" based on principles such as "respecting diversity, competition, and coordination, and open cooperation." The author's analysis of bilateral mechanisms shows that in 2004 not all countries had a current set of bilateral dialogue mechanisms like the Parliamentary Friendship League or the Joint Economic Cooperation Commission. At that time, these facts gave the dialogue a deeper meaning in the eyes of the Central Asian politicians and diplomats.

The emphasis in Kawaguchi's speech was focused on the development of intra-regional economic integration in Central Asia on the ASEAN-based experience. Thus, Japan demonstrated its interest in maintaining the principles of intra-regional cooperation close to the CACO spirit, as well as their perception of Central Asia as an integral region. In addition, Kawaguchi expressed hopes that one day Afghanistan could also join the process.

The first official meeting of Central Asia–Japan foreign ministers (first FMM) was held on August 28, 2004 in Astana. However, the Turkmenistan delegation was presented at the level of Ambassador. Later, it becomes clear that Japan would negatively react on the low level of Central Asian participation. Nevertheless, according to the former Director General of the European Bureau Komatsu (2004), participation of the Turkmen side was considered as demonstration of support to the initiative.

Japanese Ambassador to Kazakhstan Tsunozaki (2007) notes in his memoirs that all participants of the first

meeting welcomed the initiative. One of the main outcomes of the meeting was determination of the forum's goals in such dimensions as security, democratic development, socio-economic growth, and close cooperation in addressing regional and global issues.

The review of Central Asia–Japan membership in various IO/ROs prior to 2004 shows that the opportunities for their multilateral cooperation were noticeably limited. For example, some countries were less presented in various organizations such as the ACD, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These facts could also indicate a desire of the Japanese side to promote Central Asia–Japan multilateral contacts and projects in a more systematic way.

In December 2004, Kawaguchi, as the Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan, took part in the twelfth Ministerial Council (MC) of the OSCE in Sofia, Bulgaria. An additional meeting among the representatives of Japan and the Central Asian countries was held on the MC margins to discuss the working moments of the first FMM. This meeting was also the first and only meeting among the dialogue participants in the framework of major international forums.

During her speech at the OSCE event, Kawaguchi presented the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue and urged her European colleagues to jointly assist Central Asian efforts in such fields as combating international terrorism, drug trafficking, water issues, environmental problems, development of transport communications, and energy. This message could be also linked with previous Japan–OSCE experience, including based on their joint conference "Comprehensive Security in Central Asia–Sharing OSCE and Asian Experiences," which was held in Tokyo in December 2000. It is noteworthy that two years after the launch of the dialogue, in April 2006, the fifteenth Japan–EU Summit led to the launch of a separate dialogue on Central Asia, based on a similar Japan–EU framework *vis-à-vis* the East Asia region. In addition, Kawaguchi (2018) mentioned that she also made a similar appeal during her working meetings with representatives of the U.S. Department of State. This approach also mirrors the ideas of Ambassador Kawato, who, during the process of the dialogue's creation, believed that Japan could initiate the creation of a multilateral platform in Central Asia close to the example of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

One notable feature of this period was the lack of proper attention among Japanese media to the outcome of the first FMM. Analysis of publications and interviews relates it to the fact that Kawaguchi refused to use such a traditional tool for Japanese diplomacy as the "chequebook diplomacy" during her trip to Central Asia. Nevertheless, Tanaka, Kawato, and others (2018), who wished to remain anonymous, pointed out that the Japanese Foreign Ministry was impressed by the overestimation of the results of Kawaguchi's visit by Russian and Chinese media.

### 3. Transformation of the dialogue

During the fourteen years of its existence, the dialogue was able both to achieve significant results and miss several unique opportunities for its further development. In order to understand this process more precisely, the author has divided it into several stages, selecting FMMs as the starting point of each stage.

#### (1) Step one

According to Figure 1, the first structural elements of the dialogue appeared in the interval between the first and second ministerial meetings. They include the meetings of Senior Officials (SOM) and the Tokyo Intellectual Dialogue (TID). The intermediate meeting that was held in Bulgaria in 2004, after the first FMM, is not included in the timeframe due to the low level of reference to it.

