

Central Asia in Japan's focus

Toward new era of engagement?



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

On 19–20 December last year, Tokyo hosted the first summit of the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue. The meeting was rich in substance and reflected a wide range of important regional and global issues. This article examines why this summit was significant in the context of the global agenda and whether it may influence the regional balance of power.

Int'l environment, Japan's role

The current international environment is marked by strong competition among major powers and ongoing changes in the global order. The center of global politics and the world economy is gradually shifting toward Asia, where the issue of global leadership in the 21st century is likely to be decided. Developments on the continent are unfolding against the background of growing rivalry between China on the one hand and the United States and its allies on the other.

Today, the Indo-Pacific has become a key priority of US foreign policy. Washington is seeking to renew existing partnerships, deepen alliances, and build new forms of cooperation in this region. At the same time, many of China's neighboring countries are increasingly concerned about the expansion of Chinese influence and are interested in limiting and balancing it. In these regional and global dynamics, Japan plays a central role.

With mediation from the United States, Japan and South Korea have moved toward normalization and closer bilateral relations with the US over the past few years. Although the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Japan, the United States, India, and Australia, is currently less active than before, it still has the potential to serve as a coordination mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region. It is also important to recall the AUKUS format, which brings together Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and to which Japan may eventually be invited to participate.

Another important issue for Japan remains its unresolved territorial dispute with Russia over the southern Kuril Islands. This dispute dates back to the end of World War II and continues to prevent the signing of a peace treaty, while also limiting the development of broader bilateral relations. Japan's new prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, is among the political figures who seek to restore Japan's status as a "normal state". In practical terms, this means strengthening the country's ability to ensure its own security, pursue a more independent foreign policy, and defend its national interests more actively at both the regional and global levels. Shortly after taking office, she stated that Japan would be ready to intervene militarily if Taiwan's sovereignty were threatened. This statement triggered a strong reaction from Beijing, which referred to provisions of the UN Charter allowing "founding members of the United Nations to take military measures against militarist states of World War II," among which China included Japan.

Such statements from a Japanese prime minister are unprecedented and clearly demonstrate Tokyo's intention to defend its interests more firmly, with a particular focus on containing China. However, this approach is not limited to the Indo-Pacific region alone. Japan is gradually advancing a broader global strategy, in which Central Asia may play an important role as a strategic rear area.



Why Central Asia may be of interest to Tokyo

Central Asia may become a strategically important region for Japan for several reasons.

• **Geography and logistics:** The region is located in the very center of the Eurasian continent and borders both China and Russia. This geographic position makes Central Asia a key element in the development of Eurasian transport corridors, logistics routes, and trade flows. For example, China views Central Asia as strategically important for ensuring the security of trade in the event that southern maritime routes are blocked. The United States and European countries, in turn, are interested in promoting the diversification of transport links and enabling the region to access global markets while bypassing traditional northern routes. They aim to gain access to Central Asian resources, among other goals. Central Asian states themselves are actively seeking to use their transit potential and to develop alternative transport routes.

The region is also important for China in terms of developing its western territories. The Central Asian market can support industrial growth and job creation in China's border regions.

• **Resources:** Central Asia possesses significant reserves of natural resources, especially rare earth elements and other critical minerals. In the modern global economy, these resources are essential

for the development of high-technology industries. According to available estimates, Central Asia accounts for around 38.6% of global manganese ore reserves, 30% of chromium, 20% of lead, 12.6% of zinc, 8.7% of titanium, as well as large reserves of other materials. In total, 384 deposits of such minerals are located in the region.

The importance of these resources is increasing in light of China's efforts to introduce export controls. China currently accounts for about 60% of global extraction and more than 85% of global processing of these materials. Japan is particularly vulnerable in this regard as it depends heavily on imports of critical minerals from China, which supplies roughly 60% of Japan's needs. This high level of dependence is pushing Japan to develop alternative supply chains. In July last year, within the QUAD framework, Australia, India, the United States, and Japan announced the launch of a Quadrilateral Critical Minerals Initiative. At the end of October, Washington and Tokyo also signed an agreement worth \$400 billion, which includes cooperation in the field of critical minerals.

• **Diplomacy and security:** Diplomatic support from Central Asian states is increasingly becoming an important political resource. For Russia, in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and its growing international isolation, any form of diplomatic backing is particularly valuable. At the 2023 Victory Day parade in Moscow, five out of seven foreign leaders

in attendance were from Central Asia. In the same year, regional capitals hosted major international events: Dushanbe held the CIS and Central Asia–Russia summits, while Bishkek hosted a CSTO summit, all attended by the Russian president.

China is also actively seeking diplomatic support from Central Asian countries. At the China–Central Asia summit held in June last year, President Xi Jinping promoted Beijing's concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" as well as the Belt and Road Initiative, receiving support from regional leaders. China seeks backing from Central Asian states both in multilateral frameworks and through bilateral relations.

Japan is likewise working to secure diplomatic support from Central Asia. The Action Plan for the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue, adopted in 2006, states that Central Asian countries "expressed hope for the further strengthening of Japan's political role in the international community and confirmed their unanimous support for Japan's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council". This support is especially important for Tokyo today, given Beijing's position that Japan should not be granted a permanent seat on the Security Council. Central Asia also plays an important role in ensuring security across Central Eurasia, particularly for China and Russia. Both countries cooperate closely with Central Asian states through multilateral formats — primarily the CSTO and the



The illustration shows Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in front of Tokyo and Mount Fuji.

● ALEXSANDR POTOLITSYN/TCIA



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From left to right: Leaders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan pose for a group photo during the first Central Asia-Japan Dialogue Summit in Tokyo, Japan, on December 20, 2025.

● PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE OF JAPAN