According to the Diplomatic Bluebook of the Japanese Foreign Ministry (2006:101), the first SOM was held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2005. At that event, the participants agreed on the main areas of cooperation, namely: (1) politics; (2) intra-regional issues (counterterrorism, drugs, mines, poverty eradication, medical assistance

**Figure 1. Timeline of the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue-related events**

<b>1 FMM</b> (28.08.2004, KZ)	<b>2 FMM</b> (05.06.2006, JP)	<b>3 FMM</b> (07.08.2010, UZ)	<b>4 FMM</b> (09.11.2012, JP)	<b>5 FMM</b> (17.07.2014, KG)	<b>6 FMM</b> (01.05.2017, TM)
<b>1 SOM</b> (04.03.2005, UZ)	<b>3 SOM</b> (13.12.2007, TJ)	<b>6 SOM</b> (01.12.2011, JP)	<b>7 SOM</b> (22.10.2013, KG)	<b>9 SOM</b> (04.03.2015, JP)	<b>12 SOM</b> (26.01.2018, TJ)
<b>2 SOM</b> (08.02.2006, KZ)	<b>4 SOM</b> (07.2008, UZ)		<b>8 SOM</b> (18.03.2014, JP)	<b>10 SOM</b> (24.11.2015, TM)	<b>13 SOM</b> (26.11.2018, JP)
	<b>5 SOM</b> (07.2010, UZ)			<b>11 SOM</b> (25.03.2016, JP)	
<b>1 TID</b> (30.03.2006, JP)	<b>2 TID</b> (30.01.2007, JP)		<b>5 TID</b> (15.03.2013, JP)	<b>7 TID</b> (27.03.2015, JP)	<b>11 TID</b> (03.07.2018, JP)
	<b>3 TID</b> (20.02.2009, JP)		<b>6 TID</b> (18.03.2014, JP)	<b>8 TID</b> (02.03.2016, JP)	
	<b>4 TID</b> (25.02.2010, JP)			<b>9 TID</b> (28.09.2016, JP)	
				<b>10 TID</b> (31.03.2017, JP)	
		<b>1 EF</b> (26.07.2011, JP)		<b>1 BD</b> (28.02.2017, JP)	<b>2 BD</b> (23.03.2018, JP)
			<b>1 WGM</b> (13.02.2014, JP)	<b>2 WGM</b> (19.12.2014, JP)	<b>4 WGM</b> (20.02.2018, JP)
				<b>3 WGM</b> (04.02.2016, JP)	
			<b>FMEP</b> (12.2013, JP)	<b>FMEP</b> (13-20.11.2014, JP)	
				<b>FMEP</b> (21-28.01.2016, JP)	

(Note: FMM–Foreign Ministers Meeting, SOM–Senior Officials Meeting, TID–Tokyo Intellectual Dialogue, EF–Economic Forum, WGM–Working Group Meeting, FMEP–Foreign Ministries’ Exchange Program, BD–Business Dialogue; KZ–Kazakhstan, UZ–Uzbekistan, TJ–Tajikistan, KG–Kyrgyzstan, TM–Turkmenistan, JP–Japan).

and healthcare, environment, water, energy, trade and investment, transportation); (3) business promotion; (4) intellectual dialogue; and (5) socio-cultural exchanges. The first meeting of the TID was held in Tokyo in 2006 with support from the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA), an organization that also helped the government to host the Japan-OSCE Conference in 2000. At the first TID, it was suggested that the Track II meetings should be held once a year.

The meeting made it possible to identify new areas for multilateral cooperation, e.g. cross-border infrastructure and tourism. In addition, the participants were able to discover initial limitations in the dialogue’s activities. According to Akiko Fukushima (2006), the first TID was focused on the importance of systematic and realistic cooperation, i.e. based on the limited participation of the Central Asian states in promising projects. In 2007, during the second TID, participants also highlighted the importance of in-depth discussions of regional problems and possible projects with pronounced regional effect.

In order to strengthen economic cooperation, it was also proposed to establish a Joint Committee on business

matters between Japan and Central Asia under the aegis of the dialogue. Moreover, the Senior Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan Yasuhisa Shiozaki used the term "catalyst" for the first time to describe the Japanese role in the dialogue. This fact demonstrates the transformation of Japan's role from being the "natural (equal partner)" (Kawaguchi) to being a catalyst (Shiozaki), which is closer to such concepts as "intermediary" or "conductor".

(2) Step two

The second FMM was held in June 2006 in Tokyo. This meeting became significant due to a detailed discussion of the further role of the dialogue.

First, the foreign minister of Afghanistan attended the meeting for the first time as a guest/observer. This has been the case when the official representative of a third country participated in the dialogue. In addition, in the 2007 Diplomatic Bluebook, the possibility of the dialogue expansion at the expense of Afghanistan and Pakistan was noted. As we can see later, the Afghan issue would be raised regularly in agendas and outcome documents of the subsequent meetings.

Next, following the second FMM, a comprehensive Action plan was adopted, and it determined the main direction of the dialogue activities. Despite the absence of a well-defined timeframe, the action plan continues to be one of the most significant documents of the dialogue. It covers five basic tenets of the dialogue and ten most promising areas of cooperation that were agreed during the first SOM. Despite the several important for Japan-Central Asia cooperation dates, e.g. the tenth anniversary of the dialogue (2014), the twentieth anniversary and the twenty-fifth anniversaries of the establishment of Central Asia–Japan diplomatic relations (2012 and 2017), the dialogue participants missed these unique opportunities to strengthen the basic principles and goals of the dialogue.

In addition, the second meeting gave significant impetus to the institutionalization of the dialogue. However, many of these achievements remain on paper only. For example, the Action Plan includes an appeal to consider the possibility of holding the first Summit. Traces of this issue can be found later, in the 2009 parliamentary statements of the Japanese Foreign Ministry officials, but most of them merely confirm Tokyo's interest in this specific event. During the interviews, many of speakers excluded the possibility of holding such a meeting under the current geopolitical conditions.

Participants have also proposed the establishment of a Working Group on Economics (WGM) to study regional projects and the participation of public and private institutions. It could be said that the WGM has become the counterpoint solution to the previous ideas on a joint economic structure within the dialogue. However, it is evident that the WGM could not advocate for the development and implementation of high-profile economic projects due to limited status of the Group as a structural unit. Moreover, the first WGM was organized in 2014, and up to this day only four meetings have been held. The Action Plan supported the proposal to hold annual meetings of the TID.

Finally, this meeting shed light on an updated vision of Japanese diplomacy in Central Asia, following statements by Hashimoto (1997), Koizumi (2002) and Kawaguchi (2004). On the eve of the second FMM, Aso gave an extraordinary speech on Japanese policy in the region. Aso designated Central Asia as the object of the "New Great Game," which, by-turn, gave Kawaguchi's initiative a robust political connotation and increased the doubts of Russian and Chinese media about Tokyo's real intentions. Aso also updated the basic concepts in describing the importance of Central Asia to Japan: leaving security, economic potential and the development of multilateral relations, and breaking them with an "affinity" (interest to Japan). Moreover, he updated the guidelines of the Japanese diplomacy in the region, incorporating: (1) a broad-based perspective; (2) regional cooperation; and (3) partnerships based on common universal values.

Five months later at the JIIA event, Aso presented his vision of so-called "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" for the Eurasian continent. The message also called for closer cooperation with NATO on the Afghan issue. At the same time, the Arc's key countries, including the countries of Central Asia, were presented as "marathon

runners” and Japan was depicted as an “escort runner,” which can also be compared with the attempt of Aso to give a new meaning to the concept of “catalyst.”

### (3) Step three

The third FMM was held in 2010 in Uzbekistan during the reign of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Despite the plain results of the ministerial meeting, including adoption of a Joint Press release—a low-level political document—Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada was able to achieve some progress. For example, according to data from Okada’s personal blog (2010), he returned to the issue of having regularly scheduled ministerial meetings, and as a result, participants agreed to hold follow-up ministerial meetings in Japan and Kyrgyzstan two and four years later, respectively. It was also suggested that SOMs should be held at least once a year.

According to Kitagawa Katsuro (2010), who was the Head of Central Asia and the Caucasus Division at the Japanese Foreign Ministry at that time, this meeting was an important for the DPJ to prove their desire for friendly relations with Central Asia. Same time, he expressed disappointment that Turkmenistan was presented at the level of Ambassador. The author also used this instrument–participation criterion–to improve the analysis of the dialogue’s events.

The third FMM was also preceded by the fourth TID (2010), during which DPJ representative returned to the notion of “catalyst.” At the same time, they were able to enforce the catalyst’s meaning by inviting representatives from the Asian Development Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to a meeting. In 2005, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura spoke about the importance of ADB and other international financial institution’s participation in the dialogue. However, neither he nor his successors from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) followed up on this important suggestion. The DPJ was able to go further, proposing to hold the first “Economic Forum” in Japan, which, in fact, continued to function as Business dialogues and helped to enhance the WGM activities.

In addition, under Okada, the first and only review of national reports on the implementation of the Action plan was made. The dialogue participants no longer use this method. This fact demonstrates the absence of mechanisms for monitoring the process of implementation of multilateral agreements.

### (4) Step four

The fourth FMM took place in 2012 in Japan. It coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Central Asian nations. The peculiarity of this meeting was related with the full-fledged participation of the delegation of Turkmenistan in the event.

In addition, all parties agreed to include the Foreign Ministries’ Exchange Program in the dialogue activities. In fact, this initiative was based on the previously existent exchange program established by the Japanese Foreign Ministry for young diplomats from the Newly Independent States. Meeting participants also stressed the importance of inviting new guests to participate in the dialogue meetings, such as representatives of the UN agencies. Moreover, the participants supported the proposal of the Kyrgyz side to create a dialogue’s website: <http://www.ca-jp.org/index.php/ja/> (out-of-operation).

The main result of this phase was the launching of multilateral consultations on cooperation in the field of agriculture. The sixth TID and the first WGM were devoted to this topic. At the same time, the Japanese side indicated a new criteria– “Japanese specificity”–for projects to be discussed in the framework of the dialogue. Analysis of the statements shows that the Japanese side understands under this term those projects that are “based on or aimed at the transfer/acquisition of Japanese technologies and expertise.”

### (5) Step five

The fifth FMM was held in Kyrgyzstan in 2014. Then, for the first time in the history of the dialogue, all members were represented at the ministerial level. It had taken ten years for Japan and the Central Asian countries to give the dialogue a finished look.

Nevertheless, the parties reflected the importance of “new decade” in the work of the dialogue and giving it

practical content. As evidence, the participants adopted the first in the framework of the dialogue Roadmap on agriculture (e.g., fight against pests, silkworm breeding, livestock, and processing of fruits and vegetables). It is noteworthy that one year later, in 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) adopted a new strategy titled, "The Global Food Value Chain Strategy: Promote "Made with Japan" through Public-Private Partnership," which supports ideas to create regional food supply chains in Central Asia and Russia.

In addition, this phase was further stimulated by the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Abe to Central Asia in October 2015. Undoubtedly, the visit had tremendous value for the further development of Japanese foreign policy towards Central Asia and *vice-versa*. Many of Step five events were devoted to the implementation of results of the visit. In addition, creation of a new instrument of Kantei diplomacy—Japan-Russia-Central Asia Exchange Promotion Council, whose first meeting was held on November 9, 2015 can also serve as clear evidence of this fact.

Another important result of this phase was the seventh TID. During the event, representatives of the Japanese Foreign Ministry introduced the dialogue as a "public good" that contributing to the stability and development of Central Asia. Moreover, the President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) made his first appearance at the dialogue's event. In his speech, Akihiko Tanaka pointed out that the JICA has long been using the dialogue meetings as a basis for its activities in the region. Same time, he pointed out the small number of regional projects in the Agency's portfolio. Tanaka also referred to the challenges and opportunities faced by the region and particular points for Central Asia to focus on: (1) challenges: sanctions against Russia over the situation in Ukraine; incursions by the ISIL; withdrawal of the ISAF from Afghanistan; (2) needs: employment opportunities; diversification of industries in non-resources areas; financial support and private sector investment; improvement of deteriorated infrastructure; achievement of SDGs; (3) opportunities: CAREC Program, SCO, and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Apparently, for the Japanese Agency, it seemed more sensible and effective to use the existing mechanisms in the region to support projects and initiatives. Given China's role in CAREC and the SCO, and Russia's role in the EEU, it can be assumed that JICA is clearly realize the possibility of cooperation with both PRC and Russia, rather than in competition with them. Besides, Tanaka pointed out the three tasks to be implemented: (1) intra-regional and extra-regional cooperative relationships as an open region; (2) increasing connectivity with neighboring countries and developing domestic systems; (3) equal distribution of economic growth universally to the people by strengthening the capacity of the public sector.

#### (6) Step six

The sixth FMM and last meeting for today was held in May 2017, in Turkmenistan. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida became the first head of the Japanese Foreign Office, who visited the region twice and took part in two ministerial meetings. Following the outcome of the sixth FMM, parties adopted a new regional cooperation Roadmap, on Transport and Logistics.

Kishida also came out with the "Initiative for Cooperation in Transport and Logistics" that would be supported by the additional assistance of the Japanese Government to the region worth 24 billion yen. This sum could be considered as the first form of financial assistance, to be given to the region in the framework of the dialogue. Indeed, it also could mean that Japan finally decided to employ the "chequebook diplomacy" in order to give its initiative the "practical" nature.

Moreover, based on the outcome of the eleventh TID, which was held under the title, "Regional Cooperation in Central Asia and Strategic Outlook for Regional Security," it might be assumed that Japanese scholars and officials are interested in the discussion of Central Asian–Japan cooperation for reconstruction of and peace building in Afghanistan.

Speaking about the last two phases, it could be observed that the dialogue members started to "consistently" study the "practical" forms of intra-regional cooperation in agriculture, transport and logistics, and recently in the field of tourism, which was chosen as another promising area of cooperation during the last dialogue

meetings.

(7) Step seven

The next FMM would be held in Tajikistan for the first time. On the one hand, this once again demonstrates Japan's readiness to negotiate with its Central Asian partners in their domain. At the same time, it is not clear what exactly a new Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono could bring to the dialogue.

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

(1) Structural features of the Dialogue

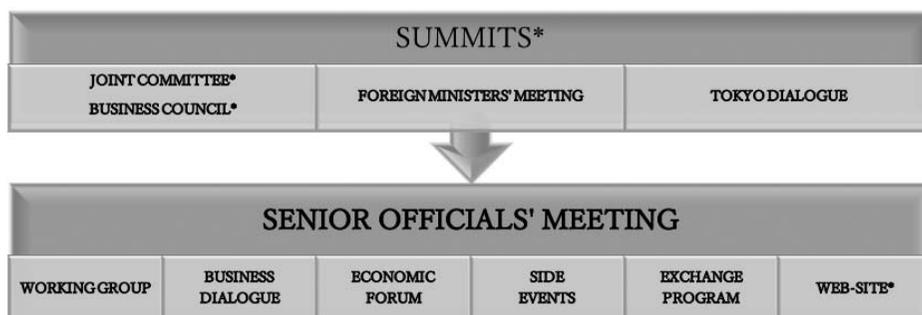
1. To date, FMM is the highest possible level for meetings in the framework of the dialogue. The analysis of the dialogue's activities shows that the primary documents are usually adopted at the ministerial meetings. In this regard, it can be argued that the FMM is the chief political body of the forum that responsible for the adoption of political decisions, outcome documents and the approval of new initiatives. The dialogue has no any clear schedule for the ministerial meetings. Same time, it can be assumed that participants still try to adhere to a particular algorithm, i.e. to meet once every two years (third FMM). However, as was learned earlier, the dialogue's calendar is strongly affected by large-scale domestic and international events, e.g. general elections and cabinet reshuffles in Japan. Moreover, as was mentioned above, the first full-fledged meeting of the FMM with the participation of all Central Asian delegations took place only in 2012 (fourth FMM), and at the foreign ministers' level two years later, in 2014 (fifth FMM).

Moreover, all meetings are traditionally held in Japan or Central Asia, but not on the margins of international forums. As a result, the Central Asian countries receive two significant benefits. First, unlike international events, they have enough time to discuss their own agenda in the framework of the dialogue. Secondly, the Central Asian countries form a regular basis for the organization of visits by Japanese Foreign Minister to the region.

It also seems unusual that a representative of only one nation, namely Afghanistan, took part in the FMM as a guest (second FMM). Despite the existing recommendations (fourth FMM), there is an evident absence of representatives of IO/ROs and financial institutions, which also indicates the desire of the parties to give the dialogue an "exclusive" format of Central Asia–Japan communications. This could be considered as a desire of the Central Asian countries to increase financial and technical assistance from Japan.

2. In general, the SOM is the most regular and "closed" event in the framework of the dialogue. It is clear that SOMs are important elements in the preparation of the FMMs and in their "follow-up." Also, SOMs became an important mechanism in maintaining the dialogue's activities during the absence of ministerial meetings in 2007–9. Moreover, following the sixth FMM results, SOMs were also given additional functions to monitor joint projects between Japan and Central Asia in the framework of the dialogue. Based on this fact, the SOM could

**Figure 2. Organizational chart of the dialogue**



(Note: \*-declined proposals or non-functional mechanisms)

be considered as the principal executive body of the dialogue. At the same time, a particular disbalance might be seen in the SOM's composition. For example, in comparison with other delegations that usually presented at the level of Deputy Foreign Minister, the Kazakh side is more often represented at the level of the Director of Department or the Embassy staff (seven times). These facts demonstrate key features of how Central Asian countries assess the dialogue by themselves. It is enough just to compare the levels of participation of Kazakhstani delegations in similar structures with the EU, the US and the ROK.

3. It should be noted that Track II approach was strongly recommended to the leadership of the Foreign Ministry of Japan by the authors of "Challenge 2001." During a telephone interview, Hakamada, one of the report authors, noted that the interest of the Japanese academia and mass media to Central Asia is shallow. And regular meetings in the TID format are very complex (from the organizational point of view), but, in fact, they allow exchange information and develop new cooperation ideas.

In general, TID records usually passed to the FMMS and SOMs in the form of the Chair summaries. It is evident that experts in their assessments count on the fact that these proposals could be admitted based on their feasibility and acceptability.

Today, TID is one of the unique structures that hold regular meetings and produce various cooperation proposals. Same time, the author did not discover any information about the TID meetings in Central Asia. In addition, a limited number of experts from Central Asia participate in each meeting. In this regard, it could be concluded that the TID serves exclusively for Japan's own purposes. The Track II of "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue could be considered as a platform with a limited effect.

4. WGMs are held in the same manner as TIDs. At the same time, we should understand that WGM-related topics usually do not correspond to the primary competence of the foreign ministries of Central Asia and Japan. It is obvious that discussions and preliminary arrangements on different possible projects, especially in the framework of TIDs, SOMs and FMMS, require additional coordination with the specialized agencies. It is obvious that the creation of a full-fledged economic body could significantly increase the effectiveness of the dialogue.

In this context, it should be noted that initial proposals on the establishment of the Business Council and the Joint Economic Committee were not implemented. Consequently, appropriate economic and business institutions did not support these ideas due to the possible overlapping of already existed frameworks. In this regard, WGMs could be considered as the Japanese Foreign Ministry's "invention" to keep economic track in the context of the dialogue.

5. In September 2014, the Second Regional Ministerial Conference of the Central Asian Disaster Management Authorities under the auspice of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. As a result, participants agreed to regularly convene such meetings at the level of heads of the disaster management authorities for discussing regional cooperation. However, this event is not reflected in an "official" list of the dialogue's events. Therefore, it can be assumed that the dialogue started to use its name as a "banner" for regional events with the participation of the Japanese and Central Asian officials.

6. In July 2014, on the tenth anniversary of the dialogue, the MOFA Japan presented an unofficial mascot of the dialogue, which usually used during PR activities and cultural events in the framework of the initiative. The famous Japanese manga artist Kaoru Mori based on her romance manga books, "A Bride's Story (Otoyomegatari)," compiled the "image" of the dialogue in the form of six ladies dressed in national clothes of the Central Asian nations and Japan. Such action by the Japanese side could be considered as a desire to give the dialogue attributes of the "organization."

## (2) Unique trends in the dialogue's activities

In 2015, the Foreign Ministry of Japan commissioned a survey of public opinion, which showed that 70 per cent of respondents in the region highly appreciate the activities of the dialogue. However, the core question–

“Last year the “Central Asia Plus Japan” dialogue celebrated its tenth anniversary. Do you think the strengthening of the ties between Japan and Central Asia brings benefit via similar commemorative events?”—actually does not reflect the essence of the dialogue activities and apparently cannot be presented as an assessment of its role. Based on this fact, the author suggested that the dialogue’s issue was excluded from the second opinion poll (after Abe’s visit to Central Asia) intentionally. However, there are some positive trends in the dialogue activities that could be attributed as the dialogue’s effect:

1. Since the fourth FMM, there has been an increase in the number of FMMs’ outcome documents. Outcomes of Mahmudov’s interview with Jun Nanazawa, former head of Central Asia and the Caucasus division, shows that the dialogue has “revived” after the fourth ministerial meeting, from formal to practical character (2017).

2. The most popular form of outcome documents is “Joint statements” and “Roadmaps.” In this regard, it can be concluded that the Action plan is still the main document of the dialogue, and the Joint Statements and Roadmaps serve as complementary to the Action plan documents.

3. Transformation of the dialogue’s role could also be traced in the titles of outcome documents. At the first FMM, there was a reference to the entrance into so-called “New Era” of relations as a starting point of the dialogue’s process. The fourth FMM was concluded with the establishment of a “New Partnership,” which differs from such terms as “relations” and “cooperation” in other titles. In addition, outcome documents of the fifth and sixth FMMs give references to the beginning of a new working timeframe of the dialogue (2014–24) and strengthening of the “multilateral” component in its activities.

4. The level of outcome documents’ signatories indicates that the full-fledged activities of the dialogue with the participation of all countries and ministers began only during the fourth FMM. Accordingly, the dialogue started its functions as a full-fledged mechanism only after the fourth ministerial meeting.

5. The text analysis of outcome documents shows a high level of references to the role and efforts of the Government of Japan. At the same time, a relatively low number of references to the individual countries of Central Asia could be found. In the texts, the term “Central Asia” is highly prevalent for the description of the Central Asian republics.

Moreover, the texts contain sufficient references to the importance of Japan–Central Asia cooperation. However, as in the first case, we can also trace serious differences in the allusion of the dialogue and different IOs and ROs. In four of six cases, references to separate IOs and ROs prevail over the use of the dialogue.

6. Despite the strong beliefs about the dialogue as a tool of geopolitical game, findings clearly show that the dialogue countries do not mention third parties, except for some cases. In this connection, the author believes

**Figure 3. Agenda for the dialogue**



(Note: IOs–International organizations; ROs–Regional organizations; P2P–people-to-people exchanges)

that there is also a consensus among nations on the discussion of the policies of third countries, for example, Russia or China. In 2012, Japanese Foreign Ministry's Deputy Press Secretary Saiki Naoko confirmed for the first time that the Dialogue is not aiming at any particular country. However, at that time, during severe diplomatic contradictions between China and Japan, she did not rule out whether the issues related to the PRC would be raised during the fourth FMM or not. Then-Foreign Minister Gemba also ignored such questions.

### (3) Practical dimension

The detailed analysis of dialogue-related documents allows the identification of a small number of initiatives that could be attributed to the effect of the Japanese initiative, indicated as follows:

1. According to Kawaguchi, despite her promise to accept one thousand trainees from Central Asia (first FMM), Japan received almost 1200 people at that time. Same time, Japan accepted 9,154 trainees between 1991 and 2015. In addition, Foreign Minister Kishida also declared at the sixth FMM that Japan would provide additional training opportunities for approximately 2,000 people over the next five years.

2. In 2005, the JBIC surveyed the adjustment of water resources and electricity, one of the critical issues in the region, to examine possible forms of cooperation with regional areas of cooperation in Central Asia.

3. Based on the outcome of the second FMM, the JICA published a paper titled "Study on Intra-Regional Cooperation over Water and Power for Efficient Resources Management in Central Asia." The main function of the report was to determine the role of Japan in water and electricity-related issues in Central Asia:

"Japan leads in areas such as water saving, water resources management and energy saving, and can, therefore, provide Central Asian countries with its excellent technology. Technical assistance should be expanded to reform systems including improving the management of power-related facilities such as power generation, transmission, and distribution. It is appropriate to start with projects which will be conducted within a country but...will have regional impacts rather than immediately venture gigantic projects."

The report also included the following recommendations: (1) strengthening of mutual trust through continuous dialogue; (2) support based on a long-term perspective; (3) respect to the individuality, assistance in accordance with the state of progress; (4) prevention of unfairness; (5) cooperation with other donors; (6) advantage use of Japan's expertise.

In particular, the Japanese support should be promoted based on fundamental principles, like "(give) priority to projects producing effect...for the entire region and all countries concerned." At the same time, these recommendations include specific pre-conditions, namely, "a mutual agreement on the promotion of intra-regional cooperation through river basin management and electric power interchange."

4. In order to implement the decisions of the fifth FMM, in 2015 the JICA together with the Hokkaido Intellectual Tank and the Overseas Merchandise Inspection Co., Ltd. conducted a survey on the agricultural sectors of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The JICA also conducted point studies about the promotion of Japanese technologies owned by private companies in Hokkaido, in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan). Moreover, based on the dialogue's decisions, the JICA and the FAO have developed a program of cooperation in the field of locust control which focuses on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The project amount for Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan totaled US\$ 5 million.

5. Following the fifth FMM, the JICA together with several Japanese companies conducted a study on emergency preparedness in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Mongolia.

6. During the sixth FMM, Foreign Minister Kishida announced that visa applications between Japan and the Central Asian republics would be simplified, especially for people engaged in business, academic, or cultural exchanges.

7. On 22 February 2018, in Astana, the UNDP and the Embassy of Japan signed an Exchange of Note ,

according to which the Japanese Government committed to provide US\$ 6.1 million for the regional project titled, “Strengthening Community Resilience and Regional Cooperation for Prevention of Violent Extremism in Central Asia.” According to Japanese officials, this project is part of Japan’s commitments under the sixth FMM.

8. On March 6, 2018 based on the sixth FMM discussions, the Government of Japan provided US\$ 6.2 million to Kyrgyzstan for the implementation of two programs, “Strengthening the System of Maternal and Child Health” (US\$ 3.5 million) for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and “Strengthening drug control measures” (US\$ 2.7 million) for the UNODC.

9. At the fourth FMM, the Japanese officials announced that the government had already implemented several projects worth US\$ 700 million to promote cooperation in the region. The exact list of such projects was not officially disclosed. In this regard, the author believes that this amount covered Japanese projects that were already implemented or were under implementation by the time of the fourth FMM.

10. At the sixth FMM, Kishida came out with the “Initiative for Cooperation in Transport and Logistics,” which was used by the Japanese Government to undertake concrete projects involving cooperation in the field of transportation. It was said that the initiative would include a significant amount of assistance, approximately 24 billion yen. According to the document, monetary resources will be allocated to projects in such areas as border control (e.g., UNODC), air communication (e.g., airport modernization and personnel training), ground transportation, and logistics. These projects also include yen loans, grants, and technical assistance.

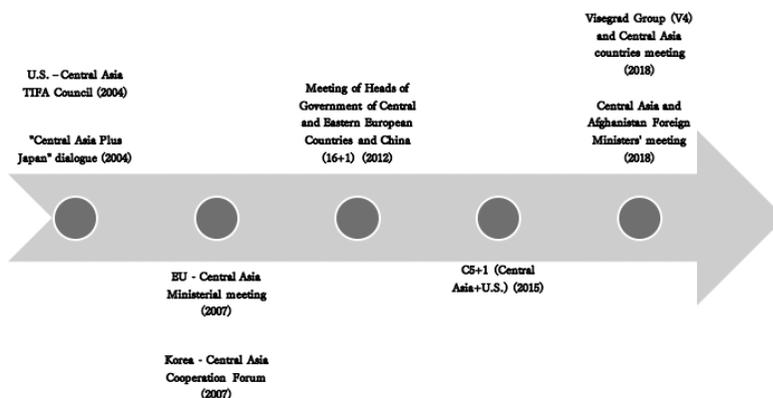
#### (4). External effects

It is worthwhile to note that the dialogue was launched in the same year as Japanese dialogue with the Visegrad group (V4).

Moreover, similar platforms were created with GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (2007), Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) (2013) and three former USSR Baltic states (2018). Actually, all these dialogue platforms are supervised in Japan by the European Affairs Bureau.

Tetsuji Tanaka mentioned that the dialogue gave impetus to similar platforms between Central Asia, the EU and the U.S. Moreover, Tanaka, the current head of the Japanese Centre on Chinese studies, noted that the Chinese “16 +1” initiative has possible roots in the dialogue (see Figure 4). According to Tanaka, the thesis about the Japanese track in the EU-Central Asia and the C5+1 format was also recognized by the famous U.S. scholar Starr during their occasional meetings in Tokyo and Tashkent. The same thesis was indicated in an article about the tenth anniversary of the dialogue in the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s online magazine “Wakaru! Kokusai josei” (“I understand! The International Situation”), Vol. 117, on 11 July 2014. According to the article,

Figure 4. The effect of the dialogue.



"This pioneering effort by Japan has attracted attention from the international community, and now the EU, Korea, etc. have also launched a dialogue forum with a similar approach."

However, Tanaka is convinced that Japan's participation in regional affairs will be less active if the republics cannot become one-piece. Amb. Kawato shares a similar opinion. According to the former diplomat, the creation of the dialogue can be viewed as Japan's earliest attempt to develop its own "diplomatic card" in relations with Russia and China. Leaders in Japan will be able to achieve more of their goals in the region only if all Central Asian republics could form a single unified bloc.

## 5. Conclusion

As we can see, in the early 2000s Japan planned to create the "Japan-CACO" dialogue, which, based on previous aspirations of the Japanese side in the framework of ASEAN-Japan and ASEAN+3, was bound to transform in the "CACO+5" (e.g. Russia, China, Japan, the U.S. and the EU) mechanism. Despite the dilution of the CACO, Japan retained its interest in Central Asia and came forward with its own idea. The author realized that Japan had a choice—to create a dialogue or not. Again, the appointment of Kawaguchi as Foreign Minister was accidental and possible only after the resignation of her predecessor Makiko Tanaka as a result of a major scandal in the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Nevertheless, this initiative was developed and became an example of a new type of multilateral diplomatic framework for Japan, based on the affiliation of partner countries to a particular region, rather than regional organization.

Today, dialogue is an essential complement to the Japanese foreign policy, which allows it to compensate an insufficient level of interaction between Japan and Central Asia in the global arena. In this regard, dialogue can also serve as an essential argument for Japan in the discussion of the Central Asian agenda with various actors.

Same time, the dialogue was able to achieve its goal, since the Central Asian countries were able to create similar structures with other key countries and regions, and today collectively defend their common interests. The author concluded that Japan, if the current *status quo* is maintained, could fall under the influence of the Central Asian republics, which, in turn, could try to reformat the dialogue and its content. In fact, Japan could become a "hostage" of its own initiative, as many of its early efforts have not been implemented.

However, the dialogue has essential features that allow Japan and Central Asia to discuss a wide range of issues in the framework of FMMs, SOMs and TIDs. In this context, the dialogue participants demonstrate their aspirations for further changes through the great focus on the real-life meaning of the dialogue. Moreover, academic interest in the dialogue might be enforced by recent political trends in Central Asia. The advent of a new leader in Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, re-launched political discussions about the intraregional integration in Central Asia. For example, on November 10, 2017 President Mirziyoyev proposed to convene annual meetings of the Central Asian leaders, whose first informal meeting was hosted by President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan on March 15, 2018 in Astana.

It is no doubt that this process would be accompanied by a revision of regional strategies of the Central Asian nations in the framework of different multilateral dialogue platforms, including with Japan. As a first step, during their meeting on November 10, 2017 in Uzbekistan, Central Asian Foreign Ministers already agreed to cooperate on their joint actions in the framework of ministerial meetings of "EU–Central Asia," "C5+1 (U.S.)," "Central Asia–ROK" Cooperation Forum, the US–Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, and the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue.

In such situations, Japanese diplomats always love to say, "The ball's in your court now." However, today the ball is in the Japanese court. Indeed, the Central Asian countries have created a unique momentum that can help their foreign partners to demonstrate declared by them intentions and opportunities. If the dialogue miss a chance for more radical transformation now, it is unlikely that it will be able to improve its work in the foreseeable future.

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